

**The First Two Pages: “The Mob, the Model, and the College Reunion”
by Melodie Campbell**

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An Essay by Melodie Campbell

I always tell my writing students: You have one goal and one goal only, in your opening: MAKE ME CARE.

Do I practice what I preach? Damn straight! That’s my goal in the first two pages of “The Mob, The Model, and the College Reunion.”

I want you to like and root for my protagonist. If you, the reader, care about the protagonist, you will probably keep reading to find out what happens to her.

Yes, I try to do more than that. I also try to set the story fast and establish some conflict in the opening two pages. But all of that doesn’t matter if the reader doesn’t care.

I have to admit that in this short story, I decided to have fun. Donna di Marco is as close to me as it gets, although don’t tell my mother. I want you to like her. There is more than one way to do this. What’s my way?

WRITE IN FIRST PERSON.

Donna tells her own story in first person. There’s no separate narrator. She talks directly to you, the reader.

I almost always write short stories in first person. Why?

There isn't much time to hook you in a short story. I have to do it quickly. One way is to put you in her head and make you read and feel her motivations. I want you to have a relationship with her and not just view the story from afar through a third party. Let's look at the first paragraph:

The smell of stale beer met me at the door. You might think a place called The Tap Room sounds just like a small-town sleazy bar where they serve cheap brew in not very clean draft glasses, and you'd be right. My eyes tried to adjust for the low light and dark walls, but I knew the way through this dive like the intervening years had never happened. Even the soles of my shoes still stuck to the floor. Designer shoes now, of course.

What do we learn from this?

You know from the first sentence that this will be a first-person story (“...met me at the door”).

You are given setting—a sleazy small-town bar—with a little humour in the telling. Note also the sense of smell. The first sense you encounter is smell, not sight.

You find out that Donna has been here before, when she was younger, and that it hasn't changed much. *But she has*: “Designer shoes now, of course.”

That's a lot of info to pack into one paragraph, and I worked hard to make it succinct. Get us into that story fast!

Next, we learn she didn't come alone. A little further down, I give you more information about our gal. Here goes:

I looked pretty good today, at least as good as it gets. Still warm enough in September for sleeveless, and the green jungle-print dress that clung to my body suited me, with a sheen that accentuated my curves. The deep V surplice neckline was trademark “di Marco,” as my agent would say. My dark hair, still long, was behaving for once...

The key phrase I want you to note in this paragraph is “at least as good as it gets.” There’s a lot packed into that phrase. We hear about her “agent,” and from that we can infer she is the model mentioned in the title but one who is realistic about the passage of time. “As good as it gets”—we can all sympathize with that, I hope. Again, I want you to care about her.

In any case, I had my share of attention at this moment. One man leaped up from a crappy wooden table and lunged our way. The body was the same as I remembered—several inches over six feet and lanky. The eyes still had that predatory look to them. I watched as they went wide with surprise.

“What the—”

I smiled sweetly. “Hi, Nigel,” I said. “You remember John, of course.”

“O’Connell. When the fuck did you two get together?” He didn’t sound pleased...

Now, we get conflict. This is a crime story, so I want to sew the seeds of unease, of sparring to come.

Nigel had a few inches on John, yet I’d bet on the latter in a fight. Funny how that description came so quickly to me after all these years. I hadn’t seen a prize fight since my mother’s cousin left the ring and upended the family tradition of fixing.

Now we’re getting somewhere! Her family fixes prize fights. First mention of the mob!

If you look back at the title, you'll see we've come close to addressing all three nouns: "The Mob, The Model, and the College Reunion." We've done it in under 500 words. Hopefully, we've made you care enough to want to read the whole story!

After all, it might be about me! <wink!>

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Called the "Queen of Comedy" by the *Toronto Sun*, and compared to Janet Evanovich by Library Journal, Melodie Campbell writes capers, heists, and golden age mysteries. Winner of ten awards for crime fiction, including the Derringer (US) and the Arthur Ellis in Canada, Melodie has 17 books and over 60 short stories. Her Rowena Through the Wall fantasy series was featured in *USA Today* and made the Amazon bestseller list, between Tom Clancy and Nora Roberts. Melodie is the past Executive Director of Crime Writers of Canada and has taught fiction writing at college for over 20 years. *The Merry Widow Murders* has just been released from Cormorant Books, with *Open Book* noting that "The high society flair of *Death on the Nile* meets a 1920s ocean liner in this sensational mystery from Melodie Campbell."