

The First Two Pages of “And the Band Played On” by Peter Lovesey

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An Essay by Peter Lovesey

I’d rather eat worms than create an entire novel to someone else’s specification, but short stories I can do. Martin Edwards, the editor of numerous collections for the Crime Writers’ Association, knows this and has invited me often to work to a theme. This time it was music. I weighed the possibilities and decided there might be a crime story in that annoying experience we’ve all had of a tune that drives us mad because it won’t get out of our heads. Only one thing is worse: being trapped with someone else who sings the thing repeatedly. Is that enough to justify murder?

I knew my tune straight away, one that lodges in my own head each time I watch the old Hitchcock film *Strangers on a Train*. It’s the chorus from a song called “Casey Would Waltz with a Strawberry Blonde” and Hitchcock used it at several dramatic moments. When I checked the lyric, I was pleased to find it was in the form of a story that included two mysterious and faintly sinister lines. Written more than a century ago in 1895, the song was out of copyright, so I could quote the refrain.

*“Casey would waltz with a strawberry blonde
And the band played on.
He’d glide ‘cross the floor with the girl he adored
And the band played on.
But his brain was so loaded it nearly exploded.
The poor girl would shake with alarm.*

*He'd ne'er leave the girl with the strawberry curls
And the band played on."*

Even better, I had been gifted a good title as well: "And the Band Played On."

The germ of the idea—the maddening tune—started to develop into a plot. I liked the notion of entrapment, some unfortunate person stuck with somebody else, perhaps in a prison cell, who hummed, whistled, or sang the thing to the point of provoking violence.

I soon decided the plot would work better if the trap was more subtle, created out of loyalty. I pictured a family at home with a singing grandfather driving them to distraction while they were all too polite to complain. Probably he was succumbing to Alzheimer's. It is well known that music can be used as therapy for people whose brains are disintegrating. The song was one of the last coherent group of words he could use. You couldn't tell him to shut up. But a child might.

I wrote my second paragraph:

Grandpa's thin, reedy voice wasn't loud, but we couldn't shut it out, however hard we tried. He stopped the singing and smiled. Some of the family tried to smile back. Our dad sighed and rolled his eyes. Gemma, my youngest sister, who was six and would say anything that came into her head, spoke for all of us. "Grandpa, I'm tired of that song."

When writing the start of a story, I test it by trying to put myself into the mind of my reader. Does the text make an instant connection? Is there enough interest? Is there a danger I will overload the reader? I need to be aware that

she/he is making an effort to take in information. Although I am writing in a simple style, the content here is quite complex. As many as four characters are introduced: Grandpa, Dad, Gemma, and the narrator. There's a suggestion ("my youngest") that there may be more sisters. If I'd given them all names at this early stage, it would have been too much. Fortunately, I can reinforce the personalities as the story moves on. The reader will know this, too, and ought to be willing to read more.

In those six sentences, I have also set the plot in motion. The song (which the reader may barely have taken on board yet, because it looks like an opening quotation that may have only a remote connection) is important. The family tolerate the singing out of respect for Grandpa. Some of them manage to smile, but Dad rolls his eyes. Gemma, with the directness of a six-year-old, speaks the words the others are too charitable to say. And in the next short paragraph, a fifth character attempts to soften the incident.

Our mum shushed her and told her she was only tired because it was past her bedtime. That was enough to send Gemma into the other room where the TV was.

The reader learns that this is a conventional family home with mum in her maternal role. Bedtime is an institution here. And now, as the author, I can get into the mindset of my narrator, who we already know is one of the young generation but old enough to understand that his sister overstepped the mark.

Most of my novels and short stories are written in the third person. I find it more adaptable because you can, if the story requires, slip into another point

of view. Yet occasionally I have written entire novels in the first person, becoming the narrator. I did this in a novel called *Rough Cider* which drew heavily on my own memories and experiences in the second world war. The voice was largely that of a nine-year-old who doesn't fully understand the gravity of what he witnesses. I was influenced by L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, relating events recalled by a thirteen-year-old from an earlier era, in 1900.

