

The First Two Pages of “Reader, I Killed Him” by Meredith Anthony
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An Essay by Meredith Anthony

I love having this opportunity to talk about short stories. (Thank, you, Art!) I love writing them and I LOVE reading them.

My story, “Reader, I Killed Him” is very short story, just shy of 2300 words. (Most guidelines describe short stories as between 5000 and 10,000.) It takes up just five pages in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*. And it was fun to write. It marries two things that I particularly like—violence and humor.

First, I want to talk a little about the title. I think titles are important both for novels and especially for short stories. When you have so little time and, in a magazine or anthology, are competing for a reader’s attention with a dozen other authors, you need to make your title count. In this case, I paraphrased one of the most quoted and iconic sentences in fiction, the “Reader, I married him” line from *Jane Eyre*. I think the change to “I killed him” is provocative and funny, and it provides a hook to get a reader interested in the story.

And notice that the brief, four-word title also does some heavy lifting in story terms. For one thing, it signals that the story’s narrator is a woman. Unless you are totally unaware of Charlotte Brontë, you begin reading knowing that the unnamed narrator is female. (How many times have you begun a first person chronicle only to be surprised on page 5 to find that the main character is a Mister

instead of a Ms.? I hate when that happens and I have to adjust my assumptions and expectations.) In “Reader, I Killed Him” you also know that the narrator is a killer, and you are inside her head.

And the title does one more thing. It gives away a major plot point. There will be a murder in the story. In fact, one of my early, pre-publication readers actually advised me to replace the title since it gave away the big action. But for me, the story was not about a woman killing a man, but why and how she did it and whether or not she gets away with it. So, by putting the murder in the title, I’m asking the reader to take it as a given and to share my interest and concerns.

Another structural matter that I think is of utmost importance, particularly in a short story, is the first sentence. Much has been written about first lines, and many panels at mystery writers’ conferences have been devoted to them. In a short story, indeed, they loom very large. And again, when a story is in a magazine or anthology with a dozen others, you are competing for the readers’ attention so you don’t want to open with the weather, the setting, or any exposition that you could possibly put in later.

Here is the first paragraph of “Reader, I Killed Him:”

I was thirty-five when I realized I was a psychopath. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed much earlier.

This provocative beginning invites you to identify with the narrator. She frankly admits her pathology. She has a realization and then a secondary response

about her own surprise. This very human approach allows us to identify with her quite quickly. She's not an unhinged maniac, but a person capable of self-awareness and reflection.

Sometimes readers ask about the genesis of a book or short story. In this case, the first line, "I was thirty-five when I realized I was a psychopath," popped into my head as I was musing about whether bad or crazy people know they are bad or crazy. Suddenly I needed to know this woman and tell her story. I was nearly done writing when the title popped into my consciousness. It made me laugh out loud. I have to admit that I had to look it up to make sure it was from *Jane Eyre*, itself a model of the first person narrative, not to mention a mystery. Actually, I'm more of a Jane Austen girl, myself, but I respect Brontë for her strong, proto-feminist heroine.

After the opening, I give my character some space to expand on her revelation, starting with something the reader can identify with: she's a reader of mysteries, as are we.

I was reading a thriller—the only books I really liked—and was deep into Jeff Deaver's description of the villain when I sat up, amazed. It was me!

Cold. Check. Manipulative. Check. Quick to anger. Sure. Narcissistic. Well, yeah. Impulsive but able to control them. Yep. Lack of empathy. Huh? I had to admit I'd never understood that one. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes? Really? That one always stumped me. What could it possibly mean?

Then there were the trio of early indicators. Yes, I had killed a couple of animals. Who wasn't tempted to see what happened to a cat

in a microwave? And yes, I started a couple of fires. No biggie. Bedwetting? Not that I could remember, thank God. But maybe. But I was not a loner. Never friendless. I loved having friends. I only regretted that they were never my match. Not really. I had always had admirers, fans, acolytes, but never a soul mate.

I put the book aside. I also put aside my irritation that I hadn't known, hadn't noticed. No one had ever told me. Of course, my first two husbands had said some harsh things about me toward the end, but even they had never implied I was actually crazy.

By the way, her reading material of choice plays a big part in the story. If you read the whole thing (and I hope you will), you will see how she uses her knowledge of thrillers.

