

The First Two Pages: *The County Line* by Steve Weddle
(Lake Union Publishing)

An Essay by Steve Weddle

When I start reading a new book, I like to know where we are in place and time. I appreciate those slugs at the beginning of some books: “Atlantic City, Summer 1983.”

And I like to know who the main character is pretty early on.

And I like to get a feel of the tone and rhythm of the book.

Honestly, I probably ask too much or ask the wrong things, seeing as how there are at least as many styles as there are authors.

So I figured when I opened this book, I wanted to do as much of that as I could.

In the summer of 1933, a little north of the Louisiana line, not too far into Arkansas, Cottonmouth Tomlin stepped from Miss Phoebe’s pie shop into the afternoon sun and, not for the first time since his return, felt lost in his hometown.

We get the time and place right away, but not exactly.

Before I get into how the book starts, I should briefly mention a little about how the book began, which isn’t the same thing at all.

I wanted to write the backstory to my novel-in-stories *Country Hardball*, which is set in present-day Arkansas. The idea was to have the story start then, then move back to the 1950s, then back to the 1930s, then come back through the 1950s and finish in the present day. As my mother would tell me when I’d left too much of my

third helping of mashed potatoes on my plate, my eyes were bigger than my belly. The 1950s part became a short story for *Playboy* magazine, which left me in the 1930s. So here we are, in the summer of 1933.

I could have said that we are in Magnolia, Arkansas on Monday, May 22, 1933. I didn't, because we're in that foggy field of fiction based on real events. We open the story reality-adjacent, which is important because for the next 300 pages, I'm going to drop 218,730 details (estimated) on the reader, and some buildings may be where they're supposed to be, and some may have been moved across the street for plot reasons. I want to start laying the groundwork and ease the reader into this world of "historical fiction," which is as much one as the other.

Additionally, this isn't going to be a smooth journey. We're going to move to this part of the story, then to this part as the need arises in the telling. The majority of that first paragraph is simply a string of dependent clauses. The first tells you the when, while the next one puts us north of the Louisiana line. The third clause reigns the reader in a little, providing a pulling back, a slowing. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, it says.

In that second clause, the phrase "the Louisiana line" appears, our first hint of lines that will be crossed. Sure, the stateline will be crossed in the book, but other lines, particularly the lines set down by the people in charge of the county, will be tested.

In the fourth clause of the opening paragraph, the main character does a thing, moving into the afternoon sun. There's a line I quite like in *The Sound and the Fury* about finding your shadow when you step into the light. Cottonmouth is about to find all sorts of things, of course, as he steps into the light from the darkness and fog he's been struggling through after he left his hometown a few years back.

And speaking of that, the paragraph ends with an idea that came to me in a fairly late draft of this novel. He is "lost in his hometown," a not-uncommon state for characters in novels nor, if we're being honest, for the rest of us.

The novel takes place in a specific time and place, which is essential for understanding the story. And that story involves being presented with lines you're not allowed or prepared to cross. More than any of that, this novel is about community and belonging, and Cottonmouth is lost.

Now that the reader is a little more grounded in the time and place and themes of the novel, it's time to help the main character settle in and to let the reader know what to think of him. So far, all we know is that he likes pie and he's lost. Or maybe he doesn't like pie, and that's why he left the shop. So the next section is about placing Cottonmouth into the world of the story and understanding his relationship to that world.

Place names and a little Tomlin family history dominate this next paragraph, in which we learn in passing that Cottonmouth's mother left when he was a boy, a first hint of why he feels lost.

He feels lost, and part of that feeling is a disconnect from his home. He's back, looking at drugstore window which

had the same shelved items, best he could figure, still in the window. He scratched the back of his neck. Or maybe it didn't. Maybe he'd never paid that much attention, but everything felt the same, a small room in someone else's house, where the air just settled.

And that's the end of the second paragraph, which serves as an expanding of the first paragraph. The second paragraph closes with his feeling disconnected, and had opened, as the first paragraph had, with placing the reader in space.

Across Jefferson Avenue on the courthouse lawn, the Thurman twins were chasing a brown-and-white dog that must have belonged to someone.

