

## **The First Two Pages: *Last Puffs***

By Harley Mazuk

I wrote what I thought was a spiffy first line for *Last Puffs*, a novel featuring my series private eye, Frank Swiver. It went like this:

Whenever Maximilian Rabinowitz wanted a little Asian nookie, he would go to the Lotus House in Chinatown.

That's set in San Francisco in December 1948. But as is often the case, you don't really know your story until it's written. I completed my first draft and set it aside to ferment for a month; when I re-read it, I found my story actually started in Spain in March 1938, where Frank and Max were fighting during the Spanish Civil War.

If I opened with Max and his proclivities, I'd have to flashback at some later point to the war. I'm not fond of long flashbacks, and it felt awkward to tell the story with one. Besides, what happened in Spain stayed with the characters, affecting their behavior throughout. It would be less awkward and clearer to open the book in Spain and proceed chronologically. It was a difficult decision to change the opening because I was so fond of my original opening. (I managed to keep the bit about Max, now on page 46.) Here is our adjusted opening, as it appears in the book:

There'd been a dusting of fresh snow in the high ground during the night, and the captain wanted our squad, which was nine men, to relieve an outpost on the crest of a hill, just up above the tree line. Max Rabinowitz took point, and I followed, climbing steadily. It was a cold, quiet morning, and we talked between ourselves about the '38 baseball season, and whether we'd be back in the States to see any games.

(The entire First Two Pages, 666 words, appears at the end.)

In my opening, I tried to accomplish at a minimum these three things

1. Hint at conflict
2. Suggest movement
3. Be clear

Conflict is essential to all good fiction, so we want to start our story by at least hinting there will be conflict coming your way. The military terminology—captain, squad, outpost—is the suggestion.

I like to set my characters in motion at the beginning of the story. I want to describe visual action that the readers can imagine and thus begin to see a movie in their minds. If I make things visual, the reader will follow. Even though I'm back to the chronological beginning of my story, I'm still able to open the book *in media res*. Frank and Max are soldiers going into action to relieve the troops at an outpost in the hills.

I also like to give at least rudimentary physical descriptions of the primary characters, Frank and Max, to help the reader picture them and begin to follow

their movements. In the fifth paragraph, the reader learns Max “looked a bit like Cary Grant.” That’s an invitation to roll film. The physical description of the characters includes some description of clothing, too. Frank, the narrator, “wore a burgundy scarf around [his] head and ears, under a dirty and battered grey fedora.” Detailed descriptions, *a la* a witness’s account or a private eye’s report, are a “Hammettism,” a writing technique often employed by Dashiell Hammett, that I will use throughout the book.

Be clear. It’s my job to be clear about the where, when, and who of the story for the reader, not create confusion. Frank hears “cries in Spanish;” it’s prior to the 1938 baseball season. We’re in Spain, it’s winter 1938. I build the situation in baby steps, but I don’t build confusion. Yes, the place and year are in the chapter header, but I want it to be apparent in the narrative too. Max and the narrator, as yet unnamed, are leading a squad of men who come under fire from “the fascists [who] had overrun the outpost.” A reader with an average knowledge of world history might pick up that our boys are fighting for the Spanish Republic, against the Nationalist rebels—the fascists.

One of the interesting things about writing a guest post for this blog is the opportunity to focus on your first two pages. Now I see some things I should have done better. For example, did I give the reader a fair indication at the start of what this story is about? Well, 85 percent of the story is a private eye story, but there’s

no hint early on that Frank, the narrator, will become a private eye years later. At the beginning, *Last Puffs* is a war or adventure story. But although I fail to suggest “private eye story,” I do try to establish the tone I will use—a pulp fiction tone. This is going to be a straightforward story, told in simple declarative sentences. Characters will reveal themselves through action, not through internal monologue or rumination.

Characters also reveal themselves in dialogue in my stories. We immediately get into a conversation about the upcoming baseball season. It is not plot material *per se*, but it’s not careless, throwaway dialogue either. We learn that Frank and Max are baseball fans, and if you’re knowledgeable about the time frame and the history of the game, you realize from their talk that they’re only familiar with Pacific Coast League players whom they might have seen in person. Baseball is one of the recurring images throughout the novel.

