

## **The First Two Pages: *Mortmain Hall* by Martin Edwards (Head of Zeus)**

An Essay by Martin Edwards

The opening pages, the opening paragraphs, the opening lines of a novel all need to work hard. Every word needs to earn its keep. Lose your reader's interest, and you'll lose your reader. So the temptation for the writer is to try too hard and to focus on the opening to excess. For instance, by making implied promises to the reader that aren't kept. Promises about style, character, plot, and storyline.

I pay a lot of attention to the opening two pages of any short story or novel I write, but I always revisit them and often rewrite them (sometimes more than once) after I've reached the end of the first draft of the complete story or novel. What you come up with later in the process can have a crucial bearing on the opening, in all sorts of ways. A novel in particular takes a long time to write, so it would be strange—and disappointing—if fresh ideas didn't come to mind along the way. Those ideas may transform the way the story begins.

*Mortmain Hall* is set in 1930 and is my second book about Rachel Savernake and Jacob Flint. Like *Gallows Court* it pays homage to Golden Age detective fiction. Authenticity of period detail is vital, but neither book is a pastiche. My ambition, bold (and possibly naïve and unachievable) as it may seem, is to do something fresh with the classic mystery.

The first page is an Epilogue, but when I began writing the book, I didn't plan to start in that way. Yes, I wrote the first page after I reached the end of the story...

My original starting point was page two. I wanted to do five things:

1. To plunge the reader into the world of the 1930s
2. To engage the reader with a puzzling scenario
3. To introduce Rachel Savernake
4. To set the mood of the story
5. To kick-start the plot development

The first line of Chapter 1, which begins on page two, reads: 'The ghost climbed out of the hackney carriage.'

If it fits the story, it's fun to start with that sort of paradox. Orwell's 'It was a bright day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen' is one of my favourite first lines. My first line conjures up a bizarre picture of the kind I hankered after and places the action firmly in the era of the hackney carriage.

The next two sentences establish the initial set-up. First: 'His head twitched from side to side as he checked to see if anyone was following him.'

So in case anyone doubted it, this is not a story of the supernatural. The 'ghost' is nervous: perhaps he is frightened, perhaps he has something to hide, perhaps he is up to no good. We don't know, but we are (I hope) curious.

And then we come to the key protagonist: 'Rachel Savernake was sure he'd failed to spot her.'

So we gather that Rachel has her eye on him and that she's concealed herself so as to obtain some kind of advantage. Again we don't know why. But there's already a hint that she's someone who likes to get a step ahead, and is good at so doing.

The remainder of the second paragraph introduces the setting. Rachel is keeping watch outside the private station of the London Necropolis Company. There really was a Necropolis Railway in those days, to transport London's dead from the city centre to a vast cemetery in the Surrey countryside. I felt it supplied a wonderfully atmospheric setting that was perfect for the initial scenes of a dark mystery. Even though some authorial licence is permissible in a work of fiction, I was anxious to describe the Railway accurately and so I contacted its historian for corroborative information. Very kindly, he offered to read the opening pages and helped me to ensure that the details given were precisely correct.

Above all, my aim was to create a mood of macabre and menace. Barbara Peters of Poisoned Pen Press coined the phrase 'Golden Age Gothic' to convey the flavour of the Rachel Savernake novels, and that seems as good a description as any. The final sentence of the second paragraph seeks to capture that flavour: 'This was the terminus for the funeral train.'

The third and fourth paragraphs amplify our understanding of what we are witnessing: 'With exaggerated care, the ghost pulled down the brim of his felt hat. During his years away, he'd grown a bushy moustache and beard...'

Now we know that the ghost has been somewhere else—perhaps in hiding? We are, I hope, intrigued about what he’s been up to and why he might need to conceal his identity.

Rachel’s reaction is perhaps unexpected:

As he limped towards the tall station building, Rachel suppressed a groan.

The ghost’s lameness gave him away. Gilbert Payne was still an amateur in deception.

So he’s not a hardened criminal, but an ‘amateur in deception.’ Rachel’s groan when he fails to conceal the fact that he is lame suggests she may be sympathetic towards him. But why?

Other questions beg to be asked. What is Rachel’s interest in him? How does she know he intended to go to the Necropolis Railway? And what is his purpose?

Something strange is happening. Whether or not we have read *Gallows Court*, our impression is that sinister events will unfold. And I have already posed several questions that, with any luck, readers will be keen to answer.

This is how, originally, the book began. Once it was finished, I had to consider whether to rest content with the intricate plot that I’d concocted or to add a fresh layer of mystery. By then, I had a much fuller understanding of the characters I’d created. My aim is always to present these individuals, even the minor players, in some depth, so that their actions seem credible and human (even if unlikely) rather than wholly contrived. Some contrivance in a novel that

pays tribute to Golden Age detection is reasonable, but I want the psychology of the people to make sense as well as to fascinate readers and keep them absorbed.

