

The First Two Pages:

“Kate Chopin Tussles with a Novel Ending” by Ana Brazil

From *Fault Lines: Stories by Northern California Crime Writers*

edited by Margaret Lucke (Sisters in Crime Northern California Chapter)

I knew my title, the conflicts, and the story’s last paragraph before I started writing. I also knew that it would be a challenge to write a short story set in 1899 Louisiana that would satisfy the *Fault Lines* anthology theme, the word count, and my goal to make historical crime fiction both fresh and familiar. Finally, I wanted to write a historical short story that would intrigue and entertain those readers who didn’t read historical short stories.

I loved my title—perhaps a little too much—but I appreciated how it specified my historic protagonist by name, how it included the somewhat antique verb “Tussle”, and how “Novel Ending” applied both to the stunning ending of Chopin’s 1899 novel *The Awakening* and to the dual interpretations I set up for my own ending.

I started the story with a date: “October 1899.” Then, somewhat paralleling the way that Chopin began some of her short stories, I introduced the two women who will tussle: Kate Chopin and the dark stranger.

“Madame Chopin! Madame Chopin!” The plump landlady huffed into the screened summer parlor. She anchored her hand

heavily on the doorframe and announced, “You have a visitor. From Chicago.”

Kate finished her paragraph before lifting her fingers from the typewriter keyboard. Her focus on writing was legendary amongst her large family; she was known to craft an entire short story while hurricane winds whipped the Louisiana gulf coast or to edit an essay while her grandchildren screamed for their supper.

Kate followed her landlady through the narrow hallways until they arrived at the front gallery. The landlady nodded her head in the direction of the gulf waters before returning inside. Kate examined the back of the dark figure standing on the walkway leading to the water. When the stranger did not turn around, Kate stepped down toward her.

“Hello?”

The woman turned slowly toward Kate, as if released from an unexpected reverie. She bounced a thin indigo-and-crimson carpetbag against her knee before saying, “It’s not quite how I expected it. Louisiana and Grand Isle ... the beach ... the ocean beyond. It’s all so vast. Like an eternity.”

As with all good stories that take place on the Louisiana coast, the beaches and gulf are primary characters. This would be true in my story also and so I introduced the coastal characteristics quickly. I showed both Kate’s experience (hurricane winds) and the stranger’s POV (“It’s all so vast”).

At this point, it’s time to mention Chopin’s novel *The Awakening*, because it drives my story and provides a historical point of reference. I also mentioned *The Awakening* early so that readers who suspected that the story was about the real Kate Chopin could get an “I’m in on the secret” thrill. Since Clifford K. Reese was the publisher of *The Awakening*, I used his name as historical ballast.

The stranger inspected Kate from scalp to shoe and then scanned the building behind Kate. “Your boarding house is smaller than I expected. And you’re smaller than I expected, too.” She

extended her ungloved hand. “You *are* Kate Chopin, aren’t you? The author of *The Awakening*? I’m Theodora Jensen, secretary to Clifford K. Reese, your publisher.”

“You’re Theo Jensen?” Kate recalled the cramped signature at the bottom of all of the typed correspondence from the Clifford K. Reese Publishing Company. “I thought that... that—”

“That I was a man. Yes, I’ve heard that before.”

“You do sign your letters *Theo*.” Kate had mused once or twice about the almost-unreadable signature at the bottom of the publishing-house letters. Did it belong to an overworked mouse-man who obeyed Clifford’s every command? Or was it the signature of a nearsighted dragon who protected the publisher from all unsolicited parcels?

I built the historical *milieu* so that the emotional and physical conflict between Kate and Theo would seem realistic for the time and place. I didn’t want a whiff of 19th century quaintness to intrude upon the characters’ goals and actions. I spent time detailing what Theo was wearing and more importantly, what she was not wearing.

... Theo Jensen appeared to be a woman between thirty and forty years of age, as un-ironed and un-corseted as Kate, but blond of hair and blue of eyes. Not a Chicago native, Kate thought, but a woman from somewhere higher up river. Minnesota, perhaps?

Despite the harsh autumn heat and humidity, the woman was dressed entirely in black. So black that Kate searched her visitor for clues of mourning—a brooch or ring containing braided hair. She saw instead the twist of reddened skin on the ring finger on the woman’s left hand. There had been a wedding or an engagement ring there, Kate was sure of it. And it had been recently removed.

Finally, Kate’s needs are clearly defined and entirely appropriate for a widowed woman in 1899: she needs money. The stranger’s reason for calling on Kate are still a mystery.

Kate did not care what the woman's name was, not really. She only hoped to God that there was a check in the woman's carpetbag. All of Kate's recent short stories had been rejected, and although most of her children were settled, they all depended upon her for something. Kate's rent had been due four weeks ago and once again this morning, she had not joined the other autumn boarders at *le petit dejeuner*.

I was very mindful that Kate Chopin was an accomplished short story writer, and I read some of her stories while I crafted mine. Very often, Chopin's characters are unhappy women who were eager to understand their sexual and emotional longings. For me, their conflicts fit perfectly into the primary (fault) and extended (blame and guilt) themes of the *Fault Lines* anthology.

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Ana Brazil earned her master's degree in American history from Florida State University, worked as an architectural historian in Mississippi, and is now writing fiction full-time. "Kate Chopin" is her second short story. Her third short story "Miss Evelyn Nesbit Presents" is published in *Me Too Short Stories: An Anthology*, from Level Best Books. Ana's debut historical mystery *Fanny Newcomb And The Irish Channel Ripper* (Sand Hill Review Press) won the IBPA 2018 Benjamin Franklin Gold Medal for Historical Fiction. Find out more at <http://www.anabrazil.com>.