

The First Two Pages of “Just Like Peg Entwistle” by Robert Weibezahl
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An Essay by Robert Weibezahl

Every writer of fiction fields the question, “Where do you get your ideas?” and I have to confess that nine times out of ten I don’t know. Writing is a magical, mysterious, and (let’s not forget) confounding process. But I know exactly when and where I got the idea for my story “Just Like Peg Entwistle.” Some time ago, I was reading a breezy biography of an iconic actress from the Golden Age of Hollywood, drawn largely verbatim from interviews the subject had given to the biographer. Early in the book, the movie star effused about a moment in her youth when she saw an actress on stage and decided there and then that she, too, was going to be a great actress. “I want to be exactly like Peg Entwistle,” she told her mother.

Well. Any diehard fan of early Hollywood, especially its more sordid lore, knows that Peg Entwistle was the young woman who committed suicide in 1932 by leaping from the now iconic HOLLYWOOD sign. Or should I say *allegedly* committed suicide, because like many such “celebrity” deaths before and since, there remains an air of mystery hovering over Entwistle’s demise, the nagging feeling that all the pieces don’t quite add up. And here, in the pages of this bio, was a connection I never knew about—a connection between doomed Peg Entwistle

and one of our greatest film legends. Light bulb moment. I began plotting a seemingly plausible “what if?” scenario in my head.

But who should tell the story, and how? I didn’t really think too hard or long about these questions. It seemed only natural, in the wake of reading the memoir, to try to take up the voice of the actress herself and write the story from her point of view. (Confession: I had never written anything that might be construed as “historical” fiction before, nor written in the voice of a woman, except for dialogue. But I was game for both challenges.) I began writing the story as if it were an actual excerpt from an autobiography, removed from the manuscript before publication for obvious reasons, and surfacing many years after the subject’s death. To lend the story an air of verisimilitude, I preceded the narrative with real newspaper headlines from the day— *Girl Leaps to Death from Sign* and *Suicide Laid to Film Jinx*—and fashioned a press account of the circumstances surrounding Peg Entwistle’s death from the historical record. This technique allowed me to dispense with the known factual details quickly, succinctly, and upfront—details I could then play with and subvert in my version of events. I also felt that including this hodgepodge of “documentation” was a welcoming throwback to an earlier style of writing—perhaps something, say, Wilkie Collins might have done—that might draw the reader in and enhance the nostalgic vibe of the story.

The challenge in “capturing” my narrator’s voice lay in trying to replicate the way a movie star of a certain age (and certain era) might tell her own story. Because such an eminent, pampered celebrity would most likely dictate her autobiography rather than take pen in hand (or put fingers to keyboard), I tried for a conversational, yet heightened, tone (and, of course, I had the actual memoir I’d been reading as a guide). The story begins:

Since this book will not be published until after I am dead, I can finally tell the truth about a story that has long fed the lore of Hollywood’s “dark side.” It is a story I have been linked with over the years, though only peripherally, and only because of a comment I made when I was very young. When still just a girl, I saw a lovely actress named Peg Entwistle in Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*. From the moment I saw her stunning performance, I knew that I too had to be on the stage. After the play I told my mother that someday I was going to be an actress just like Peg Entwistle.

First person can be limiting, but here those limitations served my purposes well. Right from the start, I hope that I’ve been able to convey a certain breathlessness, a certain self-dramatization (dare I say narcissism?) that defines the nameless actress who is telling her story at last. “That was the experience of a lifetime in a life filled with remarkable experiences,” she gushes in the third paragraph. Or, “Yankee modesty prevents me from telling you what an early triumph that performance was for me, but you can see for yourself if you dig up the notices.” One could be consumed for some time counting the number of times that the pronoun “I” appears in this story. That was an intentional choice, a way not

only of showcasing the narrator's self-regard but also, I hope, suggesting that perhaps we shouldn't take everything she tells us at face value. Every first person narrative is suspect, of course (and many third person ones are, too). And while I did not want the actress to come across as an unreliable narrator or imply that she is lying to us about what happened the night Peg Entwistle died, as readers we must be ever diligent when weighing a character's own notions of guilt, remorse, and absolution. It is, in the end, *her* interpretation of events.

Another obstacle when tackling a story such as this one is how to create and maintain suspense when we know the outcome from the start. Peg's death is not merely foreshadowed, it is historical fact, stated outright in the documentation at the top of page one. So, I needed to pepper the opening pages with some hints of what was to come. "Upon my death, this testament can be made public. Perhaps it will clear up one of Los Angeles' most enduring myths," teases an attorney's note at the start. "I can finally tell the truth," the actress herself admits in the first sentence, then two paragraphs later elusively adds, "Much has been made about the fact that Peg committed suicide because she was despondent over her career."

For the purposes of fiction, I realized the suspense must not be built around the fact that Peg Entwistle died, but around *how* she died. Obviously, the long-buried truth is not fully revealed until story's end, and by then I hope that I've managed to keep the reader guessing (ideally) or at least entertained. I also hope

the chatty tone I use from the opening lines nonetheless conveys, as the story unspools, some measure of the chilling insouciance that can exist beneath the surface of certain kind of egotism or self-absorption: An ambitious personality where murder can be shrugged aside as a postscript. Hooray for Hollywood!

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Robert Weibezahl's stories have appeared in *CrimeSpree*, *Beat to a Pulp*, *Futures Mysterious Anthology Magazine*, *Mouth Full of Bullets*, *Kings River Life*, and the anthology, *Deadly by the Dozen*. He has been a Derringer Award finalist and has also been twice nominated for both the Agatha and Macavity Awards in the nonfiction category. His two crime novels, *The Wicked and the Dead* and *The Dead Don't Forget*, feature screenwriter-sleuth Billy Winnetka. Robert is also an award-winning, internationally produced playwright, and a book critic whose monthly column appears in the national publication, *BookPage*. He is a member of International Thriller Writers, the Short Mystery Fiction Society, and the Dramatists Guild. Find him at www.robertweibezahl.wordpress.com.