

**The First Two Pages: “Wisest, Swiftest, Kindest” by Paula Gail Benson  
From *Love in the Lowcountry***

**Essay by Paula Gail Benson**

Last year, the Charleston, S.C.-based Lowcountry Chapter of Romance Writers of America (LRWA) offered its members a tremendous gift: the chapter would publish an anthology of short stories and every member could contribute. Stories needed to take place in Charleston S.C., at any time-period, during the winter holidays (from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day). They had to be 7,500 words or less (later this word count was extended to no more than 10,000). Also, those contributing would have to participate in the process of beta reading and marketing.

I’ve been a member of LRWA for many years. Even though it requires a ninety-minute commute from my residence, I continue to join because it offers excellent programs and retreat opportunities as well as welcoming and embracing a diverse membership.

While I write mostly mysteries, I do have experience writing short stories. For me, this opportunity represented a challenge. During my time with LRWA, I’d heard how professionals crafted romances. Could I do it in a short fiction format?

Story length is another factor I pondered. Most of my stories are about 3,500 words. Could I effectively structure and create one twice that long?

Fortunately, LRWA had each of us start out by writing an opening scene. Since Charleston was the focus, I put my protagonist on King Street, walking toward her job at the Charleston Library Society. That decision became the impetus for so many factors that resonated throughout the story. Charleston itself emerged as a character, and movement, whether backward or forward, became important in developing both the main characters' relationship and the time travel plot.

I'm fascinated by Charleston's historic places and its literary influence. In particular, I had read about DuBose and Dorothy Heyward returning to Charleston with their daughter Jenifer in 1936 following *Porgy and Bess*' less than stellar run on Broadway.

My protagonist, Mel, would be a female graduate student in the College of Charleston's English department. The Heywards are the subject of her thesis. She's obsessed with them because she sees them as the perfect literary couple, her ideal view of how she wants her life to be. Also, as she confesses early on, she's "better at literature than life." What if she is propelled back in time to meet her idols?

This idea continued to fascinate me, especially when I discovered all the artistic and literary figures who were in Charleston in November 1936. Along with the Heywards, Frank Gilbreth, Jr., who would write *Cheaper by the Dozen* with his sister, was a reporter for the Charleston paper; Madeline L'Engle was a senior at

Ashley Hall girls school; and Alicia Rhett, who would play India Wilkes in the movie *Gone with the Wind* and later become a renowned artist, was starring in the production that would reopen Dock Street Theater the day after Thanksgiving.

So, Mel has plenty to explore when she travels back in time, but who is she involved with and how should he be introduced?

Unfortunately, Mel's with the wrong fellow. He's a self-centered actor named Ali, who followed her to Charleston hoping to live off her scholarship, until he discovers that she'll be in the dorm as a graduate advisor. When Ali gets a starring role, he leaves Mel to fend for herself.

How do I, within the opening pages, show this relationship that on the surface has potential but is in fact between two persons on parallel tracks and is ready to break up? How do I provide the backstory without making it seem like an information dump?

What if Mel is getting ready for a 5K run? One takes place in Charleston every Thanksgiving morning. She's following the track on her way to work: right direction for her destination, but backward for the race she's preparing to run. Could that be a metaphor (she's going the wrong way, but toward the right goal), since she's talking with Ali by cell (emphasizing their separation)? Could that even help establish that both history and theater are important aspects of this story?

The first line is Ali's criticism of Mel: "You're too mired in the past."

Mel doesn't understand his attitude, particularly since he's rehearsing to play Ebenezer Scrooge, who ultimately sees respecting the past, present, and future as extremely important.

Unknown to Mel, her true love waits in the wings, at the Library actually, exactly where she might expect to find a literary mate. Will is a fellow graduate student and co-worker, whose thesis topic is Edgar Allan Poe (stationed on Sullivan's Island, near Charleston, in the 1850s). Will has an interest in Mel, but, since his marriage failed and he's primarily responsible for his young daughter, he questions if he's relationship material.

So, in the first two pages, I have Mel and Ali talking on the phone. Mel is making suggestions for spending Thanksgiving together. Ali is resistant. I want to demonstrate that Mel is not so completely consumed with her studies that she lets Ali take advantage of her. Readers need to respect Mel as someone who not only knows her desires, but also notices and evaluates what's going on around her.

The solution is to have a third "party" in Mel and Ali's conversation: Mel's thoughts. This device gives me the opportunity to show Mel becoming disenchanted with Ali. Ali might accuse her of being distracted by her research, but he's reached the point of neglecting her. As she ponders his actions, she can gently admit her disappointment and prepare readers for the upcoming scene where she must confront his betrayal. Only then will she be ready to take her trip back in time

(reflecting the turmoil of her world breaking apart) and be grateful for someone who cares as deeply about literature as she does (a true literary partner).

