

**The First Two Pages: “Trip Among the Bluebonnets” by James A. Hearn**  
From *The Eyes Of Texas: Private Eyes From The Panhandle To The Piney Woods*,  
edited by Michael Bracken (Down & Out Books)  
An Essay by James A. Hearn

“Trip Among the Bluebonnets” is my first professional sale and my first attempt to write in the private eye genre. I actually heard about *The Eyes of Texas* at a science fiction and fantasy convention in Austin, where editor Michael Bracken was speaking on a panel about anthologies.

Something clicked in my brain as I listened. I’m a Texan, the great-great-great grandson of General Thomas J. Rusk, and I’m a writer. A week later, the first draft was done.

As a new writer, I am keenly aware of the importance of those opening lines. They have to set the hook, or the story doesn’t make it out of the slush pile.

Without further ado:

The Roadrunner Diner south of Lampasas looked like a hundred other greasy spoons I’d ever walked into in my fifty-six years of life in Texas. The clientele was a mix of locals and truckers, the countertops were passably clean, and the lime-green linoleum looked like something out of a 1960s’ *Better Homes and Gardens*. Buddy Holly’s “That’ll Be the Day” played from a jukebox in the corner.

Texas. The very word conjures up a host of images, whether or not a reader has ever been there. For *The Eyes of Texas*, I knew that setting had to take center stage and be a character in my story, as important as my protagonist.

The first sentence does a lot of work by establishing where and who. The

viewpoint character is fifty-six and a lifelong Texan. He's in a "greasy spoon" south of a small town, with 1960s decor and a jukebox playing Buddy Holly (a Texan). As these details are filtering through Trip's brain, the reader realizes he's an older man, not quite elderly, with one foot in the past. This feeling will grow into a theme, as Trip comes to grips with his past while evading the dangers of the current case.

A waitress waddled up to the front to greet me. I spared a glance at her nametag, pinned to a uniform that was ten years too small. Louise. That figured perfectly for this place.

I grinned at Louise.

"My eyes are up here, cowboy," she said, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth. She had apparently read my glance as something bordering on interest. I had to admit, she was definitely my type. Mid-forties, ample curves, probably a woman who liked to eat in bed.

But I was here on business.

Here, Trip meets a waitress named Louise. Now, she simply could've handed him a menu and disappeared, never to be seen again. That would've been perfectly fine in a novel. But in a short story, there can be no wasted space. By describing Trip's attraction to Louise and the banter that follows, she is introduced as a character who'll play a role throughout the story. Detail equals importance; if an interesting character drops away, the reader feels cheated.

"And such pretty eyes they are, too," I said. "Table for one."

Louise uh-huhed at my compliment and led me to a table in the middle of the room.

"Not that one," I said. "Something against the wall, where I can see the front door."

Trip is called out for his wandering eyes, and he has a great comeback that doesn't fool Louise. You can practically see her eye-roll. The banter is subtle, not overdone, and sets up a possible romance.

Even a mundane detail like choosing a table in a diner can be used to great effect. He wants his back to the wall, so he's a cautious man facing a dangerous situation. It causes the reader to wonder what he's up to.

Louise gave me a sidelong look, from the top of my thinning gray hair to the silver-tipped toes of my sting-ray boots. Her gaze lingered on the bulge under my left armpit, where my .38 Special rested snugly in the holster under my jacket. In a moment, she had thumbed through the pages of my life and read a multitude of sins.

There's a problem in first-person narration: how to describe what the character looks like to the reader. Sometimes, such descriptions are unnecessary, as the pace of the narrative can carry the story along. The physical details, whatever they are, will be filled in by the reader.

Here, I wanted readers to see Trip as I saw him. Louise looks him over, from head to toe, and Trip matter-of-factly describes what she sees. He's balding, wears expensive boots, and carries a gun. While still maintaining Trip as the viewpoint character, he comes into sharper focus through the eyes of Louise.

“What's your name, cowboy?”

“Trip.”

“Pick a table, Trip.”

I tossed my Stetson and a newspaper on the tabletop of a corner booth while Louise tidied up the Sweet'N Low container and the

napkin dispenser. I gave the menu a glance while keeping an eye on the door.

Louise fished a pencil out of her beehive of strawberry blond hair. “What’ll it be?”

Nothing much looked good, from the meatloaf special to the “atomic” chili. One piece of advice has always served me well: When in doubt in these establishments, order the chicken-fried steak.

“Chicken-fried steak. Extra gravy. And coffee.”

“Cream and sugar?”

“No thanks.”

“Got it. You feeling particularly nostalgic today, Trip?”

“Huh?”

“You picked out the Elvis table. He ate in that very spot, back in ’59, when he was stationed over at Fort Hood. Always ordered the chicken-fried steak and a banana sundae with hot fudge and buttered pecans.”

“Really?” I said, not interested. Dozens of local business in this area claimed to have regularly fed the King of Rock ’n’ Roll during his stint in the U.S. Army. “Did you wait on him?”

The rest of the opening takes us back to setting, as Trip and Louise discuss Elvis and chicken-fried steak. This scene points out another writer’s axiom: write what you know. (At the same time, don’t be afraid to take a risk, as I did in writing a private eye story!)

For *The Eyes of Texas*, I had my choice of setting, as I’ve lived all over Texas. I could’ve written about Fort Worth (an interesting mix of cowboys and culture) or Austin (a liberal bastion in a sea of red).

But my heart is in the Hill Country. I’ve traveled the highways that Trip travels, and I’ve walked among the bluebonnets in springtime. I’ve eaten in the diners that served Elvis (if you’re ever in Lampasas, I highly recommend the

cheeseburgers at Storm's Drive-In). In writing about something familiar, strong details provide a sense of realism.

By establishing a robust setting while introducing characters and their relationships, the stage is set for the action to begin. If you'd like to know what happens next, pick up a copy of *The Eyes of Texas* at your favorite online retailer.

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James A. Hearn is an attorney and author who writes in a variety of genres, including crime, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. He and his wife reside in Georgetown, Texas, with a boisterous Labrador retriever. An amateur astronomer, James believes everything is better under a starry sky—a good book, time with friends, or Mexican martinis. Visit his website at [www.jamesahearn.com](http://www.jamesahearn.com).