

The First Two Pages: “Numbers Don’t Lie” By James McCrone

From *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 2*

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An Essay by James McCrone

This story was difficult to write. Most of that difficulty was self-inflicted. If the short story form is about thrift, my novelist’s brain made the early drafts lavish. I wanted to tell a story about a stolen vote, which is the theme of the anthology in which the story appears: *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 2: Every Stolen Vote is a Crime*. I’ve been writing novels for the past five years, and the short story form forced me to think and work differently. But not at first.

The short stories I admire are terse but suggestive of more. Moreover, that directness and brevity are an act of trust, of respect with the reader. The first thing to go was the title. My original title was “Numbers Don’t Lie, Except When They Do.” Too much. The irony of “except when they do” can be assumed. And Mack’s (the narrator’s) job will be to make the numbers lie.

To prepare, I had done extensive research, looking at voting machines and ballot stuffing. I had looked at ballot harvesting, as had been done most recently in North Carolina, and at the stories behind hacked machines, and (sadly for the nation) I had a lot of factual material to work with. Backed by copious research and anecdotes, the scope and pace of those early drafts read like chapter one of a novel—a long novel.

Worse, I started by telling it from the wrong end, as an investigation. But when I started thinking from the perspective of the criminal, referred to only as “Mack” in this story, the whole thing took off. Mack’s voice came to me quickly. There was an urgency and energy about him that I wanted to communicate:

“I guess I felt bad about it,” he begins the tale, “but not bad enough not to do it. The money was right.”

So this will be all about business. I hoped this opening made for interesting questions, which would impel the reader to keep going. First, is it true that numbers don’t lie? Nothing is immediately related regarding what Mack will do or how he will do it. But the reader can infer. In the second sentence, we learn that it’s three days before the election. Which election? How is the narrator involved? It sounds sinister. The normalcy of the business exchange, despite Mack’s snarky tone over the next two paragraphs, both affirms that his services have been used often enough that he can speak of how things “typically” work and gets the action moving. Moreover, even though it’s about elections, no one mentions policy or ideology. One gets the sense that Mack will work for whoever pays.

Throughout the story, as here in the first two pages, no one gives a real name. The reference to a bank account in the name of James Burnham is also an alias. It’s the first intimation that what happens may be about something larger than a simple election. The real James Burnham is the author of *The Managerial*

Revolution (1941), and many of the ideas in it about hegemony, oligarchy, and the ends of power for ruling elites became the blueprint for “Goldstein’s book” in Orwell’s *1984*. I knew the reference was oblique (he’s not widely read today), but in this case, whether the reference landed wouldn’t make or break the story.

The interchange between Mack and Mr. Green is all business, because that’s what this vote theft is about—business. Mack has the skill to return the desired election result, irrespective of what the voters may want, and he will be well paid to do it. The place where the election is taking place, like the names of those involved, is also left out. I wanted readers focused on the story, not on whether they recognized specific places or events or made associations with specific people. Mack’s contemptuous tone drives the narrative while we jump—with him—into action.

It’s clear he’s a fixer, a hired gun.

I suppose a consultant shouldn’t lament the foolishness that brings about the need for his services, but a review of how and under what circumstances those footing the bill had fucked up can be enlightening. From a self-preservation view, identifying blind spots, weaknesses and outright blunders—and not only those of the side you’re attacking—can shine a light on future difficulties.

“Ideally,” he notes—the only mention of ideals in this story—“voters looked at the cases presented during the various campaigns and made their preferences known at the ballot. But we don’t live in an ideal world, and that’s where I come

in.” Despite his ambivalence he will go through with it. Even if he’s only ever called in “at the eleventh hour.” The money’s right.

He doesn’t like the people who employ him. He’s immediately dismissive of the party functionary who hires him, “Mr. Green,” sneering at Green’s spy-novel jargon. And he’s canny, no true believer: “The profligacy and stupidity of my employers were breathtaking” is his summary appraisal of his client(s), and it’s given him a mountain to climb. Who are his employers? Who, ultimately, is Mack working for? Will he be successful?

You’ll have to read on.

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James McCrone’s short story “Numbers Don’t Lie” appears in the anthology *Low Down Dirty Vote, Vol. 2* (“*Every Stolen Vote is a Crime*”). He’s also the author of the Imogen Trager series, comprising *Faithless Elector* (2016), *Dark Network* (2017), and the forthcoming *Emergency Powers* (Oct. 1, 2020)—“taut” and “gripping” political thrillers about a stolen presidency.

A Pacific Northwest native, he now makes his home in South Philadelphia with his wife and three children. He’s a member of the Sisters in Crime network (DE-Valley chapter), Mystery Writers of America (NY-chapter), International Association of Crime writers, and Philadelphia Dramatists Center. He has an MFA from the University of Washington, in Seattle. Author website: <http://jamesmccrone.com> .