

## The First Two Pages of “Amdur’s Ghost” by M.H. Callway

From the Mesdames of Mayhem’s *In The Spirit of 13*,  
edited by Donna Carrick (Carrick Publishing)

An Essay by M.H. Callway

Ten years ago, Donna Carrick and I decided to tackle a new beast named Social Media, and the authors’ collective the Mesdames of Mayhem was born. We are now a national organization of more than twenty award-winning Canadian crime writers, including three Messieurs.

Our fifth anthology, *In the Spirit of 13*, celebrates our milestone anniversary. The contributing authors let their imaginations run wild, taking “spirit” to mean ghosts or demons—even alcohol or prohibition thereof. And in view of the world’s troubled times, the stories lean to the lighter side though a few do stray into darker realms: we are crime writers after all.

My personal stories tend to be dark; readers find they can even stray into horror. For instance, my novella *Snake Oil*, which centred on snake fanciers, notably scared a hard-bitten (male) noir writer. But for this outing, I returned to my comedy roots. My breakthrough short story, “Kill the Boss,” was a comedy mystery, as was my learner novel that now resides deep in my basement filing cabinet.

My dear friend and creative writing teacher, Rosemary Aubert, often assured me that nothing one writes is ever wasted. I was always fond of the hero of my lost

first novel, Benjamin Amdur, the doctor who headed up the West Huron Health Unit, the most obscure and poorly funded public health department in Ontario. For the Mesdames' first anthology, *Thirteen*, I took a chance and resurrected him in the comedy thriller "Amdur's Cat," and my readers loved it.

While waiting in my basement file cabinet, Amdur had transformed from a beleaguered civil servant to a wily warrior. He now used his wits and political skills to outfox his reactionary opponents. Mind you, in "Amdur's Cat," he also had the help of a lion and the lion's owner, a tough burlesque dancer, to defeat the venal new Deputy Minister.

Readers consistently find my writing "quirky." Maybe it's because I draw inspiration from bizarre real-life events and truth is stranger than fiction. In "Amdur's Cat," Amdur first spots the lion playing in the snowy park by his condo. This is based on a true incident where someone's pet lion did actually escape into a city park though the feline did *not* pay a subsequent visit to the Ministry of Health. The Deputy Minister character is based on a former Ministry executive who dressed and acted like such a bum that government security guards thought he'd wandered away from the neighboring courthouse. When the guy insisted he wanted the health department, the guards sent him to the registration office for his health card. My friend, who'd been sent to retrieve him, told me the story.

Now Amdur returns in a second story, “Amdur’s Ghost.” The narrative includes one of my favorite scenes from my learner novel, a bizarre true event that happened while I worked in public health: two people were trapped in their car by a rabid coyote.

In “Amdur’s Ghost,” Ben Amdur’s political opponents are now in charge of Ontario. He’s left his job at the Ministry and taken charge of the West Huron Health Unit in the fictitious small town of Dunlop. My challenge was to convey this backstory without drowning readers in an information dump.

I crafted my first paragraph to establish the main characters and the setting, to evoke the anthology’s supernatural theme of the story, and, most importantly, to hook the reader.

At work, one’s predecessor becomes a ghost. In Dr. Benjamin Amdur’s opinion, this was especially true for Nigel Browne, Dunlop’s former Medical Officer of Health. Amdur had spent his first two weeks as Browne’s replacement sorting out the mess of his non-performance. Damn it, Browne had merely haunted his job!

The first line—“*At work, one’s predecessor becomes a ghost*”—is a wry observation about working life that echoes the theme of the anthology, *and* it foreshadows the mysterious disappearance at the heart of the story. The second line introduces the setting, our hero Ben Amdur, and his predecessor, Nigel Browne, using the phrase, “Dunlop’s former Medical Officer of Health.” The third line—“Amdur had spent his first two week as Brown’s replacement sorting out the mess

of his non-performance”—establishes that Amdur is conscientious while Nigel was lazy. And the last line—“Damn it, Browne had merely haunted his job!”—uses the word “haunted” to hint at Nigel’s vanishing and to get the reader interested.

In the second paragraph, I introduce Marley’s Home Bakery, which, readers will soon learn, is owned by the spiritual medium, Roberta Marley. I bring in Amdur’s habit of switching his phone to “silent,” which will cause him problems in the story, as well as his handle and his increasing ties to Dunlop via his favorite snack, Marley’s Nanaimo Bar. In the phrase “bright April sunshine.” I tell readers that it’s spring in Ontario.

