

The First Two Pages of *Rattlesnake Rodeo*
by Nick Kolakowski (Down & Out Books)

An Essay by Nick Kolakowski

What's the best way to start off a sequel? You hope, of course, that your reader finished the preceding novel. But what if the sequel is their first introduction to your characters and their world? How do you bring them up to speed in a way that's not crushingly pedantic, while also slipping your longtime readers into the story as quickly as possible?

These questions (and many others!) occupied my mind while plotting the beginning of *Rattlesnake Rodeo*, the sequel to *Boise Longpig Hunting Club*. I recalled the many books written by authors I loved, from Agatha Christie to Lee Child, that reintroduced characters and took up threads from previous books. But I had a particular dilemma: *Rattlesnake Rodeo* begins roughly an hour after *Boise Longpig Hunting Club* ends, with many of its plot threads extremely active. This wasn't just a whole new adventure with the same cast.

One frequent and trusted advisor suggested that I try starting off with a short prologue that summarized the events of the previous book in a couple of paragraphs—the text equivalent of the 30-second “Previously On...” that begins many TV shows. That would allow me to plunge *in medias res* without having to

add chunky exposition at the outset.

I tried it, but it didn't work. It felt... clunky. It ran counter to one of those big truths of writing: Show, don't tell. On the next go-round, I did my best to thread the proverbial needle: weaving in details about the previous book (mostly though dialogue) while moving things along as fast as possible in the first few chapters. For example, I had Frankie, the arms-dealing sister of Jake, the books' main character, catching up another character on the plot of *Boise Longpig* via a somewhat-lengthy cellphone conversation.

Something still felt off, and I realized that I was trying to introduce too much backstory too fast. It was getting clunky and inorganic again.

Okay, rewrite time. For this go-round, I shaved back on the details from the previous book, figuring that those who'd read *Boise Longpig* would know what happened. As for those for whom *Rattlesnake* would be the first introduction to this world, I trusted that a few key details would ensure they didn't feel lost as the plot rushed ahead. From the top:

CHAPTER ONE

After we blew up a few of the richest and most powerful men in Idaho, my sister Frankie wanted to stop for fries. We had a plastic tub filled with charred phones and wallets in the back seat of our stolen SUV, three pistols under the front seats, an AK-47 in the cargo area, and yet she felt calm enough to steer us toward deep-fried carbs and probably too many eyewitnesses. Ever since we were kids, Frankie was always the weirder sibling.

“We got a lot to do if we want to stay upright and breathing,” Frankie explained as she twisted the wheel, leaning into yet another mountain curve. “We’ll need all the calories we can get.”

In the back, my once-and-future wife Janine sorted through the bin, peeling melted driver’s licenses and high-end credit cards from blackened leather. We had found these personal effects in a locked metal box thrown clear of the explosion. The men we killed had used that box to secure their personal effects before trying to hunt us down, like how I would put my wallet and phone in my gym locker before a monster weightlifting set. I felt zero remorse over converting those sick bastards into piles of charred hamburger.

So you know from the outset that “weird” Frankie and her brother have just killed a bunch of powerful, wealthy folks—even if you’re not quite sure about what exactly happened. You know they’re on the run. And the “once-and-future wife” gives you the sense that our narrator, Jake, has a complicated relationship with his spouse. There’s more than enough time in the rest of the novel to dig deeper into all of these things—I just wanted to sketch enough so that a new reader wouldn’t get too confused.

We continue on:

“Maybe we should toss these phones out the window,” Janine said. “Someone could track them, right?”

“We need to get whatever info off them we can,” Frankie said. “Then we’ll dump. There’s no signal up here, anyway.”

“I’m trying to find my phone right now, but there’s a lot of scrap...” Janine held up a charred lump of plastic and bubbly glass.

The road dipped into a valley prickly with burned trees, its rocky sides plunging into a narrow river foaming with rapids. Even steeper mountains beyond, the ridges patched with snow. Under ordinary circumstances, I would have found the view peaceful, but my stomach was imploding, a black hole vacuuming up my body heat from the inside. When was the last time I had been this scared? Iraq?

We were dead. Although I didn't want to say it out loud, I knew that our life expectancy had almost certainly dropped to zero, no matter what we did or where we went. When you carbonize a group of millionaires, politicians, and millionaire-politicians, the law never stops hunting you, and they make sure you'll never have the chance to say something embarrassing at trial.

