

**The First Two Pages: “The True Cost of Liberty” by Chris Wheatley**  
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I once read a quote that has stuck with me: “Come up with a wonderful title and the story will write itself.” I’m not sure I believed it back then, but over time I have come to appreciate the power of those words. I don’t think any story quite “writes itself,” but an inspiring headline can go a long way.

What you’re looking for is a neat little memorable word or combination of words which distils the essence of what is to follow. Like a memorable opening credits sequence for a film (*Vertigo* springs to mind). a good title can provide intrigue, provoke curiosity, and instill in the reader a particular state of mind. All of which may enhance the reading experience.

One of my favorite writers, R. A. Lafferty, was a master of this. I never cease to be amazed by his imagination and wit, which brought forth such stories as “The Devil is Dead,” “Nine Hundred Grandmothers,” and “The Ungodly Mice of Doctor Drakos.” Who wouldn’t want to discover what those tales are about?

While I do not wish to claim, when it comes to titles, that “The True Cost of Liberty” is up there with the best, I would argue that it is a pretty solid effort and effectively achieves all that I outlined above. The story grew from an article I happened to chance upon concerning rare coins. I think all writers cultivate a “magpie-mind,” forever digging into interesting little snippets and filing them

away for future use. This particular article set me to thinking: what is the most valuable coin in the world and how many are there?

The Flowing Hair Liberty dollar has a nice back-story and a striking appearance. It is the first dollar coin ever produced by the United States mint. It was in production only from 1794–1795. In 2013, one such example sold at auction for \$10 million, more than doubling the previous record of \$4.1 million. The coin itself shows a woman's head in profile, her chin raised and her hair hanging loose.

I knew I wanted to write a crime story. The ingredients I had were a priceless coin and a neat title. *Liberty* suggests its opposite, *confinement* or *incarceration*, and I was taken by the idea that the object of an intended theft could be a coin, a small thing worth far more than was ever intended.

Of course, the history of literature is full of examples of the dangers of greed, from Adam and Eve onward. “The love of money is the root of all evil,” says the Good Book. It came to me that I could interpret this literally. What if the coin itself was the killer? A coin coated in deadly poison. I was taken with that idea.

If you like, then, the story grew somewhat in reverse. The coin, the poison, and then the why, the who, and the when. It is the tale of an unnamed narrator who, while attending a gathering at the home of his ex-wife and her new partner, discovers amongst a box full of junk what he believes could be a genuine Flowing Hair dollar. Before he has a chance to examine the coin, the

box is removed. Right there and then, the narrator determines to steal it.

What he does not know or suspect is that the accidental viewing was no accident at all. The coin has been coated in a deadly toxin. The ex-wife and her new partner plan to cash-in on the narrator's inheritance. He has not updated his will, which leaves everything to the woman in question. She knows that his greed will drive him to steal the coin and the pair plan to be very much out of the way when this happens. Incidentally, do you ever wonder if Googling "contact poisons undetectable in autopsy" sets up a red flag next to your name in some covert government agency?

Much has been written concerning the importance of opening sentences in fiction. It is a mini art-form in itself. Ideally, they should establish mood, setting, and a sense of character (of a person or of the story itself). Much like the title, they need to entice.

Here is the opening paragraph from "The True Cost of Liberty":

Never in my life did I expect or desire to become embroiled in theft, murder and the seedier side of humanity. I had always fancied myself a reasonably honest and straightforward person, but all that changed, in a matter of seconds no less, last Sunday afternoon.

I chose first-person perspective for a sense of immediacy and to enable an extra little twist—the final lines of the story reveal the narrator has been talking, not to the reader, but to the police. I like to think that the above words do a serviceable job of creating a tone and throwing out a "hook."

The story continues:

The occasion was the seventh birthday of my niece, Florence, the venue was the garden of a house belonging to my estranged wife, Laura and her new partner, Isaac. A peculiar arrangement, you might think, but Laura remained close friends with my sister, the child's mother and besides, I rather think she relished the opportunity to show off her new home.

Every sentence ever written contains two components: form and function.

The function of the above paragraph is to set the scene, establish relationships, and communicate a sense of animosity between the narrator and his ex-wife.

There is an argument that the key to effective writing is economy. Pretty much every successful writer will give you the same advice: cut and cut again. There are, as always, notable exceptions to this rule. As to my own style, I think this is wonderful advice. At the conclusion of a first draft of this essay, I intend to go back and prune rigorously. Obviously I haven't cut this sentence, or you would not be reading it now!

Form-wise, I sought to inject some definite "character" for the narrator. With first-person writing, you can really go to town. Beware, though—too many quirks and repetitions or too much vernacular content can easily overwhelm and off-put. My narrator's "speech" is somewhat prissy, conservatively educated, and a little eccentric—the qualities I had in envisioned for him in my head.

One of the most important paragraphs, for me, comes a little later, at the moment when the narrator discovers the fabled coin. If there is any "magic" in the tale, it comes here. My desire was to communicate the adrenalin rush of the

collector upon stumbling across something momentous. This was crucial in explaining the narrator's subsequent actions.

I knew the design, of course, straight away, but I think perhaps I will struggle to convey the raw drama which played out in my (for want of a better word) soul.

Imagine, if you will, you are looking through a pile of framed canvases in a thrift shop when, amongst the mediocre watercolours of woodland scenes you come across a Van Gogh. Not a print, but an original, a dazzling beautiful, visceral thing that is so astonishing it subsumes one's mind in vibrant emotion.

You look around nervously, certain that this must be some dream. Then realisation slowly dawns that it is not. This is real, and the object which you hold in your sweaty palms is a genuine masterpiece, worth millions. All you must do is take those few steps to the counter and pay whatever paltry sum is asked and your life will have changed forever. Your heart beats, your pulse pounds and you feel sure all around you must see the greed and desire in your eyes.,,,

I am bit of a stickler for making sure that, by the story's conclusion, all the loose ends have been tidied up and any logical (or emotional) flaws corrected. I find little more distracting, when I am reading a story or watching a film, than when obvious plot-holes are left uncovered.

I sincerely hope, with "The True Cost of Liberty," that I have managed to craft something unexpected which satisfies both logically and emotionally.

Thank you for reading this far!

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Chris Wheatley is a freelance journalist, writer and musician from Oxford, UK. He has an enduring love for the works of R.A. Lafferty, Jack Vance, Thorne Smith and Cornell Woolrich, far too many records, and no cat. He is forever indebted to the advice and encouragement of his wife, his son, and his mother, without whom he would never have come so far.