

**The First Two Pages: “Mourning Glory” by Mollie Cox Bryan**

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In the first two pages of my short story “Mourning Glory,” readers are introduced to the fictional Victoria Town, the character Viv Barton, and her new boss Stu. I think of the first few pages as hooking the reader, sparking their curiosity enough to continue reading. I sprinkled curiosities through the first few pages, designed to keep the reader engaged—starting with the town itself.

When I wrote “Mourning Glory,” I was deep into the PBS show *Victoria*. A fascinating woman whose cultural reach was astounding, the Queen moved into my imagination and Victorian Town took root. That said, I also live close to Staunton, Virginia, which is a quaint town with a lot of Victorian influence. In many ways, Victoria Town is Staunton on steroids. But there are many towns like this throughout the South, historical, quaint, and reaching back to their British or French roots—an aspect of the South some tend to overlook.

Thematically, much of my writing involves outsiders trying to fit in or not trying to fit in. Viv Barton, the main character in “Mourning Glory,” is a smart young woman despising much of the Victorian frill. Hopefully, her outsider qualities prompt the reader to learn more: What is she doing here?

One reason Viv is in Victorian Town is because her aunt needs help with her bed and breakfast, but there's more to her story, of course. The character's lack of appreciation of the place comes through in the first paragraphs, which give the reader insight to her character. It starts with her first day of working at one of the few shops she likes, Mourning Arts—a shop full of Victorian mourning regalia.

The shop was one of the few Viv frequented in Victoria Town, so she was acquainted with it. Most of the other shops brimmed with rose and pink, lace, feathers, ornate woodwork. Not her taste. Stu handed her a bottle of glass cleaner and paper towels. “You can start by cleaning the cases.”

He couldn't have given her a better job. Mourning jewelry was her passion. Today, she'd worn her favorite lover's eye mourning pendant with its tiny red garnets on black choker, a piece she'd inherited from her grandmother.

From just these few paragraphs, I hope the reader gleans Viv's character as a bit more interesting and complex. On first glimpse, she's a gamer-type, a bit goth-looking, and taken with the darker side of things. But she appreciates jewelry—and, in particular, a piece she inherited from her grandmother. These are hints about her character. As is usually the case, on the outside she is cool and dark, on the inside she's a brew of complexities, most of them decent, like love of her family. I hope some of these dichotomies spark reader's curiosity.

So while Viv is happily working at a shop she likes, there are a few oddities strewn in the first few pages. I intentionally scattered bits of strangeness into a seemingly ordinary day. Word choice was key in attempting this.

He kept his sugar (or was it saccharin) in a small, jewel-encrusted vial that he tapped with one bony finger until clumps fell into his cup.... Watching the pointy-chinned Stud slurp his tea gave her the creeps. What if the finger was long and lean, instead of bony? What if his chin were square or dimpled instead of pointy?

Readers pick up on this use of language. It's almost subconscious. We know something is off. But, as the end of the first two pages, that subtlety grows into an action. A man enters the shop and threatens Stu, who claims the man is crazy. But the stranger says he wants a piece of the action. The reader knows something is up. So does Viv, but she's so excited about her new job that she chooses to believe Stu. Choosing to believe one thing, while the facts are leading in another direction, is an element throughout the story.

Between the language choices, pacing, and character traits in the first two pages, tension is created, along with suspense. What's going on here? What is Stu hiding? Is the stranger crazy—or is Stu up to no good?

The rest of the story is a slow answering of the questions set up in the first few pages, with a twist at the end revealing, once again, that sometimes people choose to believe what they want to, despite what is in front of their face.

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**Mollie Cox Bryan** is the author of the Cora Crafts Mysteries and the Cumberland Creek Mysteries. Her books have been selected as finalists for an Agatha Award and a Daphne du Maurier Award and as a Top 10 Beach Reads by *Woman's World*. She has also been short-listed for the Virginia Library People's Choice Award. Mollie's newest book is *The Jean Harlow Bombshell*, selected as one of the top mystery reads of May by CrimeReads. She is distantly related to Jean Harlow.