

**The First Two Pages of “The Buddy System” by Kate Fellowes**  
From *Hook, Line, and Sinker: The Seventh Guppy Anthology*  
Edited by Emily P.W. Murphy (Wolf's Echo Press)

An Essay by Kate Fellowes

Every couple of years or so, the Guppies Chapter of Sisters in Crime produces an anthology. Guppies is an interesting name for a chapter of a national organization, I'll admit. It stems from the title “The Great Un-Published” (GUP), which we may have been once, but with over 1000 members now, many are multi-published.

Each anthology has a theme, and the latest one, out at the end of January and called *Hook, Line, and Sinker*, has an obvious one. Every story involves liars, cons, grifters, frauds, identity thieves, or individuals who are, or appear to be, gullible characters.

When I read that prompt, the first vision to pop in my head was of a little old lady. Maybe she'd be gullible and fall for a scam, or maybe she wouldn't. But you never use your first thought, because it's probably everybody else's first thought, too. One author I know tosses out her first *five* thoughts, which is way too ambitious for me.

What would be the flip, I wondered, of an old lady? Equally obvious: a young boy.

When I mentioned this to my husband, who is also a writer and a constant source of good ideas, he said, “Why not something related to selling candy bars as a fundraiser?”

Why not, indeed?

In my story “The Buddy System,” we meet Bennett, age ten and a half, in the first sentence, being introduced to the class at his new school.

I wanted my main character to be vulnerable, at a disadvantage. Being the new kid, while shy and academic, added the perfect level of discomfort. Bennett is used to being the new kid, with his dad in the military requiring frequent moves, but it never gets any easier. Still, he tries.

He smiled his biggest smile, the one that looked fake, and gave a half-hearted wave.

Adding to his misery, he’s seated in the back of the room, next to the boy who looks like the class bully.

Bennett felt a little shudder as Max gave him a smile. It was just as fake as his own, but in a scary way.

Here they are, the two who will make my Buddy System work. At recess, Bennett meets Savannah, who welcomes him.

“You’ll like Ms. Shepard. She’s really nice,” Savannah told him. “Everybody in class is mostly okay, too.” She looked to the basketball court, where Max was wrestling the ball away from a kid half his size.

“Except Max,” Bennett said. “Right?”

She gave a big sigh, shoulders coming up to her ears. “Mom says he’s just misunderstood. That it’s because he lost his mom when he was so little.”

Thinking of his own mom, Bennett feels compassion for the other boy, an emotion I hope to stir in readers as well. He tosses the basketball back to Max when it gets away, taking time to impress him with some fancy, but limited, dribbling skills. This won’t put them on an equal level, but it will enable Bennett to connect with Max in a positive way.

Back in class, the teacher describes the candy bar fundraiser, inviting each student to team up with another.

Bennett’s spine stiffened. Would Savannah turn to look over her shoulder at him, way off in the corner of the room? Or would—

“We’ll be buddies,” Max announced, leaning across the aisle between them to cuff him hard on the shoulder. “Okay?”

Nodding, Bennett felt resigned. Of course he’d get stuck in the back of the room next to the class bully and now be expected to trail around their neighborhood with him after school and on weekends. Of course. He sighed.

So here, in the first page and a half, is some backstory on both my main characters, some emotional engagement (I hope you can feel Bennett’s sinking heart as he’s forced into the uneasy alliance), and the set-up for a very unlikely scam.

At supper, Bennett’s mom is reassuring, giving her son some words to live by.

“Just give him a chance,” Mom said, kissing the top of his head on her way to the sink. “You never can tell with people. They can always surprise you.”

I wanted that last sentence to resonate throughout the rest of the story, as Bennett and Max spend lots of time together, selling candy bars.

On their first afternoon pounding the pavement, they share information about their families, taking tentative steps toward friendship without realizing it.

“Your uncle lives with you?”

Max shook his head. “Not really. It just seems like it because he’s there so much. He’s not really my uncle, either. Just a friend of my dad’s. They’ve known each other since grade school. Hey,” as a thought occurred to him, his voice brightened, “maybe we can be like that when we’re ancient.”

They both laughed at the idea. Bennett couldn’t imagine being actual friends with Max any more than he could imagine being ancient.

Remember when you were a kid and the idea of ever being old seemed crazy? I distinctly remember thinking 25 was “ancient.” Talk about crazy! This light-hearted moment is another stepping stone to a relationship. Max, we can see, welcomes the idea of being “old” friends, displaying his vulnerability just as Bennett had in the first paragraph. And while Bennett can’t envision a true friendship with Max, we the readers can recognize a bit of foreshadowing at work here.

By using two children as characters, I was able to combine the naivety of youth with simple situations and a heartwarming dash or two.

There's a crime in this story, one that is solved, and resolved, in what I hope readers will find a satisfying way. Please check out "The Buddy System" and let me know if I succeeded. Find me at <https://katefellowes.wordpress.com/> and on Facebook, of course.

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**Kate Fellowes** is the author of six mysteries, including *A Menacing Brew*. Her stories and essays have appeared in many anthologies and periodicals including *Victoria*, *Woman's World*, *Brides*, and *Romantic Homes*. As winner of the San Diego Public Library's Matchbook Short Story contest, she met the challenge to craft a mystery just fifty words long. A founding member of the Wisconsin Chapter of Sisters in Crime, her working life has revolved around words—editor of the student newspaper, reporter for the local press, cataloger in her hometown library. She blogs about writing and life at <https://katefellowes.wordpress.com.>