The First Two Pages: *Fire on the Island*
by Timothy Jay Smith (Arcade CrimeWise)

An Essay by Timothy Jay Smith

It's astonishing how much of a story can be set up in its first two pages, whether a short story or novel, and I write the latter. I don't start a new work until I have a good sense of the issues or themes I want to explore, and my characters and their conflicts. When I can visualize a story's opening and ending scenes, and have a sense of its emotional arc, I start writing it.

That doesn't always mean that the first two pages necessarily get written quickly. I constantly self-edit as I write, so it can take me an inordinate amount of time to make it to page three!

Though my books are described as thrillers or mysteries, all of them are standalone and not part of a series. That has the advantage of not having baggage from earlier books that I still need to contend with, but it also has the disadvantage that everything has to be created anew.

For me, it's a creative advantage that allows me to tackle issues I find compelling (and fortunately my readers have, too). I quit working to become a full-time writer after a two-year stint assisting Palestinian businesses at the start of the Oslo peace process because I had a story of reconciliation to tell. Four novels later,

my latest release, *Fire on the Island*, portrays a Greek village trying to cope with the dual crises of a collapsed economy and flood of refugees.

Except for a brief mention of refugees, those crises aren't elaborated upon in the first two pages, though subliminally much else is revealed. The book's title suggests that fire will be an important element, and it is. The basic story is that Nick Damigos, the FBI agent posted to Athens, arrives on a small Greek island to investigate a series of mysterious fires, each one coming closer to a village, raising the fear that the village itself is the arsonist's ultimate target.

I tend to write chronologically, so in *Fire on the Island*'s first sentence the reader meets Nick when he comes around a bend in a coastal road and sees the village on the next headland. "Nothing had prepared Nick for the sheer beauty of the village perched above the purpling sea" also promises the reader a story that will unfold in an exquisitely scenic location.

He walks to the cliff's edge to view the village through binoculars. Panning it, he's glad to know that somewhere in that tangle of stone buildings, there's a bed with his name on it, a clue that he's tired after a long trip.

He shifts his gaze to scour the sea for an "approaching raft [of refugees] silhouetted against Turkey's distant shore." That sentence reveals the island's general location and introduces the subject of refugees. The fact that he's looking for them suggests he's somehow involved with them.

A gust of wind carries the smell of smoke to him. Nick, scanning the coastline, discovers its source is a brush fire rapidly approaching a lone house. In its yard, a dog, leashed to a post, barks frantically. He sprints back to his car to go and save it, showing Nick to be a man of action with a good heart.

Nick pulls back onto the road, almost colliding with Shirley, who's tootling along with "nine dead cats" in her back seat. Well, only dead-to-the-world. They're still under anesthesia after being spayed, and that small detail is a harbinger for what's to come: things aren't always what they appear to be in a story where everyone has a secret.

Shirley, by calling him a "bloody fool" for almost causing an accident, reveals her British English, which tags her as different from the beginning, and suggests she might be an important character. Indeed she is. It's her house that's on fire. They both screech to a stop in front of it and scramble out of their cars. Nick dashes up the hill and disappears in the smoke while Shirley shouts the dog's name after him.

And that's just two pages!

THE ACTUAL FIRST TWO PAGES OF *FIRE ON THE ISLAND*:

Nothing had prepared Nick for the sheer beauty of the village perched above the purpling sea. Atop the steep hill, the last rays of sunset licked Vourvoulos's lofty castle walls while necklaces of red-tiled roofs clung to the cliffs below. He pulled the small car off the road and grabbed his binoculars.

His socks collected burrs as he trudged through the dried weeds to stand as close to the cliff's edge as he dared in the gusting wind. Through the binoculars, Nick slowly panned the houses spilling down to the water's edge. From a mile away, he couldn't make out much detail, but after too many hours flying economy class, he was just glad to know that somewhere in that tangle of stone buildings was a bed with his name on it.

He heard the putt-putt-putt of a motor and spotted a fishing boat aiming for the village's small port. Shifting the binoculars, he searched beyond Vourvoulos's headland for the black speck of an approaching raft silhouetted against Turkey's distant shore. Nick didn't expect to see one. The refugees usually arrived at dawn not sunset, and with winter approaching, their numbers had started to drop; though the traffickers would ensure that they didn't stop altogether. Misery drove their business, and a few refugees drowned in the narrow channel wouldn't change that.

Nick was still looking for rafts when he smelled the smoke. The wind carried it to him. He panned the village again, looking for its source and saw nothing. Then he scanned the cove-dotted shoreline. At first he mistook the flames for the sunset's reflection off a limestone outcropping, but with a second look, he saw the wind pushing the fire quickly uphill in the dry brush. A gust sent sparks into the tops of the tall trees overhanging a lone house.

In its yard, a dog, barking frantically, strained at its leash.

Nick sprinted back to his car.

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Shirley tootled along the coastal road with her back seat filled with nine dead cats. They weren't exactly dead, only dead-to-the-world under anesthesia from being fixed, as if removing sensitive body parts could be considered a fix. Shirley didn't think so. A cat meowed weakly and she sped up, wanting her daughter, who came up with the idea of fixing them, to have the pleasure of uncaging the maligned animals when they came to. A second cat meowed, and Shirley accelerated, her tires complaining as she took a curve too fast.

In the same instant, Nick shot back onto the road, and, slamming on his brakes, barely managed to avoid a collision.

"Look where you're going, you bloody fool!" Shirley shouted in English, seeing him screech to a halt in her rearview mirror.

Moments later, he was on her tail, trying to pass on curves with no shoulders and a long drop to the sea. When they reached a short

stretch of straight road, Shirley edged over. It was also where she habitually caught the first glimpse of her house, and that evening, she couldn't see it for the billowing smoke. Forgetting Nick, who was already alongside her, she stomped on the accelerator, leaving him in the wrong lane approaching another curve. He hit the brakes hard, and swerved back behind her.

He was still swearing at the stupid woman when she bounced off the road to park alongside a pickup truck with a swirling blue light fixed to its roof. Nick skidded to a stop behind her.

Shirley scrambled from her small car as fast as her generous body would allow. "Apostolis!" she cried. "Dingo is up there!"

The fire chief was busy directing villagers who'd shown up to fight the fire, some carrying shovels, others hauling water in the backs of pickups. "Are you sure only Dingo is there?" Apostolis shouted back.

Nick sprinted past them, unbuttoning his shirt while clutching a water bottle. "Is Ringo the dog?"

"Dingo!" Shirley shouted after him. "His name is Dingo!"

Nick disappeared in the smoke.

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Timothy Jay Smith is a novelist/screenwriter who brings the same energy to his writing that he brought to a distinguished career in foreign policy, and as a result, he has won top honors for his novels, screenplays and stage plays in numerous prestigious competitions. Tim was born to travel, write, and try to make a difference. He's grateful for the first two and continuously works on the third.