

**The First Two Pages: “Never Have I Ever” by Anna Scotti**  
**From *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* (September/October 2019)**

The way I construct a story like “Never Have I Ever” might be really different from what other writers do. I don’t know a lot of writers to confer with about “process,” and although I teach middle school English, I’m not really familiar with many of the purported rules of fiction. My MFA is in poetry, and since I write free verse—again, not a lot of rules. To me, a great story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, at least one character you care about, and as few grammar and spelling errors as possible. The few rules I do know are along the lines of “show, don’t tell” and “write what you know,” both of which I learned in fifth grade (and both of which are still pretty useful). What I do is, I let an idea bounce around in my head for a while, a few days, or a few weeks. Then I just sit down and start typing. Every now and then I stop and read it aloud to hear if it sounds good.

So I had a scene in mind: a lonely woman finds a teenaged boy in her living room. He seems a gentle sort, entirely unthreatening, and she’s intrigued, but not scared. Mara doesn’t recognize the boy at first, but when she does, she realizes something odd about him.

He wasn’t frightening, oddly, though he was utterly unexpected, and the size of a man, if not yet the size of the man he promised to become. He might have been eighteen, lanky in worn

jeans with both knees torn out, one leg thrown over the sofa arm and the other stretched out before him, clearly comfortable, face shadowed but eyes big enough and bright enough for me to see they were fixed on me. He had a thick swatch of bangs that hung down over an attractive angular face with a sharp chin beneath round, rather girlish lips.

“What do you want?” My voice was so flat and calm it sounded more like I was taking his order in a restaurant than inquiring about his unexpected presence in the sanctity of my shadowed living room.

The boy shrugged, then grinned. A flash of white, a lifted eyebrow, and I knew him. Mike Parker.

He was dead.

So, yeah, that’s the odd thing about him. Gradually, after considering various possibilities—a practical joke, a scam—Mara accepts that Mike is a ghost.

Writers are often asked, “Do you write for yourself, or for an audience?” For me, the answer is axiomatic. If you don’t have an audience, what you’re writing is not a short story; it’s a journal entry. So I knew I wanted to write a ghost story, and I also knew I wanted to write a tale that would be right for *Ellery Queen*, because when I spend every evening and weekend for months editing and re-editing a 16,000-word “short” story, I want to know someone out there is reading it, preferably while shouting “Hallelujah.” Unfortunately, my two goals were diametrically opposed. *EQMM* very seldom publishes ghost stories. And if you’re a regular *EQMM* reader, this whole thing is starting to stink, because there our spectre is, in the very first paragraph.

Another challenge was going to be length. In order to make “Never Have I Ever” work the way it was taking shape in my head, it was going to be on the long side—more a novella than a traditional short. And that, too, is a hard sell for most magazines that publish fiction.

At this point in “Never Have I Ever”—when Mara realizes that her visitor is a boy she knows to be dead— I had to do something I often discuss with my students. It’s called “trusting the reader,” and it’s not always easy. What it means is that I, the writer, have to believe that a certain number of readers—maybe not all of them, but enough—will stick with me, despite the apparent discrepancy of a ghost appearing in the decidedly un-metaphysical pages of *Ellery Queen*, despite the fact that they signed up for a short story and ended up with a novella. I had to take the time to get my story off to a good start, doing everything I could to hook the reader as I let the plot slowly take shape.

When writers talk about writing—and especially, when writing teachers talk about writing—there’s an awful lot of hard wind blowing about themes and tropes, character arcs and conflicts. Enh. I’m not even sure what all that stuff really means. To me, what makes a story work is that something interesting happens to a character we care about. That’s how you earn the right to ask the reader to stick with you while you get the story told. That’s how you earn “the right to trust your reader.” So—interesting things, investment in character. The first part is easy;

interesting things are a dime a dozen. Moon landings are interesting, and so are really great meals, and murders, and tide pools at the beach. New shoes, sharp knives, trick ponies, fancy watches—all interesting. Saying goodbye to the guy who broke your heart is interesting. So is running into your kindergarten teacher or the stripper from your bachelor party. All interesting. Certainly, turning around in your empty living room and finding a boy sitting on the couch is interesting.

What's hard is writing a character that someone actually wants to know about, a character that a reader will invest twenty minutes, or an hour, or an evening, in.

