

The First Two Pages: “Two Dead, Two Wounded” By Jackie Ross Flaum

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An Essay by Jackie Ross Flaum

Kentucky politics was a blood sport in 1910.

As my grandmother Mama told it—and history bears her out—fistfights, shootings, bottle-throwing, and head-bashing were common on Election Day. Talk about voter suppression—who would go vote and risk being shot or beaten?

During this era of Kentucky politics, my Great-Great-Uncle John became mixed up in a brawl at his polling place. Mama told me about it long ago while I helped her string green beans on her porch in Morehead, Kentucky. The story leapt to mind as a good one for the *Low Down Dirty Vote* anthology on voter suppression. I am delighted the proceeds from the sale of the book benefit the Southern Poverty Law Center, since it is a pro-profit which receives my meager donations.

A short story like “Two Dead, Two Wounded” offered several possibilities for the first two pages. Introducing Uncle John was one I quickly discarded. Mama portrayed him as a victim. But Uncle John seemed a pompous ass who sparked the melee. He was not the hero fit to open a story. So where to begin?

I thought of using my sweet, white-haired grandmother's rendition of the electioneering, drinking, cussing, and fighting decades ago. Mama painted a vivid picture of it. In today's divided America the political atmosphere in Kentucky in 1910 would resonate. A description of the time and place might work as an opening.

Still, I didn't have a worthy hero, a character who would draw the reader in and through the tale. Some minor characters in Mama's tale were out of the running too. Even she described them as "ole suckers" and "reprobates."

What if I started from the end of the story and made Uncle John the anti-hero? He fit the part. In one family photo he is an older man with a trimmed mustache and black grainy eyes who stares at the camera with arrogance. No, if I didn't like or respect him, how could I expect a reader to? Uncle John's role in this affair would have to wait.

Finally, I compromised and structured the story around the hero's journey format. I created a new character, someone whose innocence would run counter to the violence and dirty dealing of Kentucky politics. The structure dictated the first two pages.

Drawing on tales of my grandfather who owned several sawmills in eastern Kentucky, I opened "Two Dead, Two Wounded" by setting the mood of the time and naming my hero.

The campaign for Espy County sheriff caused so many fights that the owner of the sawmill where young Charlie Adams worked threatened to fire the next man who talked about it on his property.

The character on this hero's journey, Charlie Adams, is every voter, a Bluegrass Don Quixote on an impossible quest to find the right candidate. On the first two pages Charlie appears as an ordinary working man who seeks to do the right things in life. He faces his coming challenge—voting—with resignation. Voting is a man's duty in his family.

As the day approaches for him to register, Charlie has an inciting incident or insight that propels him to act. Like the rest of his family, he's aware that the results of an election would determine whether Espy got a new school or paved road. From that perspective, it is no surprise why tensions were high during campaign season. But now, thanks to a co-worker, Charlie sees the political landscape for what it is in Espy County—and it what should be.

“He's fulla shit. Old man Patton's a big Republican,” one of Charlie's friends grouched as they walked home from the mill. “I hear you up for the assistant foreman job. Maybe if you sign up to vote, yur chances will rise up like steam off manure.”

“You're fulla shit. 'Sides, getting a job ain't no reason to vote.” Charlie punched his friend in the shoulder and laughed.

“It is in Espy,” his friend said. “How you figure Patton's son got that county road job?”

On the day Charlie Adams registers to vote in Espy County, he accepts that his opinion matters in a way it did not before. He has the power to alter life in his county.

Despite his awakening, however, Charlie falls into a comfortable pattern. His life as a voter begins with a casual acceptance of the status quo. The court clerk automatically enrolls him in the same political party as his father and grandfather—and Charlie says nothing. Later, however, he wonders if voting for a man who will get things done for Espy is better than voting for a party.

His jaded father offers this advice:

“Politicians is all crooked as a dog’s hind leg,” Fletcher grumbled. “Don’t matter who you vote for. Don’t believe none of ’em.”

Pragmatic observation, perhaps, but Charlie quickly points out the flaw in his father’s logic.

“Have to vote for one of ‘em,” Charlie said.

Charlie decides he must educate himself about the candidates. He naively navigates the political landscape of Espy County with the help, and sometimes to the amusement, of his father.

His quest ends, as it must for all American voters, at the ballot box. And there the reader meets my Great-Great-Uncle John. He will never be the hero, but he plays a pivotal role.

Other stories nestle in the history of Kentucky politics. Just twenty-six years before the events of “Two Dead, Two Wounded,” another Election Day fight broke

out that lead to a three-year feud between two families. Twenty people died. In 2002, someone shot two candidates for sheriff in eastern Kentucky.

To my surprise, Uncle John's voting incident appeared in a historical magazine—not that I ever doubted Mama's story was real. The account in the magazine and Mama's tale did conflict here and there. I twisted both a little more in "Two Dead, Two Wounded." I hope Mama does not mind.

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Born and raised in Ashland, Kentucky, Jackie Ross Flaum earned her scars as a newspaper reporter for *The Hartford Courant*. She moved to Memphis, pursued a freelance career in public relations, then abandoned reality for fiction. Her short stories appear in the anthologies *Elmwood Stories to Die For*, *Mayhem in Memphis*, and *Stories through the Ages: Baby Boomer Plus*. Amid the COVID19 furor, she released *The Yellow Fever Revenge*, a novella of love and murder in another time of American epidemic. Her civil rights era suspense novel *Justice Tomorrow* will be released this summer. She currently serves as president of Malice in Memphis, a killer writing group. Join her at www.jrflaum.com or Twitter @jrflaum.