

The First Two Pages: *Murder With All the Trimmings*

By Shawn Reilly Simmons (Henery Press)

My most recent book, *Murder With All the Trimmings*, is the sixth book in the Red Carpet Catering mystery series. As with any series, the challenge in the beginning of each new book is to welcome back regular readers while at the same time saying hello to those who have begun reading with the most recent book or from somewhere in the middle. It's a delicate balance of allowing enough information from the past to filter through while not being boring or repetitive, while at the same time propelling the action of the story forward from the first (two!) pages.

In every book or story I write, I like to drop the reader into an action scene, right in the middle of something that's already happening. I begin the newest book here:

Penelope Sutherland stirred her peppermint latte slowly and stared out at the holiday shoppers hurrying past the café inside the busy Manhattan department store. Her feet were sore already, and she'd only accomplished half of her Christmas shopping.

To me, inviting readers along a journey with your protagonist is easier if they're doing something recognizable and relatable. Here, I've established where my character lives, and it's clear from the first sentence of the book that she's part of the holiday rush. The season brings up a lot of thoughts with almost every

reader that can include crowds, shopping, family, travel, fun, financial burden, stress... The list goes on. I also wanted to illustrate here that Penelope makes it a habit to appreciate calmness, even when the world around her is in a frenzy. This is an enviable skill, and one many chefs work to cultivate in a busy kitchen: striving for focus amid chaos.

My publisher asked me to write a holiday-themed mystery this time around, and I started thinking about different experiences I'd had over the years. And that was my jumping off point for the book.

My next step was to introduce (or reintroduce) my protagonist to the reader:

“Do you know where the handbag section is?” the man asked, his eyes darting from place to place.

“It's on the second floor,” Penelope said. She pointed at the floor with her finger.

“Well, what floor am I on now?” the man asked with a note of exasperation.

“You're on five,” Penelope said.

I often use dialogue to develop characters, instead of spelling out exactly what they're like. I use interactions, sometimes with a character we'll never hear from again, just to give readers a sense of the type of person Penelope is. From this exchange it's clear she's helpful and friendly, even when those around her are stressed.

I continue this process in the next paragraph:

“Here’s your buck noel,” the young woman said, thumping a box on the small round table in front of Penelope. She wore a green felt elf costume complete with a pointed hat. A fluffy white ball bounced on her thick black-framed glasses.

“Buche de Noel,” Penelope corrected her.

The elf sighed. “Isn’t this what you ordered?” She looked down at the shiny gold box in the shape of a log.

“Yes,” Penelope hurried to say. “It’s just you said ‘buck’ so...it’s a French pastry.”

Here I’ve begun introducing Penelope’s culinary knowledge, and I’ve hinted that she appreciates things being done correctly and that she values tradition.

And finally to illustrate the mood of those around her, especially for those working in retail and other service-oriented jobs during the hectic holiday season:

The elf glanced back at the line forming at the café counter. A young man dressed in a matching red elf costume took coffee orders and pulled pastries from the case beside the register. “Is this a long story? I should probably get back to help with the customers.”

Penelope smiled. “Right. Sorry. Happy Holidays.”

The elf snorted a laugh and stuck a hand on her hip. “That’s a good one. I’ll only be happy when my shift is over.” She stomped away, avoiding eye contact with the people waiting in line as she ducked back behind the counter.

And it continues on from there. For me, the key to a great opening scene is well-placed character interaction and relatable settings. The end result is an open invitation to all readers to continue on with the story ahead.

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Shawn Reilly Simmons is the author of the Red Carpet Catering Mysteries featuring Penelope Sutherland, an on-set movie caterer, and of several short stories appearing in various anthologies. Shawn serves on the Board of Malice Domestic, is an editor at Level Best Books, and is a member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery

Writers of America, the International Thriller Writers, and the Crime Writers' Association in the U.K. Cooking behind the scenes on movie sets perfectly combined two of her greatest passions, movies and food, and provides the inspiration for her series.