

The First Two Pages: “Crazy Cat Lady”

By Barb Goffman

From *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*

This analysis of the first page of “Crazy Cat Lady” gives away certain information that could undermine the effect—and enjoyment—of the story. I urge you to read the story before you read this analysis. The magazine can be purchased in a paper or electronic version. If you have an e-reader, you could buy the magazine and begin reading my story in just a minute or two. I hope you will. With thanks, Barb Goffman

When starting to tell a tale, be it novel-length or short, a good storyteller will try to find a way to draw the reader in. This could involve starting a story with a proverbial bang, such as a teenager coming home and saying, “I crashed my car!” His mom and dad definitely want to hear his story (after checking out him and the car). Alternately, a story could start with intrigue, as in this familiar opening: The woman wore a slinky black dress, skyscraper heels, and a look of terror in her eyes as she entered the P.I.’s office and begged for help. Or a story could start with something familiar and comforting, such as the endearing Once Upon a Time. There are many ways to begin.

When it came to my newest short story, “Crazy Cat Lady,” (published in the first issue of *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, Wildside Press, September 2017), I decided to start with the mood—in this case, one of apprehension. This is a story of psychological suspense, and I wanted to make the reader anxious immediately,

feeling the stress and worry my main character does. I wanted the reader to slide right into the main character's sweaty shoes. So I chose a scenario that everyone can relate to—one that would raise goosebumps on most anyone's arms, including yours, dear reader. Here is the first paragraph:

Someone had been in my house. I knew it the moment I pushed the front door open. The air felt heavy, tense, like a thunderstorm in the offing.

You want to read more, don't you? You're anxious yet intrigued. You can relate to the fear that would surge through your body upon coming home and knowing instinctively that your home—your sanctuary—has been violated. Questions would flood your mind. Have your valuables been stolen? Your possessions destroyed? Has someone been hurt? And then you hit even bigger questions. Is the intruder still in the house? Are you in danger?

With just three sentences, I hopefully have led you to identify fully with the main character, Zephyr. You can practically hear her heart racing. Feel the adrenaline pouring through her body. You're primed for fight or flight, as she is. By starting not only in the middle of the action, but doing it in a way that taps into a primal fear, I've strapped you into the roller coaster car and set you off on the track, and you are eager for the ride.

Now that I've got the reader's attention, I want to better set the scene, reinforcing the mood and moving the plot forward, providing key information while at the same time misdirecting the reader. Here are the next two paragraphs:

I scanned the room, glad for the bungalow's somewhat open floorplan. The pillows on my comfy sofa remained fluffed. The yellow mums still stood tall in their vase on the kitchen table, their spicy fragrance filling the air. Everything was neat, as always. No drawers open. No mess on the floor. Things were exactly as I'd left them. Yet something wasn't right. Nothing made it clearer than Sammy's absence. My cat always greeted me when I returned home, butting his head against my legs. But Sammy was hiding, which made me wonder . . .

Was someone *still* in the house?

The description is minimal. Just enough for you to picture the room, filling in your own details. The description also does double duty. Not only does it show the room, but it provides insight into the main character. Zephyr's tidy. Precise. She *knows* how things were when she left. She's also someone who listens to her instinct. Everything looks perfect but she knows it's not. She's in tune with her feelings and she acts on them.

These paragraphs also tell you that Zephyr shares her home with a cat. This fact should make you feel good about her. If a character has an animal, she typically gives a positive impression. And knowing the animal is acting out of the ordinary ramps up the tension once more (so much so that you hopefully don't stop and wonder if Zephyr has guessed correctly why her cat is missing—a fact you

could come back to at the end and think, I should have known; tension was in the air; the cat was acting strangely—the information was right there on page one). But for now, you're in the midst of escalating tension, which leads to this:

Call the police, a voice in my head whispered. And tell them what? Another voice whispered back. Everything looks fine. They'll think she's crazy.

Suddenly you're even more intrigued, I hope, because it's been revealed that the main character may not be reliable. Everyone probably talks to themselves in their head, debating how to proceed in uneasy situations. But when Zephyr has these conversations, she's merely listening to them—because she hears actual voices in her head. Yes, she's crazy. It's right there on the page, and that fact will color everything that happens for the rest of the story. It *should* prompt the reader to pay close attention, examining every happening with skepticism. Yet I hope the reader will be so tense and so invested in learning what happens next that he won't do so.

And with all that in place, it's now time for the plot to proceed:

With a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead, I carefully set the grocery bags down by the front door. Some of Sammy's metal food cans clinked against each other. Church bells couldn't have sounded louder. I froze and listened hard. No reaction came from inside the house. The only sound I heard was the refrigerator humming. I took three small steps to the coat closet beside me and softly laid my head against its closed door. Was someone inside? I had to take several deep breaths to keep my heart from thumping like a drum so I could hear through the door. No one inside.

I hoped.

Steeling myself, I eased the sliding door open and leaned into the darkness. Boots, umbrella, jackets. And my trench coat. Long enough for someone to hide behind. With a shaking hand I reached forward and yanked it aside as I jumped back. But no one leaped out at me. No one charged at me with an ax. The closet, as they'd say on cop shows, was clear.

That left the rest of the house to check.

My goal is that by this point in the story—the end of page one—the reader feels compelled to follow Zephyr as she checks the rest of the house and as this tale builds to its conclusion. The reader will have no idea what comes next and definitely wants to find out—perhaps even needs to find out. That is the goal of any storyteller: to lure the reader in and entice them to turn the pages without realizing they're doing it, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, page by page, until they reach the satisfying end.

I hope the first page of “Crazy Cat Lady” did that for you (if you've already read the story). And if you haven't, I hope you'll go read it now. For me, storytelling is only truly fulfilling if someone reads or hears my tales. So, please, if you haven't already, read it now. And if you have already read “Crazy Cat Lady,” now's the time to do it again—knowing what you know when you reach the end should make a second read all the more telling and fulfilling. Enjoy!

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Barb Goffman edits mysteries by day and writes them by night. She's won the Agatha, Macavity, and Silver Falchion awards for her short stories, and she's been a finalist for national crime-writing awards nineteen times: ten times for the Agatha (a category record), four times for the Macavity, three times for the Anthony, and once each for the Derringer and Silver Falchion awards. Her book *Don't Get Mad, Get Even* won the Silver Falchion Award for the best short-story collection of 2013. To support her short-story habit, Barb runs a freelance editing and proofreading service, focusing on crime fiction. She lives with her dog in Winchester, Virginia, and blogs every third Tuesday at www.SleuthSayers.org and every tenth Saturday at www.PensPawsandClaws.com. Her next story, "Till Murder Do Us Part," will appear in *Chesapeake Crimes: Fur, Feathers, and Felonies*, scheduled for publication in April 2018 from Wildside Press. Learn more at www.barbgoffman.com.