

**The First Two Pages of “Merry Xmas from Orchard Beach”  
by Richie Narvaez**

From *Noiryorican* (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Richie Narvaez

A popular talking point on conference panels and in writing workshops is the likeability of characters. For me the point is not “Will the reader like this character?” but rather “Is this character interesting enough for readers to keep following or will they toss the book aside and go back to Instagram doggo videos?” My short story “Merry Xmas from Orchard Beach,” which appears in my latest collection, *Noiryorican* (nominated for an Anthony!), is a not a traditional mystery but is instead a noir. There is no tantalizing corpse in the library, no stolen parrot. So the story has to find other ways to intrigue the reader long enough to linger to the denouement.

It begins with this paragraph:

    Holding her smartphone with one hand and steering her SUV with the other, Heather Rincon simultaneously tapped Tito’s number and U-turned to park in front of his crappy house on Crosby Avenue. She was on her way to doing something right, finally.

We meet our protagonist immediately, performing an action, several in fact. I like to start a short story with a character in motion, so that the reader’s imagination is instantly engaged. Two gerunds and two verbs are crammed into that first sentence to show that this character is busy. Heather Rincon is multitasking, and the reader, I hope, starts to wonder why.

The point of view is established here as well—third person close, my favorite kind. It lets the character editorialize (giving us a sense of who he or she is) and allows me as the writer more flexibility with description than with first person. Here, we find out Heather has strong opinions (about Tito’s house), and in that second sentence, we get a sense of her goal: “on her way to doing something right, finally.” Is this goal to do something *with* Tito or *to* him? And note that “finally,” telling us that Heather feels she has not done “something right” for a long time, if ever.

I am generally miserly with character description. Letting readers use their imaginations allows for more universality. However, in this case some description allowed me to highlight a relationship that becomes important later in the story.

Pear-shaped and stocky, she wore her thick hair in braids under a baseball cap. Across her right forearm in fancy script flowed the name “Giselly,” inside a heart.

A few paragraphs later, we meet Tito, who turns out to be Heather’s pal and cohort. His description adds double-meaning details while reinforcing time of year:

Tito emerged, thin as a spliff, puffy eyed, in a denim jacket over a hoodie, and carrying a small duffel bag and two large shopping bags with nutcracker soldiers on them.

While we see the characters, it’s of course important to hear them as well. Nothing reveals character and relationships more effectively than dialogue.

“You’re freaking serious with those?” Heather said.

“Carmen said as long as I was going out I should drop these at her mom’s because we’re bringing food later, and she doesn’t want to carry so much.”

“Does she keep your b\*\*\*s on a keychain or in a jar on a shelf?”

[ . . . ] “Can’t we drop these off now before the thing?”

“Nope,” she said. “We cannot fucking drop them off before the thing. We’re already running late because of you.” Heather checked the time. “Tell me you got the stuff.”

“Of course. Damn,” Tito said and took out the shims he had made from crushed beer cans.

“Good man.”

Heather lit up a cigarette, and Tito gestured for her to give him one, so she did.

“What’s with the oldies?” Tito said.

“It’s Christmastime. Perfect time for the oldies.”

“You know what my favorite Christmas song is?”

“I don’t have the slightest.”

“‘Old Lang Syne,’ by Don Fogelberg.”

“It’s *Dan* Fogelberg.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah, and it’s not a Christmas song.”

[ . . . ]

“Yes, it is. It’s on Christmas Eve,” Tito said, then he sang, “‘*The snow was falling Christmas Eve.*’ See?”

“Do me a favor, Tito: Never sing again. Especially that song. It’s a freaking ear-worm.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“It digs into your skull and never lets go.”

“That’s why I like it. What’s your favorite?”

“I don’t know. What a question,” Heather said, then she thought about it. “Honestly, ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.’”

There is some action here to break up the talk, but overall this a long stretch of dialogue. It has a, shall we say, Tarantinoesque emphasis on trivia, and no hint of a plot in sight. But we do get more of a flavor of these characters through their banter, which is humorous (this author hopes) and everyday enough that readers will recognize having had similar conversations. With that recognition comes empathy; with empathy comes interest. Plus, adding in the descriptions, we get a sense that while

these characters are rough with each other, they know each other well. (We often save our sharpest zingers for our closest friends.) And they live regular lives—with holiday shopping bags and Dan Fogelberg, again, elements many readers will recognize.