There are two main puzzles to be solved in *Mortmain Hall* which were in my mind from the outset, although I tried very hard to conceal the nature of one of those plots from the reader, so as to thicken the fog of uncertainty that swirls around the narrative. While I was writing the story, a third plot-line came to mind, which made perfect sense given the way that I was developing some of the characters. I felt it amplified our understanding of those characters and enhanced the story as a whole, as well as offering readers ‘added value.’ I’m very, very intent on giving my readers the sense that they have read a story that brims with incident and variety, rather than being on the thin side, whether in terms of plot, character, setting, or anything else.

Nods to the Golden Age and to literary devices employed by Golden Age writers abound in *Mortmain Hall*. One quirky technique used by authors including Philip Macdonald (*Rynox*), C. Daly King (*Obelists Fly High*), and the post-Golden Age writer Michael Gilbert (*The Dust and the Heat*, aka *Overdrive*) is to start the book with an epilogue. It’s the type of literary paradox that fascinates me.

I decided that the third plot strand could be conveyed in two short sections, at the start and end of the story. I would write an Epilogue and then

split it in two. The first part, to come right at the start of the novel, serves several purposes:

1. To hook the reader
2. To convey the message that the notion of 'the perfect crime' was integral to the book as a whole
3. To hint at a mysterious puzzle
4. To emphasise the significance to the story of Mortmain Hall

That fourth point was important, because although I always intended the book to be called *Mortmain Hall*, the way I finished up writing the story meant that the characters don't arrive there until well into the second half of the novel. And that raised a wider issue about my writing methods.

I'm conscious of the fact that, although I keep varying my approach to writing novels, on the whole my books tend to build to a dramatic crescendo, with most of the extraordinary events occurring in the second half of the book rather than early on. One reason for this is that, as a reader, I often find myself disappointed by books that begin with a great premise, but fail to live up to expectations. I want my readers to finish the books with a sense of satisfaction.

On the other hand, the downside of a 'slow burn' is that readers who yearn for instant gratification may wonder where all the leads in the story will take them. Often, I utilise an extensive cast of characters; that's certainly the case with *Mortmain Hall*, and my desire to paint those characters in some depth means that there is a gradual build to the big climax (or, very often, sequence of

climaxes). These books are entertainment, and there's an unashamed element of escapism about both *Gallows Court*, which has various Grand Guignol elements, and *Mortmain Hall*. But as a reader, I prefer stories that offer rewards for investment of time and commitment, and as a writer, that's the kind of story I'm trying to offer. It's not that I'm under any illusion that I'm a latter-day Proust or Dostoevsky. It's simply a belief that, in the crime genre as in any other form of writing, you should write the best book you're capable of, and not settle for anything less. So I strive to avoid formula and the same-old, same-old. And I revise, revise, revise.

This personal view of my writing led me to start *Mortmain Hall* with an Epilogue that drew the reader into the key elements of the story straight away – even though it takes many chapters for the significance of those ingredients to become clear. The idea was to give readers who like puzzles plenty to chew over while the story develops.

The first sentence reads: 'The man was dying.'

We don't know who the man is—and I hope that red herrings scattered throughout the story will mean that the reader is surprised by the ultimate revelation of his identity.

The next sentence is: 'He knew it, and so did Rachel Savernake.'

We are then told that Rachel has discovered the truth. The dying man claims it was 'the perfect crime.' Rachel's response is to ask: 'Is there such a thing?'

This poses a question which proves to be central to all three plot strands in the book.

The man says: ‘We thought so.’

Again, who are ‘we’? My aim as the story unfolds is, once again, to misdirect the reader who is trying to solve that riddle.

Rachel then makes an observation that you’ll find in several of my stories, because it’s part of my personal philosophy: ‘Time is short.’

Finally she asks a question which seems straightforward, but proves (by the end of the book) to be rather trickier than it appears: ‘Tell me what happened at Mortmain Hall.’

And so the scene is set for an account of events leading to the big finale at the eponymous country house. Naturally, all is not as it seems...

#

Martin Edwards is the latest recipient of the CWA Diamond Dagger, the highest honour in UK crime writing. He is the author of nineteen novels, most recently *Mortmain Hall* and *Gallows Court*. He has received the Edgar, Agatha, H.R.F. Keating and Poirot awards, two Macavity awards, the CWA Margery Allingham Short Story Prize, the CWA Short Story Dagger, and the CWA Dagger in the Library. He has twice been nominated for CWA Gold Daggers and once for the Historical Dagger; he has also been shortlisted for the Theakston’s Prize for best crime novel of the year for *The Coffin Trail*. He is consultant to the British Library’s Crime Classics series, a former chair of the Crime Writers’ Association, and current President of the Detection Club. His novels include the Harry Devlin series and the Lake District Mysteries, nine non-fiction books and seventy short stories; he has also edited over forty anthologies.