

## **The First Two Pages: “Festival Finale” by Mary Dutta**

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This story was inspired by our city’s annual book festival, which attracts authors famous, emerging, and aspiring. They bring with them dreams both realized and unfulfilled of fame and validation. I thought that environment would yield an engaging mystery.

The first paragraph both introduces the two main characters and hints at some of the themes that weave throughout the story:

From a distance, Charles Attlee looked a lot like his author photo. Up close, he presented a faded, fortyish version of the twenty-something literary boy wonder of his press kit photo. Like a Dorian Gray in reverse. Hailey Fields had paused, momentarily uncertain, before approaching him at the airport and introducing herself as his chaperone for the book festival. Attlee resembled his younger self about as much as she resembled the acclaimed author she’d naively planned to become.

The first line implies that not everything at the book festival is as it seems. The Dorian Gray reference gives a nod to the literary nature of the festival. And while Oscar Wilde’s character is remembered best as a man who remains beautiful while his hidden portrait ages, the original novel stresses that Gray’s portrait reflects his moral degeneration—an implication that the story will somehow involve a morally questionable choice.

Hailey's naiveté carries the reader into the second paragraph:

The book festival director had encouraged the local university's MFA students to volunteer, stressing the unprecedented access to eminent authors that chaperoning would provide. An opportunity to receive advice, guidance, maybe even an introduction to a literary agent. Hailey had planned to network her way into the charmed circle of literary luminaries. Attlee, however, seemed to consider her more of a personal assistant than a colleague. He had handed her his messenger bag and sent her to fetch him a cup of coffee before they had even left the terminal.

Hailey and the reader then get an insight into Attlee:

He soon revealed her other role: captive audience for a ceaseless monologue on his breakout novel and subsequent accolades. When Attlee invited her to accompany him to his hotel room after checking in, Hailey had worried that she was in for a #MeToo moment, but she realized he just needed to continue the incessant stream of self-centered conversation. He had talked non-stop while he hung his clothes in the closet, laid out his toiletries on the sink counter, and put his laptop in the room's safe.

"You know," he said. "I always use the year I was a National Book Award finalist to set the code on the safe. I figure, what are the odds a hotel maid will know that? But then, one time, when I was delivering a keynote in Savannah," he paused and touched a finger to his lip. "No, I lie, it was when I went to Denver to receive that prize. Anyway, I stopped for a haircut and it turned out the hairdresser was a big fan. So really, you never know."

The #MeToo reference is not only topical in the literary world, but further evidence that not everything is necessarily as it seems. The world of literary renown might not be what Hailey imagines. She might not even like it there.

By now, both Hailey and the reader are starting to see the reality behind

Attlee's pose:

Hailey wondered why he couldn't direct all his verbiage to the page and finally publish the second novel that he had never managed to produce. Once hotly anticipated, popular expectations for the book had long since cooled to when-hell-freezes-over. Had Charles Attlee shown any interest in her or her own writing problems Hailey could have shared her struggles completing her debut novel, two years in the writing and still not considered a viable MFA thesis by her alleged advisor. She had planned on benefitting from a lot more academic mentoring when she had taken out the massive student loan to fund her degree.

The reference to Hailey's student debt adds another topical reference, and puts a monetary price on her literary dreams. The story also questions what other price people are willing to pay for their dreams.

The first two pages introduce two characters who share a dream of literary stardom. A dream that one has achieved but can't sustain, and the other fears will remain forever out of reach. The opening leaves the reader wondering what happens when a dream comes true, and when it doesn't. As the story unfolds, readers will discover that the difference between fiction and reality isn't always clear, and the contrast between dreams and reality can be murder.

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Mary Dutta traded New England and a career as an English professor for a new life as a college admissions reader in the South. She is a member of Sisters in Crime Central Virginia and Guppy chapters. "Festival Finale" is her first published fiction credit. Follow her on Twitter @ Mary\_Dutta.