

The First Two Pages: “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire” by Donna Andrews

From *The Beat of Black Wings: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Joni Mitchell*, edited by Josh Pachter (Untreed Reads)

An Essay by Donna Andrews

When Josh Pachter invited me to contribute to *The Beat of Black Wings: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Joni Mitchell*, I asked if I could have my favorite of her songs, “Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire.” Once Josh said it was mine, I pulled out my phone and listened to it half-dozen times. After the first euphoria of hearing an old favorite and loving it as much as ever, something began to dawn on me: I’m known for writing humor. And this was a really dark song.

Not surprising, since many people believe the song was inspired by the heroin addiction of James Taylor, then Mitchell’s very recent ex. Me, I’m not such a big believer in the strict autobiographical provenance of songs (or any other works of art). The pieces arrive in your brain—words, images—who cares where they came from? What matters is what you do with them.

So I listened to the song a few more times. Or maybe a few more million times. What did I like about it? The half-folk, half-jazz feel of the guitar, with an occasional hint of dissonance that introduced a subtle note of menace. The contrast between the high, cool, clean soprano voice and the increasingly dark, menacing images of the lyrics. Menace and dissonance had to be in the story somewhere.

I suddenly realized that if Josh were looking for a fantasy story, this would be easy. Maybe too easy. There’s a common folk belief that iron and steel repel

magic—especially evil magic. So all I had to do was set my story in a fantasy world and... No. Too easy. But the idea of iron repelling evil pops into my mind because I've read a lot of fantasy. What if it popped into the mind of someone arguably a lot less mentally stable than I am (or can pretend to be)? Someone who inhabits the fractured world of the song, full of pawnshops, soot, fire escapes, and ladders leading down into something unspoken but menacing. Yeah.

And so was born my protagonist, a homeless guy who is probably suffering from mental illness. I say probably because I've always been fond of a particular kind of story that works just as well if you believe in the supernatural or if you disbelieve it. So maybe Charlie isn't mentally ill. Maybe he just sees what's going on better than most people. (I wrote the story and I'm still not sure which side I come down on.)

At that point I thought maybe I could do this, but I wasn't sure until I started writing, trying out a few paragraphs from Charlie's point of view, just to see how it worked. And it worked well enough that those experimental paragraphs turned into the beginning of the finished story, with only a little polishing.

You glance in my direction, but you're not looking at me. You try very hard not to see me. I'm everything that scares you. Drunk, addict, homeless guy. Probably crazy, and maybe even infected with something you could catch just from breathing too near me. So you don't even look at me, except with your peripheral vision, and you cross the street to get away from me, and your footsteps get just a little quicker.

It's okay. I don't want to get close to you either. You could be one of them.

You probably aren't, because my knife isn't warning me. It just lies in my pocket, inert, lifeless. If you were one of them, it would react. First a tingle, and then the chill, radiating out from the blade. Sometimes, if a very powerful one of them is nearby, the cold gets so deep it hurts to touch the knife, even through several layers of clothes, and the blade gives off an eerie blue glow, like witchfire.

It's pretty, that glow. Reassuring. And yet terrifying. Reassuring because I know it's protecting me. Detecting them and hiding me from them at the same time. And terrifying because it means they're nearby.

They're almost always nearby these days.

Most of the time I don't dare take out my knife to see the glow. Cops don't like homeless people waving knives around. Not even stubby little kitchen knives. Only a little paring knife, officer. I just keep it to cut my food.

But it's sharp. And the handle is steel, not plastic. Plastic damps the steel's power.

I think maybe plastic even attracts them. I stay away from it. That might be one reason why they haven't gotten me yet.

Who are they? Not sure it would help even I knew. I think it's a what, not a who, but I don't know. Sometimes I'm tempted to call them the Fae. I'm sure they're behind those legends. Elves. Fairies. Not the cute little pocket-sized elves or fairies but the big beautiful scary ones with teeth. Iron was the only way to best them. Iron and steel. It's their kryptonite.

You don't believe in fairies? Fine. Neither do I. These things aren't fairies. That's just one of the ways they fool people.

On the face of it, this beginning—and the rest of the story—does several things that I normally warn people against. First of all, it's in present tense, which writing gurus often advise us never to use, not just because it's hard to do well but also because many readers—and editors—hate it. Although I'm sometimes asked to guru, I don't think I've ever issued any ultimatums to “never use present tense.” My advice is usually the more gentle “you might want to consider whether you really need to use present tense—have you tried it in past tense?” I did a reality

check in these opening paragraphs and found that yes, my character’s voice really required that present tense. I wasn’t sure how much of his own past he even remembered—he’d live in the eternal present.

The second thing: chunks of this beginning are in second person. Which is also notoriously difficult to do well and apt to repel the reader and editor. But again, Charlie’s voice needed it, the same way it needed for his story to slip out of and then back into second person a time or two during the story—and there’s another rule broken.

I don’t usually break three so-called writing rules at once, but I figured I was following a bigger rule—one I heard from Ruth Cavin, my first professional editor. I can no longer recall her exact words, alas, but one time, when she was asked what she looked for in a book, she said “Voice. It’s all about the voice.”

So I listened to Ruth’s advice, which has seldom failed me. And I listened to Joni’s song a few more times. And out of that came my character’s voice; and when I had those paragraphs above, I was pretty sure I had a story.

#

Donna Andrews was born in Yorktown, Virginia and now lives in Reston, Virginia. *Terns of Endearment* (August 2019) and *Owl Be Home for Christmas* (October 2019) are the 25th and 26th books in her Agatha, Anthony, and Lefty winning Meg Langslow series, to be followed in 2020 by *The Falcon Always Wings Twice* and *The Gift of the Magpie*. She’s active in Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime and blogs with the Femmes Fatales at <http://femmesfatales.typepad.com/>. For more information: <http://donnaandrews.com>.