

**The First Two Pages of “Book Drop” by Sarah Bresniker**  
From *The Fish that Got Away: 2021 Sisters in Crime Guppy Anthology*,  
edited by Linda Rodriguez (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Sarah Bresniker

Stealing books from libraries is not an uncommon thing. You may have even done it, or at least thought about it. But stealing books for a library? Not so common.

There will be crime. There will be a library. And things will be a little bit weird. Do you want to know more? I hope so. This is the opening to my short story “Book Drop,” my very first published piece of fiction.

I was taking baby steps as an author, joining writing groups, taking classes, writing bits and pieces, taking my first real stab at a novel, when the call for this anthology came out. For me, a novel is an octopus, a giant squid, a beast that changes shape and direction as I try to pin it to the page. I was feeling lost and overwhelmed with writing when I read the prompt for the upcoming Guppy Anthology. *The Fish That Got Away*. A story about someone who commits a crime and escapes or gets away with it. That seemed interesting. 5,000 words or less. So much easier than a novel, right? Sure.

Like most writers, I have an entire universe inside my imagination. My characters have histories, futures, and relationships beyond what will ever appear on the page. My hope for my main character, Arlie, is that she will be around for many books. Could I use this prompt to invite the reader into her world and make them

want to learn more, in just a few pages? It seemed possible. So, I took my character and her world, and I allowed myself to wander in search of a small alleyway that could lead to a story for this anthology.

And wander I did. I meandered the streets of my version of Pacific Grove, California, chatting with various residents. I shared amazing meals with a table full of interesting people. I walked the coastal trail and overheard suspicious conversations. I got to know the dark secrets and private shames of seemingly kind or innocent characters. Finally, I found my way to the particular story I wanted to tell, but when I got there, it was far too long. Trying to escape the abyss of a novel, I found myself with a floppy mess of a story and far more than 5,000 words. I think I spent almost as much time trimming this story as I did writing it. Possibly more. Additional staff at the library? Gone. Romantic backstory for Tim the candy man? Gone. A nemesis for Arlie? Also gone. And all of that trimming meant that I had to think three, four, or five times about every character and every scene. The great thing about writing a series is that the pieces I left out will all have other chances to appear in print. And I got lots of practice figuring out how to say something in one word instead of three. My final story came in just 20 words under the limit, so every word mattered.

As I learned from this process, a lot needs to happen in the first two pages. In those opening lines above, I start out with Arlie's voice, talking directly to you, inviting you into her world.

After two short paragraphs establishing that voice, I jump into the action. Gentle action, but unusual. When I started thinking about the prompt and the word limit for this project, I realized that for me, murder was probably not an option. I also realized that red herrings and multiple suspects would be too much for a short story. Additionally, Arlie's world is not noir. There can be darkness, but there is also hope. So, who is my fish going to be, and what am I willing to let them get away with? You'll have to read it to find out.

You may have noticed that I set up a crime in the very first paragraph. But if that were the only problem, what fun would that be? I may not be able to include the complexities of a novel in 5,000 words, but I can take you somewhere you didn't expect to go.

Oh, and you need to have some idea of who you're traveling with. I've limited my list of characters, but I want you to get to know them. And I need to do it quickly. The way Arlie, Sal, and Nora respond to the appearance of valuable books on the library shelves tells you something about each of them. But I also allowed myself a little break in the action to introduce you to these women and their unique library. Just a quick pause to ground everyone in this world, then we're back in motion. Here's the first paragraph of that break:

Nora is our boss, the head librarian of the Pacific Grove Public Library. She is the smartest person I have ever met. And the largest. And the laziest. She is well over six feet tall, and half that wide. She reads constantly and seems to retain it all. She's a great librarian, but she's

also much more, because we are not like other libraries. Yes, you can check out books and use the public computers. But you can also have any question answered, no questions asked. Was your grandma really your grandpa's first wife? Where did your sister disappear to? Who murdered your next-door neighbor? We've answered all of those reference questions and more.

“But that's a story for another time,” I say in the next paragraph. Such a convenient little sentence. Hinting at the world inside my head, tempting you to ask for more.

I feel so honored that my story was selected for this anthology. Like most things in life, it was unexpected. But I'm thrilled that this little bit of Arlie's world is out there for you to explore. The challenges of a short story are different than those of a novel, but the skills I learned in crafting and honing this story will make my novel better. I will let my imagination run free, then reel it back in. Even a novel, even a series, can't contain all of the stories in my head.

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Sarah Bresniker is a mystery writer and former librarian who lives in Northern California. She loves classic mysteries and exploring the natural beauty and fascinating history of the Monterey Peninsula. Her Arlie Wynne stories take all of these elements and mix them up into fun, light mysteries revolving around a definitely made-up version of the Pacific Grove Public Library where reference questions often involve murder and the librarians have skills far beyond making book recommendations. Although they're pretty good at that, too.