

The First Two Pages of “The Soul of Peg O’Dwyer” by Michael Nethercott

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An Essay by Michael Nethercott

Let’s start with the title. After all, that’s the opening salvo of any prose work. Each writer of fiction has their own approach to naming their short story or novel. Some writers may just dash off a title in the belief that readers will more-or-less leap over it to get to the business at hand, the actual story. Other writers may fret and fuss over that process with the same energy they’d expend on naming their own flesh-and-blood offspring.

I’d place myself somewhere in the middle—neither a dasher nor a fretter be. Without question, titles are important to me. If I don’t exactly fuss, I do finesse some. In naming my story “The Soul of Peg O’Dwyer,” I was attempting to evoke a certain mysteriousness. The word *soul* has varied connotations, ranging from the spiritual to the haunting to the poetic. I was, I think, trying to hit all those notes and to intrigue potential readers.

My actual story begins not with the narrative itself, but with a transcript excerpt:

Interview by Dr. E. S. Pinnock / Friday April 26, 1957

Dr. Pinnock: Alright, let’s go further back now. Further. Further.

What do you see?

Respondent: The mill. The old mill. I hear the waters tumbling.
And someone's calling my name. They're saying, Hurry now,
Peg, we'll be late for market.

Dr. Pinnock: Peg? But that's not your—

Respondent: 'Tis short for Margaret.

Dr. Pinnock: Yes, but that's not your name.

Respondent: 'Tis. Margaret O'Dwyer. Peg.
(Pause.)

Dr. Pinnock: Alright then. Where do you live, Peg?

Respondent: In Ballylooby.

Dr. Pinnock: Ballylooby? Is that here in New York?

Respondent: New York? 'Course not. County Tipperary.

Dr. Pinnock: In Ireland?

Respondent: 'Course.

Dr. Pinnock: Can you tell me how old you are, Peg?

Respondent: I'm just on nineteen.

Dr. Pinnock: And what year is it?

Respondent: 1884. November.
(Pause.)

Dr. Pinnock: You're certain about that?

Respondent: Aye, I am.

Dr. Pinnock: Why are you certain?
(Pause.)

Respondent: Because that's the year I died.

By starting the tale with that excerpt, I'm attempting a few different things. First off, I've established the timeframe of events: the spring of 1957. Later in the story, I'll pepper in '50s references—hairstyles, radio and television shows, Elvis Presley—but in that very first line I've pinpointed what year we're in. There seems to be another timeframe at play there as well, as shown by the respondent's reference to 1884. With this bit, my aim is to enticingly confuse and draw in the reader: Wait, who's Peg? Is she not the respondent? Are we in New York or Ireland? And then the clincher: *Because that's the year I died*. My hope here is that

this provocative sentence—even if it’s context is not fully understood yet—will grab the reader and make them want to learn more.

Another intent of my opening is to plant the idea of something otherworldly. Readers may pick up on what’s being suggested here—the possibility of reincarnation—but even if they don’t, certainly something strange and out-of-the-ordinary seems to be in the works. Again, my hope is that the desire to discover more will propel the readers on. I make use of these short transcript excerpts several times in the course of the story, punctuating the ongoing action.

Coming directly off that first excerpt, I go right into the narrative:

In the spring of 1957, on the evening of May 1st (a Wednesday) four transplanted Irishmen gathered around a kitchen table in Port Chester, New York. Three of the men, all sixty or better, were long-time comrades, while the fourth, of similar age, was an acquaintance of several minutes. Two of the old friends, McMooney and Donovan—beefy, blunt-featured men whose dark curls were riddled with gray—drank whiskey. The third, Pat Flood, a slighter man with sparse dirty-blond hair, drank only water.

