

The First Two Pages: “Race to Judgment”

By Craig Faustus Buck

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I'd like to thank Art Taylor for giving me a chance to help honor the legacy of B.K. Stevens by contributing to this two-page tradition. Bonnie was a friend and a fine writer.

“Race to Judgment” was something of a breakthrough for me. I'd been trying to write my way into the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* family for a few years to no avail. I'd assumed that my stories were too dark for *EQMM*, but they proved me wrong by accepting this one. Here's the first paragraph:

“This horseshit's makin' me sick,” said Homer Crood, slinging a shovelful into the back of Lizzie Johnson's '91 Ford F-150. “Who's fricken' idea was it to break into the fertilizer plant anyways?”

“Yours,” said Lizzie.

“Since when do you listen to me?”

You may notice that I toned down the profanity. For example, though I used “horseshit,” I softened the blow by using it as a literal reference. And, of course, “frickin’” is a minced oath that would never cross my lips in everyday use. But I figured *EQMM*'s readership is a bit more genteel than the pulp noir readership to which I'm accustomed. Know your audience.

But enough marketing talk. Let's take a look at what's going on in this story's opening. I'm a big proponent of opening with a hook, something to snag

the reader's curiosity. As Elmore Leonard wrote in his "10 Rules of Good Writing," "Never open a book with weather." I'll often open with a bang: "His face hit the pavement hard" ("Blank Shot" in the anthology *Black Coffee*). In "Race to Judgment," my opening hook was an enticement: why would someone stage a heist to steal horse manure?

Once the hook is set, it's time to bring the characters to life, so readers can identify, empathize, like, or despise, as the case may be. In this story I employed dialogue to hint at the characters' social class through their choice of words and at the nature of their relationship by the nature of their exchange. "Since when do you listen to me?" implies a history between them. The fact that she obviously *did* listen to him—she's there, after all—shows that he's not being entirely serious. They have an easy banter that bespeaks a long-standing friendship.

The next paragraph deepens our understanding of that friendship.

She leaned on her shovel and gave him a razor-edged glare. He was struck by how the moonlight turned her cornsilk hair all silvery, like an angel, but he knew she'd mock him if he mentioned it, so he swallowed his praise and shoveled another load. He could feel the weight of her gaze, keenly aware that the moonlight was probably gleaming off his scalp. He was only thirty-four, but his black mullet had already thinned to the edge of catastrophe. Life wasn't fair.

We see that he's attracted to her, but too insecure to admit it. Her old pickup, their clipped gerunds, and his hairdo reinforce the inference that they're rural and working class poor. The final nail in that coffin is his conviction that life is unfair.

I hate brazen exposition. I think it's the enemy of pace. So I depended on the inner thoughts of my characters to describe themselves and each other. "The moonlight turned her cornsilk hair all silvery, like an angel," or "He was only thirty-four, but his black mullet had already thinned to the edge of catastrophe." One or two small details are usually all a reader needs to fill in the blanks with their imagination. And, of course, you can always sprinkle in more details as the story progresses.

Once the characters were introduced, it was time to germinate the plot that I'd seeded in the first line. There's no room for waste in a short story, so I kept it brief.

"Don't you wuss out on me, Homer. Your damn brother stiffed us eighty bucks, and he's gonna get what's comin'."

Continuing on the theme of conserving space, if you can kill two birds with one stone, try to kill three. I proceeded to reinforce their class through their word choice, to add detail to how she looked and dressed, and to clarify their feelings about each other. A whole flock of birds.

Lizzie went back to her scooping, breasts swinging loose into the thin flannel of her lumberjack shirt, a sight that tormented Homer. He'd lusted after her since middle school but she hadn't given him so much as a peck on the cheek since they were six.

"I come home reekin' like this," he said, "Mama gonna whup me with a fry pan."

"Don't make no never mind. Your mama like to whup you anyhow, just for the exercise."

She put her hand all sexylike on her hip and his heartrate spiked.

“When you gonna get you a job?” she said. “Move on outta your mama’s house?”

“Now you sound like my damn brother.” Homer didn't mention the fact that he'd been looking for a job like crazy, but even at minimum wage, no one was hiring anywhere south of Memphis. And without a car, he wasn't about to take a job that required a two-hour bus ride each way.

He reveals his antipathy toward his brother, while at the same time establishing the poverty and geography of the area, the story's backdrop. In passing, Homer's lack of self-confidence reinforces his unrequited feelings for Lizzy and strives to nurture the reader's sympathy.

Having no room for wasted opportunity in a short story, I even enlisted Lizzie's truck for character development.

The two-tone red and gray truck was a year older than she was, and far worse for wear, but she loved it anyways. Homer had been with her the day her grand-daddy died at the wheel, smote by a heart attack on a rutted back road. Luckily, the driverless Ford had threaded the needle through the windbreak trees as it bounced into a cotton field, so the old coot died with something left to pass down to Lizzie.

Homer's memory of her grandfather's tragic story deepens their emotional bond while painting a picture of cotton fields and poverty without resorting to exposition.

The narrative goes on to underscore Homer's eagerness to humiliate his brother, ramping up Homer's emotional stakes.

I do reckon the look on Enoch's ugly face gonna be blue ribbon," said Homer, snickering at the thought. "He gonna shit his Fruit of the Looms."

The section culminates with Lizzie pouncing on his vulnerabilities in the teasing way we're led to assume is her wont, and foreshadowing that either his insecurity or her self-confidence (or both) will play a role in their fate.

A gust of wind blew the stench up Homer's nose, causing him to cough up a dollop of phlegm that gagged him. He felt like he was having a seizure. It didn't help that Lizzie noticed and her blue eyes sparkled as she laughed.

"Pussy," she said.

I hope, by now, the playful bickering of these lifelong friends has endeared them to the reader as they seek their revenge on Homer's uppity brother with a truckload of manure as their weapon of choice. Little do they know the utter doom that awaits them on page three.

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Craig Faustus Buck has been a journalist, a nonfiction book author, and a writer-producer for network television. His first novel, *Go Down Hard*, was First Runner Up for the Claymore Award at Killer Nashville, and his short story "Honeymoon Sweet" won the Macavity Award; he's also been nominated for two Anthony Awards and the Derringer Award for his short fiction. Among my six nonfiction books, two were #1 *New York Times* bestsellers, and his short film, *Overnight Sensation*, was an Academy Award nominee. Based in Los Angeles, he is President of Mystery Writers of America, SoCal chapter, Member-at-Large of Sisters in Crime LA, and an active member of the Writers Guild of America and International Thriller Writers.