

The First Two Pages: “Punch Drunk” by William Ade
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An Essay by William Ade

My short story, “Punch Drunk,” revolves around a New York City police detective investigating a fatal match between a journeyman boxer and the world heavyweight champion. I wanted the story to have the feel of a championship fight, a fast pace with plenty of jabs and feints. Without apologies, I drew upon a bounty of familiar big city and boxing tropes in the first two pages to achieve this tone, starting with my protagonist, Paddy Doyle, a hard-bitten Irish-American detective sliding toward a much-anticipated retirement. By the second paragraph, a citizen requesting help upends Doyle’s easy equilibrium.

The man was built like an Army tank, with a face that’d make a woman scream, a baby howl, and a savage rottweiler tuck tail. A chill scaled my spine when he rumbled into my office at the Forty-fifth Precinct. As ugly as he was, he looked vaguely familiar, like someone I might’ve run across in my years dealing with lowlifes and scumbags.

The visitor is Tag Rowley, the unlucky palooka in the ring when Oscar Torres, the People’s Champion, died from a blow to the chest. Rowley begs Doyle to investigate what he claims was a setup. Like any classic rough-and-tumble big-city character, Doyle has a sense of duty that overrides his desire to take the easy way out.

This short piece of busted humanity imploring me was too much to bear. I hadn’t wholly resigned as a steward of moral society, so I said I’d

look into it. Now that my girlfriend had joined the long list of ex-lovers, I had the time.

Rowley offers Doyle a bootleg videotape of the match. The detective watches the black-and-white images flicker on his living room wall, and we get introduced to the Champ's corner men, Pepper Martinez, Jangles O'Reilly, and Dickie Pasquallie. Otherwise, Doyle sees nothing unusual as Torres and Rowley play out their destinies in the ring.

Maybe ten thousand people were there at the Garden, cheering and jeering. The fighters engaged, and the first three-minute round went as everyone expected. The Champ came out swinging, and Tag Rowley took his usual portion of pummeling but was still standing when the bell clanged.

After the first two pages, I've given the reader everything they needed to solve the mystery. They have two victims and four suspects, and the opportunity to see a repeat of the crime each time Detective Paddy Doyle watches the film. Maybe if they avoid catching a left hook to the jaw, they might figure it out before Detective Doyle's epiphany following his second tumbler of bourbon.

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Level Best Books published the first of William Ade's Nic Knuckles collections, *Big Scream in a Small Town*, in January 2024. They published his crime novel, *Do It for Daisy*, in 2021. Other books by the author include *The Man Who Fixed Things* (2023), *Art of Absolution* (2020), and the serialized *The Inevitable Failure of Jonathan Golding* (2022). His short story collection, *No Time for His Nonsense*, was released in 2019. His stories have appeared in *Mysteries Unimagined*, the *Rind Literary Magazine*, *The Broken Plate*, *Black Fox Literary*, *Mindscapes Unimagined*, and the 2018 and 2019 *Best New England Crime Stories*. Ade's author website is billade.com and his Nic Knuckles website can be found at <https://nicknucklespi.com/>