In one compact paragraph, I’ve introduced three of our *dramatis personae*. As a writer—and as a reader—I look for handy physical descriptions that help to identify the characters. At first glance, the two whiskey drinkers, McMooney and Donovan, are indistinguishable from one another: both are “beefy, blunt-featured men whose dark curls were riddled with gray.” Soon, though, we’ll see that Donovan wears eyeglasses, unlike McMooney, thus giving him a notable physical characteristic. Also, before we’re too deep into the story, the personality

differences between those two will become evident. As for Pat Flood, his appearance is markedly different than his two companions: he's "a slighter man with sparse dirty-blond hair." Regarding Flood's avoidance of whiskey, we immediately learn the reason for it:

Flood's abstinence was due to an incident in his youth when, inspired by strong drink, he had taken a swing at the village blacksmith, an encounter which did not go well. Henceforth, he and alcohol were not on speaking terms.

The above gives a little insight into Flood and, moreover, offers a splash of color. The image of a slight, besotted fellow trying to punch out a brawny blacksmith has its own merits. The narrative continues:

This tale was related not by Flood himself, but by the jocund McMooney who told it to Mr. O'Nelligan, the newcomer, who was drinking tea. Mr. O'Nelligan rarely drank anything stiffer, not because of past excesses but because he valued moderation in all things. Unlike his three companions (a somewhat ruffled lot) O'Nelligan was dressed nattily in a tweed jacket, vest, and necktie. He was a slender man with deep soft eyes, a balding forehead, and neat gray beard. Had he been wearing robes, he might have been mistaken for an apostle of yore.

Mr. O'Nelligan has thus far appeared in a half dozen short stories of mine, in addition to two novels. It's a common challenge for a mystery writer with a series sleuth to present him or her consistently, but in a way that's accessible to anyone who hasn't encountered that character before. I think I did a suitable job with the above paragraph in meeting both those needs. Without a ton of word expenditure, we learn that O'Nelligan is a moderate, well-dressed individual, slender, balding,

and bearded, with “deep, soft eyes” suggestive, perhaps, of introspection. My “apostle of yore” reference is a bit of flourish that, with any luck, comes off as clever and fanciful—and not cringy and overwrought. (Judge not, lest ye be judged.)

The story continues:

“Listen, O’Nelligan, I don’t mean to offend,” said Donovan, adjusting his eyeglasses (the main thing that distinguished him physically from McMooney)...

(See? As promised, there’s Donovan’s spectacles.)

“...but I think bringing you here is a damned waste of time. Sure, I know you’re a detective and all—”

“An *associate* of a detective,” Mr. O’Nelligan corrected. “I don’t wish to have my status inflated.”

McMooney laughed. “Now, isn’t he a modest Kerryman? I’ve never seen the like.”

Mr. O’Nelligan smiled gently. “We do exist, I assure you.”

Donovan grunted. “The point is that if it wasn’t for my daughter’s badgering, I wouldn’t have enlisted you. She’s a persuasive girl.”

“Aye, Betty could talk the wings off an angel,” said McMooney.

“And sell them back to the angel at a profit.” Donovan took a sip of his whiskey.

With that above section, I’ve attempted to introduce a couple of pertinent points. We now know that Mr. O’Nelligan is our detective (or, as he humbly insists, the associate of one). We also learn that while Donovan is the person who’s contacted him, it’s really Donovan’s persuasive daughter Betty, as yet unseen, who’s responsible for enlisting O’Nelligan. Several lines later, more is revealed:

“And what exactly is the thing in question?” Mr. O’Nelligan asked. “You were rather vague on the phone, sir. Something about the living and the dead overlapping.”

“I might have put it that way. Not that I truly believe it myself.”

“And you mentioned an attack on someone. But again you were imprecise on specifics.”

“I thought it best for you to hear the matter face-to-face,” Donovan said. “Considering the unnatural nature of it.”

McMooney laughed again. “Unnatural nature? Aren’t you negating yourself there, Tommy, you confounding bastard?”

Donovan scowled. “Dammit, Finn, can’t you keep your prattlings to yourself?”

“You ask a lot of a fellow,” McMooney emptied his glass and reached for the bottle. “But since I’m consuming your whiskey, I’ll try to comply.”

