The First Two Pages: "Mary, Merry, Marry" by Barbara DaCosta

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An Essay by Barbara DaCosta

Language has always fascinated me: word usage, rhythm, origins, musicality of words, and even pronunciation. Thus, when a Linguistics 101 student once buttonholed me for a survey when I crossed campus one day headed for the bus, I had to respond.

"Could you pronounce these, please?" the student asked, thrusting her clipboard toward me.

She showed me a few items to pronounce: *horse* and *hoarse*, *carol* and *carrell*, and the words that inspired this story, *Mary*, *Merry* and *Marry*. When I finished the survey and continued on my way, I wondered, "Now, how could I use this encounter in a mystery story?"

Hmmm, maybe I could use Thea, the freelance researcher from my novel-in-progress. Maybe I could plunk her into a situation having to do with language. Maybe, I thought, scanning the surroundings, it could be set in an academic environment. Maybe—I remembered a professor friend's recent complaints—it could involve faculty tenure battles. By the time I got to the bus stop, I'd mentally sketched out the basics of the story.

Here are my first two pages of "Mary, Merry, Marry":

"Hey, Thea! It's Mary. I'm coming to the Twin Cities for a linguistics conference next week and—"

I grabbed the phone before the answering machine cut her off. "Well, if isn't my favorite roommate," I said. Mary Gaudio and I had lived together for a year during grad school. Luckily, our friendship had survived. "You'll stay here, of course."

"Naturally."

"Pack your long johns. We're having a cold snap. Hey, we can go together to see the Holiday Train Saturday night!"

"Holiday Train?"

"You know, a spruced-up, decorated train, Santa in a down jacket, music and fun. It's free. All we have to bring is a donation for the food shelf."

"Outdoors music in a cold snap? Not like here in Florida!"

"Come on, it's only ten below zero. You do remember winter, don't you?"

"Brrr! How could I forget? See you Thursday night!"

"Mary, merry, marry," we crowed, spotting each other at the airport on Thursday. Those three words had been our running joke ever since we met decades ago in Professor Taylor's introductory linguistics class at the University of Minnesota. He had chosen us for a demonstration in front of our classmates, almost all of whom were from the Upper Midwest, and the majority of whom appeared to be of Scandinavian or German descent. Like me, Mary was of Italian extraction, but unlike me—a local—Mary was a real, live New Yorker, a rarity here.

"Language is all about context, ladies and gentlemen. Listen carefully," Professor Taylor had said. "I want you to identify the differences in pronunciation of these three words." He wrote on the blackboard: Mary—the name, merry—as in Christmas, and marry—as in wedlock. "Miss Franco," he gestured for me to begin.

I gave my rendition: Mary, merry, marry. The three words were homophones.

"Can you hear the differences?" Professor Taylor asked. No one responded. "Well, then, let's try candidate number two, Miss Gaudio."

Mary jumped to her feet. "New York City, here ya go!" Her accent sounded like she'd just come from rehearsals for "West Side

Story." She theatrically pounced on each word, hand gestures accompanying: "Mary" came out pretty familiar, minus the sharp turn of the "r" that marked us Minnesotans. Then, "merry" came out as an oddly shaped, quick bouncing of syllables that elicited a few titters. But when Mary got to "marry," the room erupted in laughter and cheers at the nasal, long-as-a-foghorn sound.

Mary and I became inseparable friends and study partners. We spent that quarter strolling around campus with clipboards in hand, buttonholing people into taking our linguistics survey: did they have a sofa, couch, or a davenport; did they drink pop, soda, or soda pop; how did they pronounce shibboleths of roof, orange, car, poem, hoarse, or carrell, and was it okay to interrupt others in normal conversation. The next year, we got an apartment together in a rickety old building a few blocks from campus.

Mary became captivated by linguistics and went on for a PhD. Now she was teaching at the University of Southwestern Florida, where, close to forty, she was an anxious assistant professor still without tenure. Myself, I'd gotten a PhD in the incredibly small field of Turko-Mongolian studies, a field that had an opening at most once every twenty years. I couldn't find work beyond as an underpaid adjunct "gypsy scholar" teaching world history in small colleges around the Midwest.

Though I was drawing inspiration from a real-life event, I needed to rework it so it would make sense in a new context. I invented the linguistics class, plugged in the Holiday Train, and capitalized on a real roommate kerfuffle from decades ago.

My opening paragraphs needed to set the stage for this academic "small town" story, without overwhelming readers with too much details. I stuck with as conversational a tone as possible and gave dribs and drabs of Thea and Mary's backgrounds. I created little "sub-stories" that could lead to more detail if needed, rather than just listing things as on a resume.

These sub-stories can tickle the reader's imagination. Think about this: Mary's not just a professor of linguistics, as we find out on page two; she's an *anxious* one. That one word changes everything. "Anxious" implies there's a whole huge story itching to be told. Why is she anxious? Is it because she doesn't yet have tenure? Is it because of her age? Is it because she's not accomplished enough? Or, could the anxiousness be the *cause* of her problems?

We've already had a hint in the opening that prepares us for Mary's problems, when Thea recalls their roommate days: "Luckily, our friendship had survived." This ignites curiosity about what might happen when they meet up again.

All that said, I don't think through too much when I'm getting the first draft written. I just focus on the storyline. The details and subtleties emerge as the characters take over from my overactive imagination.

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Barbara DaCosta writes for children and adults. She has written three picture books illustrated by Caldecott Medalist Ed Young: *Nighttime Ninja* (Children's Choice Award), *Mighty Moby* (Minnesota Book Award finalist), and *Night Shadows* (forthcoming 2020). Her short mysteries have appeared in *Resort to Murder* and *Why Did Santa Leave a Body?* She is at work on more stories about Thea Franco, freelance researcher.