He was treating himself to a well-earned coffee break at **Marley’s Home Bakery** when his phone went off. Surely he was allowed five minutes of peace! He reached into his pocket and switched his phone to Silent, gulped down his coffee, and headed back out into the bright April sunshine. All the way back to the office, he regretted leaving behind his favorite snack, **Marley’s Nanaimo Bar**.

The next few paragraphs provide background for the readers meeting Amdur for the first time as well as telling those who read about him in “Amdur’s Cat” what has happened in the meantime. The wording establishes Amdur’s political savvy and his intent to make stay in Dunlop is temporary. I inserted several bits of comedy to make this a fun read, as marked in **bold** below:

**When he’d left the Ministry of Health, his many friends and colleagues feared that he’d lost his mind.** Today, he was inclined to agree with them. Certainly, going from Assistant Deputy Minister to running a local health department was a huge step down career wise.

Even worse, Dunlop, a town on the eastern shores of Lake Huron, was the most obscure and poorly funded of Ontario's 36 health units.

But the positives outweighed the negatives.

Advantage Number One: Medical Officers of Health were municipal, not provincial appointments. The **newly elected far-right trolls** in Toronto couldn't fire him. Not without a grinding public fight in the media anyway.

Even better, **here in the depths of rural Ontario, he was out of sight and out of mind, making it much easier to circumvent the deranged edicts of the Ministry.** And he could bide his time for the right opportunity to inflict lethal political damage on **The Trolls.**

To slip in more background smoothly, I drew on my previous career as a management consultant. To ease communication with clients, I used *lists*. Here, I had fun with two short, intertwining lists, lacing everything with comedy, again highlighted in **bold**.

The first list is "Advantages," the positives of hiding out in a backwater like Dunlop. The second is "Dragons," the challenging local characters, who are an equal match for Amdur's city smarts. Are the Dragons his friends or not?

But nothing in life is ever easy. **In Dunlop, he'd found new dragons to slay.**

Dragon Number One: Dunlop's mayor, Loretta Macdonald. **She'd moved the Health Unit's offices to the basement of City Hall, thereby cementing her opinion about its importance in the municipal hierarchy.** Worse, she now chaired the Board of Health.

He shivered in his cashmere overcoat as a brisk wind blew up from the ice-blue waters of Lake Huron at the bottom of the street.

Advantage Number Two: he'd never get lost in a small town like Dunlop. **City Hall stood at its exact centre, in an octagonal park that the locals inexplicably called The Square.** And City Hall itself was a pleasing art deco building, although today its preternaturally smooth limestone walls and vestigial Greek pillars seemed to herald the poured concrete of the future.

Dunlop is loosely based on Goderich, a real Ontario town on the shores of Lake Huron, but like Howard Engel's Grantham, which he based on St. Catherine's, it's entirely fictitious. But it's true that the courthouse that stands in the centre of town in the middle of an octagonal park that locals call "The Square."

The next two short paragraphs tell the reader about the deteriorated Health Department, again using comedy:

He went through the heavy bronze entranceway and took the narrow marble stairs down to the basement. **At the entrance to the Health Department, tattered posters implored him to brush his teeth, to stop drinking, and to use a condom.**

High time those were replaced. **Add yet another project to the list.** He threw open the door and went in.

In the last two paragraphs I introduce Dragon Number Two, Agnes Barton, the health department's office manager who becomes Amdur's ally. I purposely made Agnes funny to balance out the dark crimes surrounding Nigel's disappearance and to be Amdur's foil.

"How come you aren't answering your phone, Doc?" boomed a woman's voice.

**Hello, Dragon Number Two:** Agnes Barton, veteran office administrator and formidable guardian of local knowledge. **And extreme knitter. Today, her sweater depicted a maniacally cheerful Easter Bunny sinking its vampire teeth into a rainbow-colored egg.**

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M. H. Callway's short crime fiction has appeared in many anthologies and publications and has won or been short-listed for several awards, including the Bony Pete, the Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence, and the Derringer.

Her novel *Windigo Fire* was shortlisted for the Debut Dagger under a different title and, after publication, for the Crime Writers of Canada Best First Novel award.

In 2013, Madeleine co-founded the Mesdames of Mayhem, a collective of leading Canadian crime writers whose work is showcased in five anthologies. The Mesdames are the subject of a CBC documentary by director Cat Mills (GEM and YouTube). Fine more at [www.mhcallway.com](http://www.mhcallway.com) or [www.mesdamesofmayhem.com](http://www.mesdamesofmayhem.com).