Notice that in this section, you now have some new information. She's smart. She can pass for sane. She's never been caught. And she has had two failed marriages. We're ready for some exposition, the backstory of what she's like and a bit of her history. She's made more human and accessible by a touch of humor: "I was a good liar. So I turned to advertising." (Did I mention that I worked as a copywriter for many years?)

Smart and charming, I had gotten a good education but had no particular drive. Careers seemed stupid to me. Hard work for money you didn't have time to enjoy. Repetitive tasks in a narrow field. No thanks. But I had to make a living. After a couple of false starts, I sat down and analyzed my skill set. I was a particularly good liar. So I turned to advertising. I became a very successful copywriter. It was perfect for me. They gave you a topic, set some parameters, and you wrote. Every assignment was different. And I could forget about it the minute I left the office. The money was good and enabled me to live well in New York, my city of choice for its variety and distractions.

When I got tired of advertising, I simply married the head of the agency. Extricated him from his marriage, his family, and his scruples

with the ease of removing the pit from a cherry. His money enabled us to live well without my salary. I roamed the city and saw every play, every museum, every movie. And I read every mystery, every thriller. For a while it was enough. And I was enough for him. I kept myself beautiful, kept a beautiful home. I made sure the sex was good and varied enough so that he would never stray. We lived well. Very well. We entertained and I was the highlight of every party. Witty, informed, sought after.

But I noticed that he gradually tired of me, despite my efforts. Somehow, he stopped loving me and the carefully curated life I had given him. It took a few years, but eventually he missed something in his past—his sullen children, his contentious wife, their messy fights. Some emotion, some quality I could not identify and could not provide. He actually went back to that ghastly, messy life.

The settlement was ample. But I was bored. I felt I needed something, someone in my life. And so I repeated the process. Identified another juicy cherry and extracted another pit. But a few years later I watched in bemusement as history repeated itself. He tired of me and left. I got a tidy sum, but once more felt like I needed a partner. Someone to share my life.

Now, I was married again. I had probably been hasty. He seemed perfect but he turned out to be dull. And not all that smart. Great at making money—he was the wealthiest of my mates by far—but with no interest in politics, culture, nothing but sports and business. Try as I might, I could not get him interested in anything I could relate to.

And I was already seeing the early signs of what a cold war thriller would call mission fatigue. I couldn't let it happen. Not again. If this husband left me, I would be tainted. People would be wary, steer away. I would become a pariah. I couldn't let it happen.

[Uh oh.]

I opened my laptop and read up on my newfound diagnosis. It was unclear whether I was actually a psychopath or a sociopath. But the distinction didn't seem to matter much anymore. It was actually one personality disorder. That tickled me. Disorder. They had no idea. But as I read it became apparent that what I really had was a lack—of conscience, remorse, the ever-elusive empathy. I shrugged and closed the laptop. No use worrying over something I couldn't remedy. Might

as well concentrate on what I could do. I made the decision to stay positive. My diagnosis was not a setback, it was an opportunity.

And just like that I had a plan. I would kill him.

One of the things I love about writing short stories is the opportunity to experiment, to write in an unfamiliar form, or voice, or setting. You can take chances that you would never commit to in a long form. For instance, normally I write in a close third person which gives me the ability to establish a voice but frees me to explore people and events that happen apart from the main character.

But in “Reader, I Killed Him” I decided to use the first person. For me this was a risky venture since I was not only writing from a character’s point of view, but the character was, in fact, a murderer. How fun is that?

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Meredith Anthony’s short stories frequently appear in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*. She has written two novels and has a story in Akashic’s *Philadelphia Noir* anthology. Her short play, *Murder On The Main Line*, was given a staged reading by Deen Kogan at NoirCon. She has written for *MAD* magazine, done stand-up downstairs at CBGB, spent an afternoon with a lion, learned to shoot a rifle, ridden in a hot-air balloon, thrown parties at Elaine’s and Studio 54, written and produced an award-winning short film, proposed marriage at the Eiffel Tower, and shopped the souks of Marrakesh. She has also written a line of greeting cards and produced a TV series. She lives in a glamorous apartment in Manhattan with husband and fellow mystery writer Larry Light. She takes boxing lessons. Visit her website at: meredithanthony.com.