Setting is another way to keep readers away from Twitter. I often tell my Creative Writing students that description should always do more than describe. You don't want it to be like that salad spinner you got as a present that only spins salad and takes up so much space in your kitchen cabinet. If only it cored apples, too, or peeled garlic! So, setting describes but it should also create mood, add to plot, create tension, or illuminate characters. In this story, it's Christmastime, which is namechecked in the title and is, I think, a fairly well-known holiday, so much so that, starting from the title, the reader's imagination is hanging some of the tinsel for me. But I don't want to just throw on Christmas decorations—I want each bauble to have meaning.

The Bronx streets shone wet from the previous night's pathetic attempt at snowfall. Above Heather, the sky was a dull black, layered with slate gray clouds. At just past six in the morning, people were already out, probably on their way to the bakery to get pies and cookies and all that fattening crap for Christmas dinner. Heather drummed her hands on the steering wheel, then surfed through radio stations. She kept hearing snatches of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas," which made her push the button faster. Where were all the good Christmas songs, the stuff she grew up with? Even WCBS was playing some new, douchebag version of "White Christmas." But as it ended, Heather was rewarded with a segue into "Dominick the Donkey," which she hated, but which was better than anything Mariah Carey ever recorded.

Note: New Yorkers get an Easter Egg with the mention of a local radio station.

More importantly, the mood is not what you would call "joyful." And because this is

third person close, all the adjectives used shine a light on our protagonist's mindset: "pathetic," "dull," "gray," "fattening crap," "douchebag." She is not a happy camper, is our Heather. She doesn't approve of the snowfall, is sentimental about the past, and certainly has opinions about the holidays and Mariah Carey. While readers may not like people with such a strong attitude in real life, they do like to follow them on paper.

Now, at the end of these two pages, you may be asking: Where's the beach? Holding back that scenery (again, namechecked in the title) creates a sense of anticipation. The reader's imagination is engaged, picturing beaches they've known, wondering about this beach . . . in winter? . . . why? Anticipation is about getting the reader to ask questions based on the seemingly slight and banal information you give them. What is this "thing" our characters talk about? What's the deal with the metal shims Tito has made—what needs to be pried open? Why is Heather in a rush, checking the time frequently ("She looked at the time on her phone and then looked at the door of Tito's house. 'C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon.'")? Who is this "Giselly" that she has tattooed on her arm and that the author has taken the time to highlight? In the questions are dots that connect in the pages that follow. Eventually, the reader sees that Heather is on a quest, an ill-fated, -timed, and -considered one. This is a classic noir plot, in this case not a fall from the heights of power, but from the height of an SUV.

To a reader, a dead body in the library is pretty immediately intriguing. This is why your agent or editor tells you to add that prologue to your novel. “We need a body by page 3 or it won’t sell!” I don’t think this is at all true, but many agents and editors do, and they are often more concerned with moving pallets than moving writing. In a noir story, you can start with a dead body, of course, but the emphasis is generally not on unraveling a mystery. Rather, it is on the unraveling of the protagonist. So, absent an immediate mystery, a writer must enthrall the reader in other ways, and the best way, I think, is character. In “Merry Xmas from Orchard Beach,” the characters are, let’s say, not the best and brightest, but neither are they the worst and vilest. They are human and fallible, just like the reader.

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Born and raised in Brooklyn, Richie Narvaez currently teaches writing at the Fashion Institute of Technology and has taught at the Mystery Writers of America University. He served as chapter president for the Mystery Writers of America, New York Chapter, for two years. In 2018, he was appointed Bronx Council on the Arts Artist in Residence and served as a judge for the 2019 PEN Open Book Awards. His first book, *Roachkiller and Other Stories*, received the Spinetingler Award for Best Collection. His book *Noiryorican* has been nominated for an Anthony Award in 2021, and his book *Holly Hernandez and the Death of Disco* received an Agatha Award and has been nominated for an Anthony Award in 2021.