

The First Two Pages of “The Cost of Living” by Saul Golubcow
From *The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries* by Saul Golubcow
(Wildside Press)

An Essay by Saul Golubcow

Back decades ago when I was scribbling short stories for my college literary magazine, I would obsess for hours over the story’s first sentence. Why? Because I had been told that the first sentence is your best opportunity to grab the attention of your reader. It was a shallow literary analogy to the societal adage of “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” So I sweated that sentence, allowing my angst to draw me toward the dramatic in fashioning an attention grabber.

But as I read and wrote more, I continued to view the first sentence as critical, albeit not demanding the dramatic, in how it contributes to the foundational structure of the total story and to the flow of the narrative from inception to end. The first few words can set the tone of the story, its time and place, its point of view, its emotions, its counterpoints, and its relationships to the reader. Herman Melville might have started *Moby Dick* with “There was a young man from New Bedford. His name was Ishmael.” How different that choice would have made the novel as opposed to “Call me Ishmael.” In three words the reader knows it’s about an outcast who, as the narrative soon informs us, will seek identity on the seas in search of . . .

Well, it might be called the great whale, but Ishmael, at the onset, draws us to him to follow for thousands upon thousands of words to discover the answer for ourselves.

And so it was when I mulled how to begin my mystery detective story, “The Cost of Living,” which first appeared in its short version in 2021 in *Mystery Weekly Magazine* and subsequently became the novella-length anchor story for my book, *The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries*, released last year by Wildside Press.

Within the three sequential novellas of the collection, my elderly private detective Frank Wolf, with the assistance of his grandson, Joel, solves mysteries in the Jewish communities of New York City during the 1970s. In “The Cost of Living,” a kosher butcher is shot to death in Boro Park, and a youth gang is suspected. Frank Wolf is asked to investigate. In “A Little Boy is Missing,” an eight-year-old Hasidic child disappears in Williamsburg. Every minute counts, and Frank Wolf rushes to assist in finding him. In “The Dorm Murder,” a 16-year-old student is found murdered in a yeshiva high school dormitory with no apparent motive behind his killing. How does Frank figure out who killed Ori Gold?

Frank Wolf is a unique detective. A professor of philosophy in Europe before the Holocaust, he becomes a private detective in Brooklyn after the

War. He possesses a personality and investigative mind frame steeped in Jewish and Western tradition and practice. Thus, the worlds he enters in each of the mysteries are different slices of Jewish life for which only a detective like Frank Wolf can make sense and find resolutions. He never carries a gun, and his weapon of choice is “critical analysis,” an imperative, Frank tells us, for any good detective.

While Frank Wolf is the putative hero of my mysteries, say like Poirot or Holmes, my stories are told by his grandson and sidekick, Joel Gordon. Everything we are offered as facts, everything that is displayed as emotions, everything we are given as plot enfoldments come from the words Joel provides and through his interpretations. Yes, I exploit Joel as a classic foil. But many foils within the detective genre are wooden characters placed as narrators to offset their lack of insight against the brilliance of the smart detective. I wanted much more for my narrator. I wanted to build the intricacies of his own character in the manner of a complementary coming of age side-story in which Joel may be his grandfather’s support but also carries his own interest and, thus, his own relationship with the reader.

Here are the first three paragraphs of my short story/trilogy.

Thursday, May 11, 1972

I took the three flights up to my grandfather’s office two steps at a time. That morning, I had completed my first year law school exams. I was jaunty, sure that I had done well, the day

was warm and clear, and I wanted no intellectual burdens for a while. I thought an afternoon out watching a ball game with my grandfather was just what I needed. I planned to pick him up, have a quick lunch, and out to Shea Stadium to see the Mets take on the hated Dodgers.

I burst into his office. The sign on the door's smoked glass read: FRANK WOLF DETECTIVE AGENCY. Grandfather was sitting in his swivel chair with feet propped on his desk cluttered with newspapers, magazines, and books. He was reading a Ross Macdonald novel. Bookcases covered every wall. It was warm in the office, but a single window that looked out to the next building's red brick facade was fully open, and an incoming breeze made it bearable.

"Hello Zaida," I said using the Yiddish word for grandfather. "Tell Lew Archer you've got to go because I've got plans for us!"

My intent was for the reader to meet Joel through a rush of intensity.

He is young, vigorous, in a hurry, impetuous, sometime imperious. He runs up the stairs to his grandfather's place of business hell bent on going out to the ball game, which, as Joel tells us, is "just what *I* needed." That his grandfather surely will feel the way he does is taken for granted. He does not hesitate to interrupt his grandfather's reading a Ross Macdonald book by commanding: "Tell Lew Archer you've got to go because I've got plans for us!"

While the date when the narrative begins is precisely set as a header before the first words are read, one without such guidance can deduce where the story is set and that it is not recent. It's a weekday, and the Mets are playing at Shea, which means New York while Shea was still standing.

Frank's reading a Ross Macdonald book in an office with a smoked glass door also takes us back to a previous era. We know that Frank is Jewish, and also very possibly a Holocaust survivor, by Joel's use of "Zaida," the Yiddish for grandfather.

Very soon, the reader will be summoned to go along with Frank and Joel in unraveling the responsibility for a murder. To come along, the reader—based on the opening and subsequent words Joel chooses to describe scenes, actions, backgrounds, thoughts, and emotions—must decide how much Joel can be trusted. How does the reader handle point of view as Joel slowly matures throughout this first story and further through the trilogy?

Right off, we also know that the FRANK WOLF DETECTIVE AGENCY does not garner a whole lot of business with its being housed in a small third floor walk/run up, without air conditioning. Frank is reading a detective story as he awaits business. Then, the reader may wonder, how do crime mysteries come his way? How did a Holocaust survivor become a private detective in Brooklyn? What were the New York City Jewish communities like in the 1970s? Why is it that a detective such as Frank Wolf has the knowledge and skills to solve crimes in these communities when

others are unable? And how does a young man like Joel adapt to the strictures of crime solving set out by his grandfather?

Thus, I want the first few sentences of each of my stories within the trilogy to establish the aura and lure for readers very much wanting to enter the world of Frank Wolf and Joel Gordon, eventually to grow and learn with Joel and to learn from and have “Oh, I see” moments through Frank Wolf.

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Saul Golubcow writes from Potomac, Maryland. His commentary on American Jewish culture and politics has appeared in various publications. His Jewish themed fiction centers on the complexity of and challenges facing Holocaust survivors in the United States. *The Cost of Living and Other Mysteries* is his first book-length publication featuring the fictional private detective, Frank Wolf, a Holocaust survivor.