So I needed the reader to care about Mara right away, and in order to achieve that, I had to make her both believable and likable. Nobody likes a perfect person, should such a chimera even exist. And that's true even—maybe especially—in fiction. We're a little fonder of that brilliant beauty if she's cutely clueless about how to change a flat tire, or can't hard-boil an egg. We want our heroes strong and brave, but prone to rage in the face of injustice, or to have commitment issues, or—well, you get the picture. Real people have faults and problems, and Mara has plenty. But she had to have some good qualities, too. For the writer, it's a balancing act.

We see right away that Mara is, in her own words, “not exactly a failure,” a textbook example of damnation by faint praise. She's employed, but the main attraction of her low-paid job as a school security guard is that it provides lots of

free time for her to sit in her booth, doing nothing. Mara admits that one of her few pleasures is a nightly glass or two of wine enjoyed alone “in the big leather chair where I spent most of my free time.” Reflecting on a get-together with her former best friends from high school, Mara notes that “judging by cars and shoes and purses, (I was) the least well-off of the lot” and tells us she is the only one without a family, and that “I’d never been the most popular girl in our group, and now I had nothing to brag about.” In the first two pages, then, we learn that Mara is a lonely incipient alcoholic with no family, hobbies, or ambition. So what’s to like?

Hmmn. How not to brag? Because this is something I like a lot about my story. I needed to make readers like Mara, and I didn’t take the easy way out. I could’ve had her rescue a puppy or donate blood at the Red Cross or return a cash-fat wallet she found in the street. Nope. I took the hard road, hinting at Mara’s character and personality through snippets of dialogue and action, trying to create someone I myself would like, in hopes that readers might, too.

Confronted with a ghost, Mara doesn’t shriek, or demand explanation, or pinch herself, swooning with vapors. She riffs internally about the ubiquity of the Internet, notes that a drug addict can still be a decent kid, and regrets that Mike will miss all the exciting things life has to offer. (Ideally, reader, at this point you want to shake Mara and ask what about all the exciting things life should be offering *her*. See? That shows you care, at least a little.).

“You can’t talk, can you,” I remarked absently, mentally comparing this skinny, somewhat handsome boy with the picture his mother had emailed me just a couple of days earlier, along with a heartbreaking paragraph about his life and death. That’s our modern world, where news of the worst that can happen is disseminated over the Internet. He’d been nineteen, a druggie, yes, but apparently a nice enough kid, a little immature, still bucking curfew and trying to finish high school as his peers moved on to college and apartments and jobs and all the Big Life that unfolds after that.

Mara shows us her sensitivity and compassion, too, when she remembers details about that long-ago lunch with her girlfriends, when Mike’s mom, Lana, brought her precocious ten-year-old along. Lana now has a glamorous job in television, but Mara is generous, not jealous, about her old friend’s success.

“She’d always been our star. She’d been to Europe twice before the rest of us had been once. She’d dated all three of the hottest guys in high school, yet had never gotten a reputation as a slut. Lana had made everything look easy, even when she’d gotten pregnant junior year. She’d parked Mikey with her mom and dad while she whipped through a communications degree, and then returned for him.”

And she’s funny, too, or at least I hope you’ll find her so. Not rolling on the floor, rip-roaring slapstick funny. Just wry and introspective, the way *I* like *my* friends to be. The way I hope I am. When Mike reveals that he is not mute, and asks what Mara would like to know, she muses:

I did think of the obvious stuff; what’s it like to be dead, why are you here in my living room, if ghosts are real, does that mean God is real, too? But what came out of my mouth made us both laugh.

“Are you hungry?”

As it turns out, nineteen-year-old boys who are dead are just as hungry as their living counterparts always seem to be.

So what about the problematic length of my massive missive? At the behest of a wise editor, I cut 3000 words from the original 16 and made the sale to *EQMM*. As for that reputed no-ectoplasm policy, it turns out they do, on occasion, publish a ghost story, but it also turns out that Mike isn't *exactly* a ghost. If you've read the story, you know what I'm getting at, and if you haven't read it, I hope this deconstruction of the first few pages will inspire you to do so. Now go figure it out. They don't call it a *mystery* magazine for nothing.

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“Never Have I Ever” is Anna Scotti's third story for *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. A fourth will appear in the next issue (November/December), kicking off a series featuring a recurring character, a former librarian on the run. Anna's novella, *Big and Bad*, is forthcoming from Texas Review Press in March. Anna is also a poet whose work appears occasionally in *The New Yorker* and other journals. She has been awarded a number of prizes, honors, and nominations, details of which can be found at her website, [www.annakscotti.com](http://www.annakscotti.com). Anna considers herself something of a hero for teaching seventh and eighth grade, and spends as much time as possible snorkeling in the tropics.