How did it all work? I’ve received some early reviews on Amazon that indicate I may have made some right choices. For instance, one reader commented on “the cinematic quality and page-turning pace.” Another said, “Mazuk starts off with great description and action, which pulls the reader right into the story. He also uses a lot of dialogue to move the story along. The same way that Elmore Leonard used dialogue as a moving device.” First time anyone ever referred to me alongside Elmore. It’s cool when readers mention picking up specific details on

their end that you the writer, put out there from your end. Getting into the reader/writer zone makes me feel good. Getting into the reader/writer zone in the First Two Pages makes me think “it’s working.”

## **THE FIRST TWO PAGES OF *LAST PUFFS***

*Aragón, Spain, March 1938*

There’d been a dusting of fresh snow in the high ground during the night, and the captain wanted our squad, which was nine men, to relieve an outpost on the crest of a hill, just up above the tree line. Max Rabinowitz took point, and I followed, climbing steadily. It was a cold, quiet morning, and we talked between ourselves about the ’38 baseball season, and whether we’d be back in the States to see any games.

“I would like to see Hank Greenberg and the Tigers play DiMaggio and the Yanks,” said Max. Max was dark-haired and rangy, and I always thought he looked a bit like Cary Grant, though now after a year in the field, there was nothing suave nor dapper in his appearance.

“How about Ted Williams?” I said. “We’ve already seen DiMaggio play in San Francisco with the Seals.”

“We saw Williams play with the Padres. Besides, he isn’t in the big leagues yet,” said Max.

“Yeah, but the Red Sox signed him.” I walked along just off Max’s shoulder. I was about the same height as Max, six feet, six-one, a little thinner, and looked at least as scruffy that morning. I wore a burgundy scarf around my head and ears, under a dirty and battered grey fedora. I scanned the virgin snow ahead of us with heavy-lidded eyes. The wind was faint, just enough to pick up a feathery wisp of snow in spots and spin it around.

“He’s only about 19. I think they’ll keep him down on the farm for ’38.”

“I would like to see Bob Feller pitch to your boy Greenberg,” I told Max.

Smitty came up between us. “Feller throws 100 miles an hour, and he strikes out more than one per inning.”

“They say,” said Max, “he walks almost one an inning,”

“Keeps ‘em loose up there,” said Smitty, who was from Cleveland.

“Hundred mile an hour heat and nobody knows where it’s going.”

As the three of us stepped out of the cover of the tree line, Smitty kind of hopped up on one leg and threw his arms out. I wondered what sort of a weird little dance that was; then I heard the automatic weapons fire coming down at us off the hill. It was a mechanical chatter, rather than gunpowder explosions, and the wind had blown the sound around the hills so that the bullets cut Smitty down before it had reached us. Branches near us started to snap off and tumble earthwards. Max hit the snow on his belly and rolled downhill to his right to get to cover behind a rock. I motioned for the others to get back into the trees, and dove into a low spot in the ground.

When we could look up, we saw that the fascists had overrun the outpost we'd been climbing up to the ridge to relieve, and the firing was coming from there. We returned fire. I heard cries in Spanish from behind me, a curse in a low voice, then a high-pitched prayer.

A potato-masher grenade came flipping end-over-end down the hill toward me. It seemed like slow motion. It hit a rock and bounced up. I could say a Hail Mary in about four seconds flat in those days, and I said one then. The grenade sailed over my head; I heard it explode, and felt a shower of dirt on my back. In front of me, Max was popping up and firing one round with his Springfield, then dropping behind the rock. I popped up and fired when he dropped down. I thought we were doing pretty well taking turns, but grenades kept arcing over our heads and bullets pinged into Max's rock and raked the dirt beside me. Max tried lobbing one of his grenades towards the machine gun, but his throw was uphill, and he didn't have an arm like DiMaggio.

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Harley Mazuk was born in Cleveland, the last year that the Indians won the World Series. He majored in English literature at Hiram College in Ohio, and Elphinstone College, Bombay, India. Harley worked as a record salesman (vinyl) and later served the U.S. Government in Information Technology and in communications, where he honed his writing style as an editor and content provider for official web sites.

Retired now, he likes to write pulp fiction, mostly private eye stories, several of which have appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*. His first full-length novel, *White with Fish, Red with Murder*, was released in 2017, and his newest, *Last Puffs*, just came out in January 2018. Besides writing, Harley's other passions are his wife Anastasia, their two children, reading, running, Italian cars, California wine and peace.