At least, that was my attempt. See what you think. Here are the first two pages of “Wisest, Swiftest, Kindest” from *Love in the Lowcountry* (2019):

“You’re too mired in the past.”

Speed walking her way up King Street toward her workplace, the Charleston Library Society, and listening to Ali’s voice through her ear buds, Mel thought it odd for someone playing Ebenezer Scrooge to criticize her love of literary history. Didn’t the reformed Scrooge say he would live in the past, present, and future, letting the spirits of those times continue to teach him?

Of course, Mel had always been better at literature than life. If she couldn’t find her answers in stories, at least she found entertainment or refuge in them.

“Are you still there?” Ali asked.

“Yes. I’m following the 5K course backward on my way to work.”

“Ah, that’s another thing, babe. I can’t make the Gobble Wobble race thing tomorrow.”

She had expected it. Lately, Ali’s not being there to support her had defined their relationship. Charleston offered them new opportunities, research for her and roles for Ali. Good parts, too. The best he’d had in his short career, now culminating with Scrooge. Sometimes she wondered whether Ali’s acting or his first name being Alistair had garnered him the lead. When she’d mentioned Alistair Sim’s performance in the 1951 black and white film of *A Christmas Carol*, he’d begged the theater’s marketing director to run an ad in the *Post and Courier* reading: “If you liked Alistair Sim’s performance, come see our Alistair’s Scrooge!” Apparently, the marketing director declined.

With Ali’s involvement in the theater community and her immersion into the Historical Society’s holdings on Dorothy and Dubose Heyward at the College of Charleston, their paths had diverged and time together had diminished.

“Could we meet in Marion Square after the race? We can have Thanksgiving dinner someplace downtown.” She imagined him enveloping her in a hug at the finish line as she ran her fingers through the thick dark curls that flared like a duck’s tail at the nape of his neck.

Only silence came from the other end of the call. Then, something like a sigh. Or a groan.

“That’s another thing. I kinda need to stay open tomorrow afternoon. For theater stuff.”

“On Thanksgiving?” The actors she knew would want to take a break before the long string of performance days began.

“We’re so close to the opening, we need every minute to iron out the details. After all, this is my first star vehicle.” Ali said it so confidently. The first of many, he assumed.

She hoped so, for his sake.

They’d met last spring when she assisted the literary advisor on a production of *Porgy and Bess* as part of her undergraduate senior project at the University of South Carolina’s Honors College in Columbia. Ali had snagged a small, non-singing role. After their many discussions about the original novel *Porgy* and how Dorothy and DuBose Heyward worked together, Mel had thought they could make a similar team. This fall, when she’d headed to the College of Charleston to pursue her masters in English, Ali had wanted to come with her. His enthusiasm waned a bit after he learned she’d be a Hall Director, requiring her to live on campus at McConnell Hall instead of sharing an apartment with him.

Still, he’d followed. Except, they weren’t together very much.

“Don’t you have to eat?” she asked.

“I’ll grab a bite somewhere. Besides, I need to keep as rail thin as possible to play the old miser.”

Although not overweight, Ali would never achieve being rail thin, especially not in time for the opening.

Mel remained silent as she increased her pace. She wanted to support Ali; she just wished she’d get a little encouragement reflected back. For instance, why didn’t Ali worry about her eating alone on Thanksgiving?

As if he heard her thoughts, he said, “Hey, maybe you can have lunch with Poe Guy. Aren’t he and his daughter coming downtown to cheer for you?”

He meant Will Wilson, Mel's fellow graduate student as well as a librarian and coworker at the Charleston Library Society. She thought Ali might remember the name when she explained that Edgar Allan Poe named a short story "William Wilson," but Ali persisted in calling him "Poe Guy" after Will's master's thesis topic.

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A legislative attorney and former law librarian, Paula Gail Benson's short stories have appeared in *Kings River Life*, the *Bethlehem Writers Roundtable*, *Mystery Times Ten 2013* (Buddhapuss Ink), *A Tall Ship, a Star, and Plunder* (Dark Oak Press and Media, 2014), *A Shaker of Margaritas: That Mysterious Woman* (Mozark Press, 2014), *Fish or Cut Bait: a Guppy Anthology* (Wildside Press, 2015), *Let It Snow: The Best of Bethlehem Writers Roundtable Winter 2015 Collection*, and *Love in the Lowcountry* (LRWA, 2019). Her short story, "A Matter of Honor," co-authored with *New York Times* bestselling thriller writer Robert Dugoni, appears in *Killer Nashville Noir: Cold Blooded* (2015). She regularly blogs with others about writing mysteries at the Stiletto Gang and Writers Who Kill. Her personal blog is Little Sources of Joy and her website is <http://paulagailbenson.com>.