

The First Two Pages of “The Paris Manuscript” by Joseph Goodrich
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An Essay by Joseph Goodrich

In “The Paris Manuscript,” the titular manuscript itself becomes the body of the story. Written by Ned Jameson, it’s an account of a crime committed—and solved—at a party given in post-World War I Paris. The story is bracketed by editorial notes from Charles, Ned Jameson’s grandson.

I’d like to focus on the first of the notes. Explaining the choices I made will, I hope, illustrate what sources I drew upon and how I set about creating a “hook” that would pull readers into the story.

The note begins:

It seems an infinity away now, those days in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, when I’d sit with my grandfather on the side porch of the house on River Road.

Whatever we’re posed to hear, we know it’s going to reflect the siren call of family and nostalgia.

Bucks County, Pennsylvania was chosen as the setting for Charles’ memories of his grandfather for two reasons.

In the ’40s and ’50s it was referred to as “the genius belt” because so many literary and show business types lived or had weekend houses in the area, including such notables as Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman, Pearl S. Buck, and

S. J. Perelman. The quiet greenery was a welcome relief from the concrete noise of Manhattan and was easily accessible by car or, in those days, by train. As transplants from NYC, Ned Jameson and his wife Daisy would find like-minded friends there.

Secondly, River Road runs through Point Pleasant, PA, which is about 20 minutes north of New Hope. It is not to be confused with Point Pleasant, NJ, which is on the Jersey shore. I spent a lot of time on River Road during one period of my life and I remember it fondly. Charles is not the only one afflicted with nostalgia for Point Pleasant...

Edward "Ned" Jameson (1893-1986) served in the First World War and worked as a journalist in post-war Paris. He lived there with my Grandmother Julia (known to all and sundry as Daisy) until 1940, when the Nazi invasion of France saw them on the last boat out of Le Havre.

Ned's dates are almost exactly those of my grandfather, Chris N. Christensen, who was born in Denmark in 1892 and died in southwestern Minnesota in 1986. This is no coincidence—nor is the fact that, like Charles, I used to sit on the porch with my grandfather and listen to his stories of being a doughboy in World War I. He never saw action, though he made it pretty close to the front, and he'd been to Paris. Unlike Ned, he didn't stay in France after the war; he returned to the American Midwest, where he married my grandmother and initiated the cycle of events that led, ultimately, to these reflections.

I chose to make Ned a journalist because he needed a real job. Unlike Hemingway, whose first wife Hadley had a trust fund, Ned had no financial resources to help pay the rent and buy the *vin rouge*. In this I followed the example of Craig McDonald's *One True Sentence*, one of his Hector Lassiter novels. Lassiter is a friend and colleague of Hemingway's but has little interest in being an "author"—he's a *writer*, damn it, and he makes his living as a penny-a-word pulpster. A neat idea, I thought, and I worked my own twist on the concept.

*Only later did the names he mentioned in passing—
Hemingway, Dos Passos, Cowley—mean anything to me. He and my
grandmother moved in circles that are now legendary, but all I'd
wanted to hear about then was how he'd once seen Houdini make an
elephant disappear at the Hippodrome.*

In 1996 I made my first trip to the City of Light. Smitten with the city as any member of the Lost Generation, I renewed my acquaintance with those expatriate writers who found "a moveable feast" in 1920s Paris. More importantly, I read some of the great French writers of the last century such as the novelist Andre Gide, whose *Lafcadio's Adventures* might appeal to mystery readers; the poets Guillame Apollinaire and Paul Eluard; and, with the strongest and most lasting effect, Marcel Proust, the author of that colossus of French fiction, *Remembrance of Things Past*. (Let me add that I read these works in translation; what French I possessed was enough to buy Metro tickets and pastries, and it's only gotten worse over the years.)

Nicholas Meyer's preface to *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* sought the reader's suspension of disbelief. It says, in effect, here's a crazy thing—a recently-located, previously unheard-of Sherlock Holmes adventure, here's how I came into possession of it, here's what I think of it—and it's *real*.

My task was far less daunting, but to make the “Manuscript” feel authentic, I used a locale I was intimately familiar with (Bucks County), historical fact (Paris in the '20s), actual people (Hemingway and company), and an event a child would long to hear more about (Houdini at the Hippodrome).

A yellowing manuscript I recently found among my late mother's belongings made something else disappear: the present. Once again I hear the voice of that old man, whom I loved so dearly and miss to this day.

The events my grandfather describes took place, as far as I can determine, in the spring of 1919. The first several pages are missing, and the manuscript begins mid-sentence.

Another attempt at verisimilitude is the fact that the story starts *in media res*—the first and (as the reader learns later) last pages of manuscript are missing. We are reading a fragment of something, perhaps of a longer piece.

It also reflects a great bit of playwriting advice: Arrive late, leave early. Start the action near the climax and don't dally when the action's been completed. Beginning with Ned and Daisy's arrival at the party plunges them—and the reader—into a swirl of light and noise. We have to run to keep up, and this focuses our attention. Anything can happen.

Something does.

The editorial note ends with the full name of its author:

— *Charles Christensen*

You'll have realized by now that I gave Charles my grandfather's last name.

If the editorial note whets the reader's appetite for the story that follows, it'll have served its purpose.

The story would work without the editorial framework, but I don't think it would be as effective. My hope is that the reader will care for the characters and their world because Charles does. Our parents and grandparents led lives that, on consideration, are as strange and mysterious as our own. And they leave us far too soon—which is why we cherish any stray, unexpected revelation of who those loved ones were in that distant age before we knew them.

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