

The First Two Pages of “The Search for Eric Garcia” by E.A. Aymar
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An Essay by E.A. Aymar

One of my first enjoyable reading experiences was “Choose Your Own Adventure” books. For those that don’t remember, they were thin, white-covered paperbacks that would set the premise of the story in a page or two, and then present you with options about which path the protagonist (often a second-person POV character) would take. And you would turn to the page of your choice, and the story would continue.

I always wondered what would happen if, regardless of the choices someone made, those books only led to one resolution.

I think that notion has always whispered to me, and it took hold of “The Search for Eric Garcia,” a story about a man who, one drunken late night in a bar, decides to confront the person his wife has left him for. This man, who is also told through a second-person POV, is suffering from a mix of depression and disillusion, and while the story presents him, structurally, with a number of choices, the outcomes of those choices leads him on the same path.

Structurally, this story was different than anything else I’ve attempted in my short fiction. I think that’s a good thing. The rapper Busta Rhymes (this is probably one of the only times Busta Rhymes has been referenced in an essay about writing)

once said that music should reach into the audience and shake them and, personally, I think short stories and poems share that responsibility. A short story is one single song, and that song should be abrupt and unique (according to me).

Not all of my short fiction has done that, but I think my best short fiction has.

You're sitting at the bar, thinking about choices.

I wanted to do a few things with that opening line.

The first was to immediately pull the reader into a different mindset. A second-person POV is rarely used in fiction and, for that reason, it's disarming (it does appear quite a bit, given the way it leads the reader's mindset, in advertising). But the hope was to immediately jar the reader, which every opening for every work of fiction does to some effect, and disorient them.

The first line of the story, of course, needs to co-exist, even uneasily, with the last line and the story as a whole, and this opening line is probably a bit of a cheat. It's too far. I also generally like opening a story or book with action and, for the first few paragraphs, my protagonist simply sits at the bar, fuming.

It breaks my own rules even more, but I waited until the second page for the most immediate drama, for these sentences.

Your night's ending the way you planned.
In bullets.
And blood.

Edgar Allen Poe famously said something along the lines that every word in a short story needs to serve a purpose, and while that's *really lofty* advice, it's not incorrect. "The Search for Eric Garcia" is meant to be unsparing and despairing, a determined trudge to defeat. But nobody wants to read—and I certainly don't want to write—something that wallows in depression. To that end, or to avoid that end, I spent quite of bit time poking holes in the dark, either through moments of unusual analogy ("it's the kind of humid Virginia night when the air feels like you're being humped to death by a sweaty orangutang") or by the disruption of the choices presented to the reader ("Do you choose to: A. Order another beer? B. Stagger out of the bar?").

The conceit was to tell a story where the ending is revealed in the beginning, and still maintain the reader's interest. To present choices that, regardless of which option was selected, led to the same resolution. And to tell the story of a man who, in a drunken, dreamlike state, finally has a disquieting moment of sobriety, realized at the same time as the reader.

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Anthony Award-nominated E.A. Aymar's most recent thriller, *They're Gone*, was published in 2020 to rave reviews in *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus* (starred) and was named one of the best books of 2020 by the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*. His next novel, *No Home for Killers*, is coming out in 2023 by Thomas and Mercer.