Once more, I’m hoping to entice the reader there. First, with the “living and the dead overlapping” line, then with the reference to “an attack on someone.” And the exchange between Donovan and McMooney offers a closer look at their relationship. Donovan appears to be no-nonsense; McMooney *all* nonsense. Despite their differences—or perhaps because of them—the two men are friends. Continuing, we discover more about the characters:

Donovan turned back to Mr. O’Nelligan. “It’s best if Betty’s the one to lay it all out for you. Though I’ll be the one paying your fee.”

“Your household here consists of just you and your daughter?”

“That’s right. My older ones are all off and married, and my wife passed away last year.”

“And a good woman she was,” said Pat Flood softly, speaking for the first time.

O’Nelligan nodded at Donovan. “My condolences. I, too, am a widower, so I know your burden.”

Donovan stared into his glass. “Somedays I feel like she’ll just step through the door, y’know? Like she’s just been off visiting

friends. But then..." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, my daughter will be home any minute. She just went to pick up her pal June. That's the girl who's at the center of it all. June Higashi."

"Higashi..." Mr. O'Nelligan stroked his beard. "Of Japanese lineage, I presume?"

Donovan nodded. "Born here in New York, but, yeah, her grandparents were off-the-boat."

"As are we!" Finn McMooney lifted his glass. "A toast to all of us who've washed up on the shores of Amerikay."

The above section serves several purposes. It reveals a connection between Tom Donovan and Mr. O'Nelligan in that both are widowers. We also get a glimpse of O'Nelligan's natural empathy, a significant trait of his. As an aside, I'll note here an example of a writer drawing from his own life. Donovan's feeling that his deceased wife might "just step through the door... Like she's just been off visiting friends" is a close paraphrase of something my father said to me over two decades ago, just weeks after my mother's death. I've never forgotten those words or the far-off tone of his voice as he spoke them.

Another purpose served above is to reveal that June Higashi, Betty's friend, is "the girl who's at the center of it all." Might this mean that she's the person who was attacked? Quite possibly. And what, if anything, does she have to do with the Peg O'Dwyer of the interview excerpt? Could June be the respondent in the transcript? Good questions all, and ones I'm wagering the reader will want to find the answers to. A few lines later, a door creaks open and...

...footsteps pounded up the hallway. A serious-looking young woman—not long out of her teens—marched into the kitchen and

stood staring down at the four men. Her eyes were dark and penetrating behind horn-rimmed glasses, above which a brunette bouffant rose high and precise. Mr. O’Nelligan took this to be Betty Donovan. A second girl appeared behind her, long jet-black hair drawn back in a ponytail and an easy smile on her lips. June Higashi. Both of the young women wore white blouses and dark slacks—a look, O’Nelligan reflected, that seemed quite popular with the youth these days.

Betty thrust out a hand. “You must be Mr. O’Nelligan. Thanks for coming.” Her handshake was firm.

So now we’ve met the two aforementioned young women, each presented with her own particulars. Betty, in horn-rimmed glasses and bouffant, is serious and firm of handshake. By contrast, June, of the jet-black ponytail, possesses an easy smile. In a couple lines, I’ve introduced these two so that the reader has a general take on them. “The Soul of Peg O’Dwyer” is, at its heart, a whodunnit. Thus, the characters have added importance since they comprise the suspect pool. In my first two and a half pages, I’ve managed to trot out five of these potential suspects (and our sleuth, Mr. O’Nelligan) in brief but hopefully efficient sketches. As the tale unfurls, readers can hang their hats on those initial descriptions while following the tangled threads of the mystery.

I’ll close by noting that the seed of this story came from a book on reincarnation popular in the 1950s called *The Search for Bridey Murphy*. I first remember seeing a copy as a child while visiting my grandparents’ home in Port Chester, NY. I’ve chosen to set my tale in that town (my birthplace.) What’s more,

in writing the opening scenes, I visualized that very house—which some believe is haunted and which occasionally intrudes on my dreams.

Haunted intrusions are sometimes a writer's best friends.

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