

## **The First Two Pages of “The Importance of Being Urnest”**

**by Eleanor Cawood Jones**

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An Essay by Eleanor Cawood Jones

I’ve written for so many reasons in my life. From seeking a degree to becoming a newspaper reporter, then meandering into PR, fundraising, and marketing, it’s been a good gig; however, writing my own fiction took the proverbial back burner. Finally, in 2016, I fulfilled a lifelong fantasy of becoming a traditionally published fiction author with the short story “Killing Kippers” in *Malice Domestic 11: Murder Most Conventional*.

Kippers was a fun one; the only time in thirty-plus stories I’ve ever written my lead character/narrator in first-person drunk. (Hey, don’t judge—you’d be drunk, too, if you were snowed in at a hotel-casino during a clown convention.) I never thought I’d write one that strange again, but one day last summer, an unusual character named Urnest showed up.

I intended to use Urnest, formerly known as Earnest, to allow a recurring character of mine—Lorrie George, from previous stories in the anthologies *Murder by the Glass* and *Murder on the Beach*—to star in a comedy. Which, considering the state in which Urnest arrived, was going to be a trick. (More about that in a

minute.) The thing about Urnest was that he didn't fit into any current short story call, he didn't fit into any book I'd been invited to be in, he just wanted to be written.

How to start? I began by thinking (waaay) back to the early days of writing, when I used to create stories just for the fun of it. And I thought about the structure of comedy. Slightly dark comedy in particular. Timing is everything. Short, punchy descriptions and rapid dialogue, interspersed with longer passages. Memorable, nutty characters. A ridiculous, over-the-top scenario. And the importance of the opening pages in setting up the main character's dawning realization—and acceptance—of her situation, to pull readers into the story and keep them there.

So I sat down to write and, thankfully, I started to laugh. (The way I see it, if you're not laughing, the reader won't either.)

Lorrie George has just shown up in the Bahamas, solo, an ugly peach-taffeta bridesmaid's dress in hand, to enjoy the destination wedding of her dear and quite wealthy friend, Margaret. She's resigned to being assigned a groomsman date who doesn't sound like the most exciting guy in the world, but that's a small price to pay for a fun Nassau weekend, right?

I looked around poolside for my date. "Is Earnie here yet?"  
Margaret looked at me blankly, coconut palms swaying gently in the breeze behind her. Quite picturesque.  
"Where is he? I haven't seen him yet."

Blank Stare. Palm trees. Passing pelican.  
Time passed as well.

“Hello? Your cousin on your father’s side? You sent me a picture. Earnest. Nickname Earnie, though he doesn’t like nicknames. The shortish, skinny, geeky single guy who’s so introverted he spends little time with the family but you simply had to put him in your wedding because you promised him you would when you were four and you’re not one to go back on your promises. Ring any bells?”

She moved slightly—more of a squirm, actually. Then she cleared her throat. Twice. “Yees, Lorrie. He’s here.” Margaret’s eyes cut to her left, where a fancy jar sat on a table. Or maybe it was better described as an urn.

It hasn’t quite dawned on Lorrie yet why her date isn’t around. But it’s about  
to.

I stared at the urn and looked back at Margaret, who shrugged and tugged at her peach-colored bikini strap. She reached for the urn on the table beside her and put her arm around it protectively.

The urn was about eighteen inches tall, glossy, and embellished with swirling colors. One of which, I suddenly noticed, was a dark peach. The same color as Margaret’s bikini and the same color as the revolting bridesmaid’s dress I’d sunk a week’s salary into six months ago.

“Margaret,” I said slowly, “has something happened to Earnie recently?”

She nodded. “Quite possibly. Yes.”

I picked up Margaret’s fancy peach drink, removed the decorative umbrella, and downed it. Quite tasty, actually.

“That’s our wedding cocktail,” she offered hopefully. “It’s called ‘Peachy Couple’ and it was invented just for our event.”

“That’s cute,” I told her. “By the way, is that my date in the urn?”

Poor Margaret is stuck. She promised her cousin he could be in the wedding, and she’s determined to go through with it, no matter what. Lorrie is incredulous.

“You cannot seriously expect Earnest to be my wedding party escort. It’s not too late to get a substitute. That waiter is pretty hot. Bet he’d do it for a hundred bucks and a free reception meal.”

“Well, I know it’s unusual.” (Gee. You think?) “But you’ve been my friend since college. I know you’ll want to stand by me in my time of need.”

Sounded funereal. Well, it would.

“Ask me again after these two drinks.”

You *know* Lorrie is going to cave in, right? But along the way, she’s already started calling Earnest “Earnest.” And Margaret has more explaining to do.

“Delishia and I worked so hard to find the right vessel for Earnest,” Margaret said earnestly. (Sorry, couldn’t resist.) “We felt this one blended with the wedding outfits perfectly, yet was dignified enough that Earnest would be proud to wear it.”

Delishia was the wedding planner, the person who was supposed to have kept Margaret from going off the deep end. I’d heard more about the fabulous Delishia in the last six months than I had my own family. I wondered what kind of urn Delishia would pick for herself when the time came and pondered how I could get her in one soonest because, at this moment, I’d truly have murdered her.

In my fiction, real experiences always creep in. I’ve been that peach-clad bridesmaid covered in miles of taffeta. I’ve seen the live play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (starring David Suchet, everyone’s favorite Poirot), and this story is a subtle nod to that production. There’s also my admitted addiction to the Hallmark Channel, and a vague memory of a long-ago conversation with writers Robin Templeton and Sherry Harris about the potentially weirdest wedding ever. I’ve witnessed firsthand the years of planning some people put into weddings.

Add all that up, mix well, and pour into the opening pages. And then what happens? Will Urnest really be in the wedding? Will Lorrie ever find real, live romance? Will she give Delishia a piece of her mind? Is there even enough alcohol in Nassau to get her through this weekend? And—the most important thing—will crime be afoot? Stay tuned...

As a kid, inspired by *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, I used to sit with a #2 pencil and craft courtroom mystery shorts starring my stuffed animals. (And let me tell you, Judge Tatinka Donkey brooked no nonsense in his courtroom and was quick with a gavel.) Today, I'm still in love with short stories, and appreciate Art giving me the opportunity to be here talking about Urnest, formerly known as Earnest, and share some excerpts from the opening pages.

A side note: “The Importance of Being Urnest” is a bit of an oddball story and was gently and thoughtfully rejected by three mystery magazine editors (seriously) before I sent him to editor and friend Barb Goffman for feedback. In December, she found a home for him in her “Barb Goffman Presents” feature in *Black Cat Weekly*. She was my first editor for “Kippers” and other stories since then, and it was a treat to work on Urnest with her. You can now find Urnest in *Weekly #15* and as a solo ebook from Wildside Press as well.

And for my next trick, Urnest will return in a sequel. I'm writing it in my head right now. Long live Urnest! I mean, um—well, you know what I mean.

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Eleanor is a self-proclaimed romance novelist who somehow only writes short crime fiction. She won a 2021 Derringer Award for “The Great Bedbug Incident and the Invitation of Doom” (*Chesapeake Crimes: Invitation to Murder*). Her “Urnest” character Lorrie George will return this February in “The Lyin’ Witch in the Wardrobe” (*Murder in the Mountains*) and appeared previously in “Braying Glass” (*Murder by the Glass*) and “Cabo San Loco” (*Murder on the Beach*). A former newspaper reporter and reformed marketing director, Tennessee native Eleanor lives in Virginia and travels frequently.