

The First Two Pages of “The Locked Room Library” by Gigi Pandian
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An Essay by Gigi Pandian

I’d written my first full-length novel and was well on my way to completing my second before I figured out how to write a short story.

As someone who adores mysteries both long and short, I found this a bewildering predicament—until I figured out what exactly I wanted to accomplish with my own style of short fiction.

There are so many structures a short story can follow. For me, there are two types of mystery story I’m most drawn to: those that end with a twist that leaves you smiling, and those that resolve a baffling puzzle and have you slapping your forehead in satisfaction as you say, “Of course! I should have figured it out before the detective.”

There’s a style of puzzle that meets both of those conditions and lends itself to the short mystery form. I’m talking about a locked room mystery, also known as an impossible crime. It’s a type of story that was popular during the Golden Age of detective fiction, when puzzle plots gave readers all the clues they needed to solve the mystery. Ellery Queen books even paused at the point at which the reader had all the clues and challenged the reader to solve the case before Ellery. A locked room mystery is the ultimate impossible crime, because not only do you not know

the identity of the guilty party, you can't fathom *how* it was humanly possible for the crime to have been committed.

What *exactly* is a locked room mystery? A crime, generally a murder or a theft, has been committed in a room or other impenetrable location where it appears impossible for the crime to have been committed without a supernatural explanation. The situation appears truly impossible, so the key to the solution involves not only figuring out *who* committed the crime, but also *how*. Only rational, earthly explanations are allowed; no ghosts or other supernatural entities need apply.

Once I tried my hand at emulating the locked room mystery stories I love reading, all the pieces clicked into place. I'd found my style of story. I sat down one afternoon at the San Francisco Public Library and wrote an entire draft of my first published short story. I wrote longhand in a paper notebook. I remember the afternoon vividly not only because of the satisfaction I felt at reaching "the end" of a short story, but because I gave myself a hand cramp.

The problem? (Aside from my sore wrist, I mean.) The ending of a locked room mystery is where the idea begins. I only knew my *ending*. What about the beginning?

The beginning of a short story is the most difficult part for me to write. Always. I'm not afraid of a blank page, but by the time I get to my fifth—or

sometimes tenth—draft of my opening, I begin to get disheartened. My conclusions, however, generally only need one or two tries to get right, because I know the resolution before I sit down to write. An impossible crime story is all about a perfect solution that’s both deviously hidden yet inevitable, so the ending is clear in my mind.

Back to that pesky beginning. I know as both a reader and a writer that the first couple of pages of a story or a novel are essential to hook the reader. Only after I’d written several stories, though, did I discover my secret weapon: trusted critique readers. Fellow lovers of traditional puzzle plot mysteries who would give me honest feedback.

I don’t remember exactly how many terrible first pages I wrote before I got the opening of “The Locked Room Library” right, but I do remember it was fellow short story writers Shelly Dickson Carr and James Lincoln Warren (thank you, Shelly and James!) who convinced me to ditch a terrible opening line and begin the story with a dual-purpose beginning. One that both sets the expectation of what type of story the reader is signing up for—and provides a clue.

In its final, published form, “The Locked Room Library” begins:

Enid Maddox gripped the cream-colored envelope tightly before pressing it into Tamarind’s hand. Embossed with the image of an oversize skeleton key on the front and sealed with a hearty dollop of thick, blood-red wax on the back, this was no ordinary envelope.

“Hold onto this carefully,” Enid said with an enigmatic smile as she let go of the mysterious letter, “and break the seal of the envelope once you’re home.”

Can you imagine being handed this type of mysterious envelope as part of a murder mystery game? Or perhaps it reminds you of a Three Investigators mystery from your childhood, or a fair play Ellery Queen story where you know you’re about to be inundated with hidden clues. That’s the type of mood I wanted to create.

This was my idea for the story as a whole: The owner of San Francisco’s Locked Room Library—a new private library established to celebrate classic mysteries—has discovered a secret about John Dickson Carr’s controversial novel *The Burning Court*. When the newly discovered letter Carr wrote to Frederic Dannay disappears under circumstances identical to one of the eerie impossible crimes in *The Burning Court*, it’s up to librarian Tamarind Ortega and stage magician Sanjay Rai (who performs as The Hindi Houdini) to prove the letter wasn’t stolen by a ghost who vanished through a bricked-up door.

To quickly set the scene, I needed to not only establish the mood and clues but also draw readers in through the distinct personalities of five characters. A few paragraphs into the story, the reader learns what kind of heroine Tamarind is as well as more about what’s in store.

Wait until she got home? Hell no. As soon as she rounded the corner on her walk to the bus stop, Tamarind ripped open the blood-red seal on the envelope's flap.

For the unveiling of a once-in-a-lifetime discovery, the cryptic missive in her hands stated, *arrive promptly at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning*.

A once-in-a-lifetime discovery? She peeked into the envelope again. That was it.

Once I set the stage with the right reader expectation, interesting characters, and couple of clues, the story jumps forward to the following morning. The rest of the story flowed from there, with the impossible theft being committed before the eyes of five witnesses and all clues hidden in plain sight for Tamarind and Sanjay to solve the crime.

I might never become a natural at writing good openings to my short stories on my first try, but I love the puzzles I create and am grateful to have found a circle of critique partners who love the genre as much as I do.

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Gigi Pandian is the *USA Today* bestselling and multiple award-winning author of the Jaya Jones Treasure Hunt mysteries, the Accidental Alchemist mysteries, and locked-room mystery short stories. Her works have won Agatha, Anthony, Lefty, and Derringer awards, and her debut novel was awarded the Malice Domestic Grant. Gigi is the child of anthropologists from New Mexico and the southern tip of India and spent her childhood traveling around the world on their research trips. She now lives in Northern California with her husband and a gargoyle who watches over the backyard garden. She has two new novels coming out soon: *The Alchemist Of Fire And Fortune*, the fifth in her Anthony Award-winning Accidental Alchemist mystery series, and *Under Lock & Skeleton Key*, the first in her new Secret Staircase series coming in March 2022 from St. Martin's Minotaur. Learn more about Gigi at www.gigipandian.com and stay connected through her email newsletter at www.gigipandian.com/subscribe.