

The First Two Pages: “An ERA of Inequality” By David Hagerty

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Edited by Mysti Berry (Berry Content Corporation)

An Essay by David Hagerty

Like many writers, I struggle with beginnings. Even when I’ve got the whole story outlined, in my head or on paper, it’s tough to know where to start. You want to grab readers without confusing them, inform them without boring them.

But when I met Mysti Berry, editor of *Low Down Dirty Vote*, an anthology of short crime fiction about voting rights, and its sequel, *LDDV II*, I had no trouble getting going. Both combine my passions in fiction: crime and politics.

For the second edition, I focused on the fight to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois during the late seventies, and one image stuck in my mind: that of my mother, dressed as The Statue of Liberty, in full crown and gown, marching in the 1976 Independence Day parade. Like many of my stories, I wanted “An ERA of Inequality” to combine the political with the personal, and that image captured both, so I used it as my opener:

Lady Liberty stood atop the portico, her torch raised, and intoned, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men *and women* are created equal...” The activist impersonating the statue embodied her in all things, from her graceful robe to her spiked crown to her ledger bearing the date July 4, 1776.

And that’s the challenge of the first two pages: to convey what excited you about the story and why it should excite your readers. On a structural level, those

opening pages have to convey a lot of information: about the characters, the time, the setting, and the voice. More important, though, is that the opening of a story should suggest through subtext the conflicts to come without explicitly stating them.

To me, the best way to do that is to put your characters in motion: give them something to do, some argument, some drama, some tension, something that they want—and save the throat clearing for opera singers.

So I had my hero, Duncan Cochrane, turn to his wife, who challenges him to get the legislation passed. After all, Duncan is in the unique position to push through the law since he is both the governor and the criminal conscience of the state. Like many men, he sees nothing of himself or his own interests in the amendment until his wife makes it so.

“For ten consecutive years, the ERA has come to a vote, and each time the cowardice of men has blocked it...” Every word issued from the First Lady like a strike, a counter-punch to the male hegemony that confined her and her gender.

By the end of that first scene, Duncan is committed to the fight.

The “ERA” story is typical of my inspirations, which usually draw on real events from my childhood—then I fictionalize them in a way that lets me examine their importance to me and my generation.

In this case, my memory of the time was suspect, since I was barely an adolescent and not particularly interested yet in either politics or feminism. So I

had to research the history of the ERA, particularly the fight to get it passed in Illinois before the 1982 deadline for state ratification. What I found built out the rest of the story: protests, hunger strikes, women chaining themselves to the capital steps, backroom deals, and ultimately, pig's blood.

The next challenge was how to incorporate all those elements into a story without resorting to lots of explaining or backstory. Particularly in short fiction, such digressions can bog down a good tale and lose a reader's attention.

For me, the trick is to think of them in terms of how your characters view these events, then let the narrator give it a voice and an angle. So I had Duncan rehash everything that led up to this moment in his own cynical, weary POV (a nice contrast to his wife's passion and anger).

Duncan nodded earnestly, although he knew the stats already: first introduced to Congress in 1921 and finally passed in 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment had struggled toward ratification for a decade. Thirty-eight states needed to affirm it, but the nation had fallen three short. Now, with the deadline for passage looming, pundits called Illinois its biggest battleground, but its constitution required a three-fifths supermajority for amendments. Thus, for days women had assembled on the Capitol's steps and hallways, chanting, singing, sitting, and obstructing all other business.

Finally, you have to animate the characters, get them going toward their final destination. I knew I was going to throw a lot of impediments in Duncan's way, from cowardly legislators to angry activists, so he needed a deep motive to

keep him going. This came from his backstory, the wound that animates him throughout all four of my novels:

When his wife paused to check his engagement, Duncan said. “Don’t most voters support it?”

“It’s not their votes that matter. It’s the votes of the men in office.”

“Except mine. As you know, I don’t get a say. Constitutional amendments are voted on by state legislators, not governors. If it were up to me—”

“Hogwash,” she said. “You may deceive voters with this impotence act, but I know how powerful your voice is when you choose to use it.”

He glanced away from her to the statue of Abraham Lincoln that overlooked his office. Every room of the state house contained at least one ode to Honest Abe, urging his successors to follow the better angels of their natures. “What would you have me do?” Duncan said.

Josie glared, hands on her hips. “Do it for your daughters.”

Duncan thought of his two adult girls: Glynis, who hermitted in graduate school aiming at a career as a family therapist while barely speaking to her parents; and Lindsay, who would have owned a gallery promoting art by women, had she survived.

And that was all it took to launch him: a guilty conscience and a dead daughter.

From there, the story came quickly. With so much drama inherent in the truth, I didn’t have to fictionalize much. I even worked in Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative political activist who passed out baked goods to legislators as persuasions.

And that's the great thing about a good short story: the successful ones require only one good idea, and they don't need huge revision. For the story to work, its essence has to be in its inspiration.

Thus, my advice on openings is always: start fast, with a moment of drama, and give your characters an objective right from page one.

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David Hagerty is the author of four books in the Duncan Cochrane series, political thrillers set amid the crime and corruption of his native Chicago. He has also published more than twenty short stories online and in print, including two about Duncan for the *Low Dow Dirty Vote* series. He is currently at work on a series of linked stories about a Navajo man accused of killing his white employer. Several of these have appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and one was nominated for a Derringer award.