

The First Two Pages: “All Shook Down” by Libby Cudmore
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An Essay by Libby Cudmore

What *Law and Order* and *Perry Mason* (yes, even the gritty reboot) never show about court is that it is *boring*. Unless you are there for a full trial, you generally find yourself waiting for the five-minute appearance of the one guy your editor has tasked you with writing about, because it is a first-degree murder charge and he had been on the run ever since he lit his girlfriend’s apartment door on fire. The police caught him, in the basement of an apartment 50 feet from the police station, and now he is wearing orange behind a door at the back of the courtroom, waiting for his turn to say “Not Guilty” in front of the judge.

But until that moment, you wait.

I wrote much of the first paragraph of “All Shook Down” on a reporter’s notepad, without a character or story in mind, just based on what I was witnessing as I waited. I didn’t know how I was going to use it, but it’s not like I was doing anything else in that moment.

I never had to stand in front of the judge. No, my managers and handlers and all the privileges of fame kept me away from all that. Can’t be booked for possession if you shoot all the junk in your pocket. Never had to steal change from car cup holders to get my fix, not when there was per diem, a yes-man backstage to find some pills or a bottle or that coveted little baggie, a taste enough to even me out

enough to stagger out on stage or hold myself up in front of a studio mic. The French Letters may have been long dissolved, but those days were only as far behind me as I let them stay.

Today's docket was the usual punks and drunks, a plea on a two-year-old manslaughter case and then whatever Judge Lawrence Romy wanted me for. No sense waiting on the hard bench outside his office. Not when all the action was in the courtroom.

I've always loved the way Raymond Chandler wrote Phillip Marlowe's narrative, as though Marlowe's talking only to himself, complete with his own set of vocal/mental tics. It gives the reader a real sense that they are listening in on something small and intimate, which is the foundation of the genre. The reader, by way of the detective, is peeking through keyholes and digging through trash belonging both to the narrator and the perp.

I cribbed from that here with the way Martin says "No, my managers and handlers..." in the second line, forcing a much tighter—and, I think, much more captivating—first-person perspective. It's a natural flow of conversation, even if he's the only one having it.

Hell, even Martin's last name, Wade, is another theft from Chandler, specifically, the alcoholic writer in *The Long Goodbye*. There's a fine art to literary allusion; it's about what you can sneak in, not what you full-bore blast the reader with. A reference must work well enough on its own that the reader doesn't lose the story if they don't know what you are referring to but that it will delight whoever catches it.

(I anxiously await for someone to pick up on the elaborate puzzle of Martin's band name; it's a two-part reference, a sort of Swiss-army joke, as Joel Hodgeson might call it.)

Of course, there's the cliché of the alcoholic detective who puts down the office bottle at just the exact right moment to solve the case, but as a reporter in a rural area, I'd witnessed the devastation the opioid crisis wrought. With Martin having been a wild rock star in the early '90s, it made more sense to make him a recovering heroin addict instead, subverting a genre trope while still maintaining a personal tension that comes into play later on. "Wade" seemed a name that would amuse my college professor, but not so obvious as if I had named him, say, "Martin Cobain."

Setting isn't one of my strongest talents, but in this instance, because I wrote this while actively engaged in the setting I was writing about, I made the choice to place Martin on the galley bench himself, relating to rather than simply existing inside the courtroom. He knows he's lucky he's on this side, which makes him compelling. He has tasted the wrong side of life and has made the choice not only to return to good but to continue to uphold it in a way that the cops and the judicial system, as we find out later, cannot.

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Libby Cudmore's debut novel, *The Big Rewind* (William Morrow, 2016), received a *Kirkus* starred review and praise from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. Her work has been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Tough*, *The RS-500*, *PANK*,

Stoneslide Corrective, the *Barrelhouse* blog and the anthologies *Hanzai Japan*, *Welcome Home*, *Mixed Up*, and *A Beast Without A Name*. She is the hostess of the weekly #RecordSaturday live-tweet and co-host of the OST Party and Shattered Shield podcasts.