

The First Two Pages of *Lowdown Road* by Scott Von Doviak (Hard Case Crime)

An Essay by Scott Von Doviak

My new novel *Lowdown Road* was largely inspired by the disreputable drive-in movies of the '70s featuring good ol' boys in muscle cars running from the law, so in the first two pages (actually, the first page and a half), I wanted to step on the gas and not let up. The pacing, the tone, the time and place—it's all set up in our introduction to Chuck Melville, one of the two cousins who will later steal a truckload of marijuana and lead the drug kingpin and the local sheriff on a cross-country chase. Here's how we meet him:

Chuck Melville managed to stay out of trouble for six months following his release from the Texas state prison in Huntsville. That's what folks would say later over coffee at the Buttered Biscuit, although it would be more accurate to point out that Chuck got into a great deal of trouble during those six months—he just managed to evade the attention of law enforcement while he was doing it.

The implication is that Chuck is about to get into trouble, the kind that will make for conversational fodder at the local diner for some time to come. We can deduce we're in Texas given the location of Chuck's recent incarceration, and the next sentence gives us the timeframe: late summer of 1974. What sets Chuck off on the crime spree to follow is spotting an old friend, Gary Foulke, in the parking lot of a shopping center. We learn a little more about Chuck's criminal past: he and Gary robbed a convenience store together, and Chuck feels Gary got off with a

lighter sentence than he deserved. It's not clear that's actually the case, however. Chuck's version of events, pinning most of the blame on Gary, is "the way he told it to his lawyer." It's not necessarily what really happened, and as we get to know Chuck, our doubts about the veracity of his account grow.

Chuck is also impulsive, as we learn when he attempts to run Gary down with the 1970 Dodge Challenger he's driving. (In keeping with the novel's drive-in roots, I plucked the vehicle out of one of the great '70s car movies, *Vanishing Point*.) What follows is a sequence of slapstick action intended to establish that this is not going to be a deadly serious crime fiction outing. While dark doings will unfold, I really wanted to keep a spirit of fun and sense of humor throughout the proceedings. If there's a literary godfather to *Lowdown Road*, it's Elmore Leonard. For some reason, his influence appears to have waned in recent years, but he knew that even a dark crime story doesn't have to be grim and gritty all the way through.

Chuck utterly fails to hit his target, but he does manage to take out the plate-glass window of a liquor store and the store's owner, as well as another vehicle in the lot, before deciding it's probably time to be on his way. As Chuck heads out to the street in the middle of the second page, there is one more salient piece of information to be revealed:

He pulled the Challenger out of the lot and drove it like he stole it. Technically, he *did* steal it, but that was another story.

By this point, readers should have a pretty good idea what they're in for. We're firmly in the realm of pulp fiction, and things are moving quickly. I wanted to establish that velocity right from the start and keep the pedal to the metal all the way to the end of the line. It's my hope that the hook is set by the middle of page two, and the reader won't be able to resist going along for the ride.

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Scott Von Doviak's twenty-year pop culture writing career includes three books and stints as a film critic for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and a television reviewer for *The Onion's AV Club*. His debut novel *Charlesgate Confidential* was named one of the top ten crime novels of 2018 by the *Washington Post*. His new novel *Lowdown Road* is out July 11 from Hard Case Crime. He graduated from Emerson College in Boston and now lives in Austin, Texas.