No. We would get through this. We had to.

We had a daughter who deserved to live. I took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled, feeling a little calmer. My side-view mirror framed the pickup with Frankie's men, trailing a hundred yards behind, and that helped my mood, too. No matter what the odds, we had Frankie's crew and whatever information we could pull from these charred phones. We had my experience as a soldier and bounty hunter, combined with Frankie's considerable experience in doing terrible things to other human beings for money.

Now we have a sense of the stakes left over from the previous book—not only are our three protagonists' lives in danger, but also a kid, as well. I also wanted to emphasize the perilousness and terror of the situation without spending too much time (at least at the outset) going into *who* they've killed and why (although it ends up mattering very much later).

I also wanted these initial pages to give hints of our characters' abilities and backgrounds without exposition—hence the hints about the narrator's time in Iraq, and Frankie's deadliness. Those were details that needed to be embedded as early as possible into the readers' minds, given how key they are to the plot.

Then the plot kicks in, and from there, I wanted the narrative rocket to propel the reader forward, faster and faster, while also layering in more character notes: our narrator's position on killing (he's not a psychopath, but he'll do what's necessary),

his wife's OCD (which plays a part in the books), and so forth. Overall, though, the emphasis is on speed:

The satellite phone in Frankie's lap buzzed, and she answered it one-handed. "What?" She listened for a few moments before ending the call. Smiling, she said: "My boys."

"What's that?" I asked.

"We got a little surprise at Redfish Lake. Maybe a good one." She stomped the gas, bucking the SUV forward. "And they got that restaurant, right? At the lodge? Excellent fries."

Once upon a time, the story goes, Redfish Lake teemed with so many salmon that the water gleamed red. Hence the name. The fish were long gone, but it was a popular place to party. Before we had our kid, Janine and I would drive up from Boise to bike the rocky trails and hang out with our friends on the water. "It's Saturday," I said. "Big crowd, lot of witnesses. Maybe a concert or two later. You think this is a good idea?"

Frankie cocked an eyebrow. "My IQ didn't suddenly drop by fifty points, bro. Trust me."

A phone beeped, and Janine said: "This idiot's code was one-two-three-four-five. I'm serious."

"Who's the idiot?" I asked, spinning around to face her.

Janine tapped the shattered screen a few times. "Oh shit, it's Ted Ryan."

"Senators," Frankie said, "aren't exactly known for being a bright species."

"See if you can find anything incriminating," I offered. "Any leverage is good leverage, even after someone's dead."

"He better not have any goat porn on this thing," Janine said, swiping through images. "If I'm mentally scarred, you're the one who'll have to deal with it."

"I'll keep it in mind," I said. Truth be told, I was glad that Janine was joking. A few hours ago, she had killed a man. The first time I ended someone's life, I vomited my guts out, but she seemed pretty okay so far.

"No porn. Just, ah, a lot of food shots," Janine said. "Maybe he's got a second phone for his erotic barnyard thrills." Tossing the device into the bin, she wiped her hands on her jeans, leaving faint, sooty smears, and tapped her kneecaps in a familiar rhythm: two fast,

three slow. She stopped after that, which was another positive sign. Despite the stress of the past day, her OCD appeared under control, maybe suppressed by the shock and adrenaline.

I drifted a hand around her ankle and squeezed. She bent down, took my hand in both of hers, and squeezed back.

It was another forty-five minutes of high-speed driving to reach the lake. Turning off the main road, we found ourselves on a narrow drive made narrower by the trucks and cars parked in the ditches on either side. Picture-perfect families pushed strollers and toted colorful canoes in the direction of the still-unseen lake. For the first time since Frankie had pressed the button on the detonator that blew those powerful men to little bits, I wondered how we looked to strangers.

If we were lucky, the happy civilians slipping past our windows would assume we were hikers at the end of a long trip: dusty, exhausted, more than a little ragged around the edges. If we were unlucky, some paranoid mother would think we were vagrants looking to rob a few minivans. I had zero urge to explain myself to any cops or private security. Were fries really worth all this? What was this fabulous surprise that Frankie's men had for us?

With so much in fiction, less is more. Less means a faster pace, greater efficiency. The reader is smart; their intuitions and imaginations will fill in the details. Plus, fewer details may intrigue them enough to go back and read (or re-read) the prequel.

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