The first paragraph got us to Arkansas, and the second paragraph places us along Jefferson Avenue. We've zoomed the camera in a bit, and now we see other people, but not just the names of stores. Real characters, two boys and dog, running through town. And the dog must have belonged to someone.

It isn't that the dog is lost; rather, Cottonmouth has been gone and doesn't know the dog's owner. Here, the word "belonged" is important, as these first two paragraphs have been to set up the community and belonging themes that will carry this story along for the next 300 pages.

The boys are nearly run over by a Buick, but Cottonmouth steps in front of the car, and boys and dog disappear (temporarily) into the night.

A second later, dog and twins were off again, through the alley between Miss Phoebe's and whatever was next door. Had he been asked, Cottonmouth would have guessed it had been a lawyer's office when he'd said goodbye to the town a few years back. But the only question anyone was asking him was what in the sam hill he was doing standing in the road like a goddamn moron.

Cottonmouth looked at the man who had posed this question, the driver of the car, a fellow he didn't recognize.

In this section, I build on the foundation I've laid but also work to expand.

Cottonmouth doesn't know what kind of business was located next to Miss Phoebe's because he's been away and is disconnected.

We get two things from the man driving car. First, we see again that Cottonmouth is disconnected from the county because he doesn't know the name of the man. Second, we get a glimpse of the kind of man Cottonmouth has become. We know his mother left him when he was a boy, and we know he went off and has come back. We don't know what the going away and the coming back has done to him, but we get a quick, fleeting look.

Cottonmouth eased to the driver's side of the car, took a couple of steps toward the man, reached behind himself for the knife in his belt. For a moment they looked at each other, the man maybe just on his way to take some bread to his invalid mother in Taylor, and Cottonmouth a moment away from puncturing the man beneath the ribs.

"Friend," Cottonmouth said, "you don't seem a big-enough fellow to talk to me like that."

The man looked back to the road in front of him, drove on.

Cottonmouth “eased” to the man. This isn’t the movement of a man who is unused to this type of action. He could have walked there in halting steps. He could have moved there with adverbs—cautiously or nervously. He just eases his way over. He takes some more steps, He’s reaching behind himself, to a place he keeps hidden for now. As a writer, I’m slowing things down here because I want the anticipation and impact. I slow it down even more when they look at each other. We see who the stranger might be, a harmless local. And we see who Cottonmouth is, as he might puncture the man. He isn’t about to stab the man. That’s brutal and careless. Anyone with a knife can stab someone. Clumsy. No. Cottonmouth can “puncture” the man, the way you might puncture a balloon or a tire, something non-human. Cottonmouth has grown so disconnected, not just from his town, that he has distanced himself from the violence he considers. And, yet, he just saved two boys and a dog. What gives? The reader has the rest of the story to figure that out.

Cottonmouth lets the man move along, understanding this isn’t the time and place for this. Besides, Cottonmouth has a poker game to get to. That’s where he’s heading from Miss Phoebe’s.

Cottonmouth shook his head, told himself the number of morons in the county had likely increased the last few years, and then stepped back onto the sidewalk to head to an afternoon poker game at Moon’s store, a group he had been assured at his uncle’s funeral two weeks back had carried on in his absence and would welcome taking his money as soon as he felt up to it.

His uncle's funeral. So that's why he's back in town, and maybe that's another indication of why he feels lost. His mother left him as a boy, and now his uncle just died.

The reader sees that Cottonmouth is about to interact with others, and we can expect we'll see more people and learn more at the card game, which serves as a type of opening image. The book starts here with a card game and ends 300 pages later with a very different card game.

If I've done my job correctly, the reader will feel resolution in that final card game, knowing how much the world has changed, how much the characters have grown. The first card game is a starting point. As the writer, I know that the final card game is a sort of destination, though the reader isn't aware. My hope is that the reader can look back on the journey having enjoyed the trip.

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Steve Weddle is the author of *The County Line*, an Amazon First Reads selection. His previous book, *Country Hardball*, which the *New York Times* called "downright dazzling," is a collection of connected short stories. A former newspaper editor, he is the cofounder of the crime fiction collective *Do Some Damage* and the cocreator of the noir magazine *Needle*, and he has taught short story writing at LitReactor.