Voice and point of view are critical elements in any story. For mine, I chose to write as a boy, as the next paragraph makes clear.

I couldn't say so in front of my family, but everyone was pissed off by the song. Grandpa didn't know. He was going to carry on singing it until he dropped dead. Mum sometimes said he was getting slow on the trigger, which was putting it gently. He hadn't said anything worth hearing for months. The worst of it was that he remembered every word of the song and it was one of those catchy tunes that stayed in your head.

The words come from the mouth of a kid in his early teens. Everyone was "pissed off" and Grandpa would carry on "until he dropped dead." We also learn that Grandpa is "slow on the trigger," losing his mental capacity and becoming a burden on the family, although the parents won't say so openly.

Next, I needed to deal with the wording of the song, which would be central to the plot. For this, it was important to draw the reader's attention to the key phrase. I didn't want to sound preachy, so I did it through dialogue.

"Who was Casey, anyway?" I asked Mum. I knew I wouldn't get a sensible answer out of Grandpa.

"I've no idea, Josh," Mum said, "and I don't really care."

“Someone ought to know.”

“It’s only a song. Does it matter?”

Sarah, my middle sister, said, “It’s creepy.”

“Why?”

“The line about his brain being so loaded it nearly exploded and the poor girl shaking with alarm. At a dance? I don’t get it and I don’t like it.”

There it was: the sinister bit. My reader may well have skimmed the lines of the lyric printed at the top of the story. Possible she or he would turn the page back to check the context. They are strange words. We’re looking at the story within the story. I don’t myself understand what is meant here, but it was a nugget of pure gold to a crime writer. I had already decided I would return to it later in my narrative. First, it was necessary to play fair with the reader and relate the full story in the song. Exposition can be dull, I thought. I tried to do this as painlessly as possible, trimming it to the essentials, with asides giving more insights into the personalities in the family.

I did some scrolling. “Granddad’s bit is only the chorus.”

“Don’t you dare sing it,” Dad said.

So I simply read them the words. ““Matt Casey formed a social club that beat the town for style and hired for a meeting place a hall. When payday came around each week, they’d grease the floor with wax and dance with noise and vigour at the ball . . .’ It’s like a story.”

“Crap lyrics,” Becky, my oldest sister, said.

Dad frowned at her and said, “Language.”

“There’s no other word for it.” Becky was seventeen and thought she knew everything.

I carried on reading out what was left on my phone. “Each Saturday, you’d see them, dressed up in Sunday clothes –”

“Shh. You’ll start him off again,” Mum said.

So I took a quick look at the last part and gave them the gist of it in my own words. “At midnight they all push off for a late meal except Casey, who tells the band to keep playing so he can

carry on waltzing with the strawberry blonde. Finally they get fed up and play 'Home Sweet Home' and he thanks them and now the blonde is his wife."

"Is that it?" Becky said.

"More or less."

"Sappy stuff."

The groundwork was done. I was ready to spring the first of several surprises as I revealed Grandpa's surprising back story. And here, according to the rules of "The First Two Pages," I must stop. But I'm pleased to add that the full story can be found either in *Music of the Night* (Flame Tree Press) or my own new collection *Reader, I Buried Them and Other Stories* (Soho Press/Sphere).

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British writer Peter Lovesey's mysteries include three well known series detectives: Sergeant Cribb, of Scotland Yard in the 1880s; Bertie, Prince of Wales; and Peter Diamond of the Bath police. He has also published six collections of short stories. His books have been adapted for radio, TV, and the cinema. In 2000, he was awarded Britain's highest mystery-writing honor, the Crime Writers Association Diamond Dagger; and in 2018 the Mystery Writers of America made him Grand Master. His website can be found at www.peterlovesey.com.