

The First Two Pages: *Disorderly Conduct*

By Mary Feliz (Lyrical Underground/Kensington)

I told the kids it was a drill. I told myself it was a drill. But I wasn't fooling anyone, especially not the cats.

Late summer in California is fire season, and the potential consequences had never been more apparent nor closer to home. Air gray and thick with smoke and unburned particulates was so dry it hurt to breathe. My compulsive refreshing of the Cal Fire website throughout the night revealed that the cause was an illegal campfire abandoned on the coastal side of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Thirty-six hours later, it now encompassed miles of state and county-owned hiking areas and threatened to jump the ridge and barrel down on the South Bay, Orchard View, and our family home.

This morning, a dry wind originating in the Central Valley sent the firestorm back across land it had already burned. Firefighters hoped it would burn itself out due to lack of fuel, but I knew anything could happen at any time, and I needed my family to be ready.

Like everyone in flammable California, we work year round to keep vegetation from growing too close to our house. Wide stone and concrete verandas surround our 100-year-old Craftsman house on three sides while our paved driveway and parking area protect the east-facing walls. A plowed firebreak separates our barn and field from the summer-dry creek that borders our land.

"Do you want these in the car, Mom?" Brian, now thirteen, would one day tower over me. For now, I pretended that perfecting my posture and straightening my spine would maximize my five-foot six-inches and preserve my position as the taller one. Brian held an empty cat carrier in each hand.

"Leave them here in the kitchen for now. Leave the crate doors open."

"David," I called to my fifteen-year-old, who was now unquestionably the tallest in the family. To the chagrin of my husband Max, David had recently gained the few inches he required to realize that Max's luxuriant walnut-colored curls were thinning. "Make sure to leave room on the back seat for Belle, the cat carriers and two passengers."

"Two?" David entered the kitchen from the top of the basement stairs.

"Ideally, we'll take both cars. But I want to be prepared for anything." I tilted my head toward the view outside the kitchen windows. A plume of smoke filled the sky on the far side of the ridge to the west. "If that shifts direction and marches this way, we'll need to clear out fast, no matter what. If one of the cars breaks down, I want us all to be able to jump into the other one."

"We could strap Brian to the roof." David's eyes twinkled as he nudged his younger brother.

Crafting perfect opening pages for a novel is a task akin to writing a short story. I need to quickly introduce the characters, setting, genre, and stakes in a way that grabs hold of the reader and convinces them to trust my ability to tell a story and keep them entertained.

That's a tall order. Few authors are able to check all those boxes at once. For example, in *Disorderly Conduct*, we don't learn about the "inciting incident" that propels Maggie into her investigation until page five. But, we know right away that the stakes are high, which I hope will help readers hang in at least until the end of the first chapter.

I chose not to offer much backstory in this introduction. I think that choice becomes easier as my series has evolved. By now, I'm confident that most of my readers have met the recurring characters. As an author, I'm familiar with the characters and have the confidence required to let them reveal themselves naturally as the action unfolds.

Unique among my mysteries, the opening two pages of *Disorderly Conduct* are the least revised paragraphs of this novel. The scene is almost identical to the version that first unfolded in my imagination. I think that's because it works. We find the characters in the midst of a dire situation (a California wildfire), and introduce the key players immediately.

We see Maggie and her family and their pets (which tells the reader it's probably a cozy mystery) in their kitchen, scurrying to evacuate from the encroaching fire. There's a touch of humor in the fact that Maggie tried to convince her family that they are conducting drill, but no one believes her, especially not their cats. We see Maggie's love for her family, and she reveals the organizational skills that she uses in her business and to organize clues and solve crimes.

It's a tumultuous beginning, and I worried that there might be too many characters, but I think it works to reveal the family dynamics, the setting (a rural residential neighborhood above Silicon Valley), and the genre and tone of the book.

Ideally, I'd be able to do all this and more, including introducing the inciting incident that propels my main character, Maggie McDonald, into an investigation that she (and only she) can successfully complete. I think if I were to revise it

further I might eliminate some of the references to the origin of the fire, which may confuse the timeline for the reader.

Overall, however, I'm happy with the introduction and with the rest of the book. In my writing at least, I may strive for perfection, but I can accept a hard-won effort that mostly works—especially when my editor agrees!

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Mary Feliz writes the Maggie McDonald Mysteries featuring a Silicon Valley professional organizer and her sidekick golden retriever. She's worked for Fortune 500 firms and mom and pop enterprises, competed in whale boat races and done synchronized swimming. She attends organizing conferences in her character's stead, but Maggie's skills leave her in the dust. *Address to Die For*, the first book in the series, was named a Best Book of 2017 by Kirkus Reviews. All of her books have spent time on the Amazon bestseller list.