

**The First Two Pages: “The Big Push and Legend of
Sir Morleans’ Lost Pearls” by Andrew McAleer**

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An Essay By Andrew McAleer

I’m not only thrilled to appear on Art Taylor’s The First Two Pages (FTP) with his fans, followers, and students, but honored to be part of continuing B.K. Stevens’ tradition of sharing ideas and insider writing secrets with readers and authors.

I’ll discuss some of the literary strategies used in writing the opening to my London-based Detective Henry von Stray mystery novella “The Big Push and Legend of Sir Morleans’ Lost Pearls.”

My FTP consists of two parts:

Part I. How the Story’s Title Helped Drive the Mystery

Part II. Insider Opening Hook Secrets

Part I: The Amazing History of the Tell-Tale Title

What’s in a title?

In “The Big Push” the title became the driving force that put von Stray in a tree.

Let me explain!

Legendary theatre producer, director, and screenwriter George Abbott made a handsome living in the storytelling business for eight decades and here's his simple formula for breaking down the story structure. It has three acts.

First Act

Put your protagonist in a tree.

Second Act

Throw rocks at your protagonist.

Third Act

Help your protagonist down from the tree.

So, how did I go about getting protagonists von Stray and his trusted crime-fighting companion Professor John Dilpate out on a limb? That is, how did I go about creating a conflict readers care about getting resolved? It all began with this 85-year-old mystery story title my father John McAleer wrote in his 1937 diary: "The Case of Sir Morleans' Lost Pearls"—a fun title we might run across during the Golden Age of Detection (approximately 1920-1940).

As background, after my father's death, the existence of his von Stray series was discovered; however, only one of the original von Stray stories has been found: "The Case of the Illustrious Banker," which appeared in the anthology *Edgar & Shamus Go Golden*.

Fortunately, von Stray's creator left us word of two other von Stray stories he wrote: "The Murder Case at Lord Beachly's" and, as mentioned above, "Lost Pearls." I

challenged myself to write a new version of “Lost Pearls” while preserving its original title as much as possible. I did this knowing modern readers require more conflict than a quest for lost pearls. Maybe the original version did have more conflict—we may never know because this literary pearl remains cloistered. Not lost, however, was something my father passed on to me while outlining our book *Mystery Writing in a Nutshell*—a gem from Edgar winner Charlotte Armstrong: “Suspense is made up of fear, time, and hope.”

Could *fear*, *time*, and *hope* be introduced into this mystery title borne from the Golden Age? Absolutely I reasoned. The title reveals the story’s conflict: lost pearls *allegedly* belonging to a member of the British aristocracy. Hence, one can fairly surmise where von Stray’s creator went with his original story. Von Stray is charged with locating the pearls and—as Golden Age genius detectives tend to do—he solves the baffling puzzle. The title also takes a page from Alfred Hitchcock’s book.

According to Hitchcock, mysteries need a “McGuffin.” The Master of Suspense defined the McGuffin as the thing in the story that the characters “care” about. In the present case: Pearls.

Now armed with a few pearls in my quiver, all I had to do was write my own version of “Lost Pearls”—85 years later. Add mystery, adventure, historical legend, suspense, travel back to 1920s London, and create some interesting secondary and tertiary characters. Not a problem—once you learn to talk to yourself until you get answers.

Like this one-sided Q&A:

1. *How* did the pearls get lost? Stolen? Misplaced? Destroyed? Hidden?
2. *Why* did the pearls get lost? (Strange question I know, but one might ask the same question while pondering a murder mystery plot—so why not lost pearls?)
3. What kind of pearls are they? Perhaps a famous set of unique matching pearls with a most astounding legend behind their existence.
4. What strange roads did the pearls travel before ending up in the hands of British aristocracy? Create some folklore here.
5. Speaking of aristocracy, how did Sir Morelans obtain his title? I suspect he's not all that he's cut up to be. Give him an interesting backstory...
6. Must introduce a time element here! *Why* is it a race against time to find the pearls?
7. A little espionage in the plot would be nice. Add a spy or two.
8. A main character named Elizabeth Thornbred would fit in nicely. But how? I'll worry about her later. But now that I think about it, I think she's *Lady* Elizabeth Thornbred.
9. Getting back to the espionage thing, von Stray and Dilpate are veterans of the Great War. Their military service will play a role in solving what may prove to be their most baffling case yet.

10. What hold might the possessed object have over the possessor? Does Morleans own the pearls, or do they own him and/or his heirs?
11. Lost pearls. Lost pearls. *Lost pearls!* Perhaps this has multiple meanings...? Yes, I believe so.
12. Maybe the McGuffin is one thing to von Stray and another to Dilpate? That would be an interesting twist.
13. How do von Stray and Dilpate get dragged into this thing and up the tree? I'll figure that out when I start writing or perhaps while I'm mowing the lawn.

Working with the title given to me (a cherished gift really) opened up my mind to ask these above questions and more. Ultimately, while writing and researching the story, additional plot twists, clues, characters, and an expanded title magically appeared.

Looking back, I can say without question that had my father not documented this von Stray story title into his diary on August 4, 1937, “The Big Push and Legend of Sir Morleans’ Lost Pearls,” all its fun adventures, characters, and unique historical setting would not exist.

Tip: Never quit on your ideas—road blocks are often building blocks. Slight adjustment(s) might produce *your* next gem.

Part II: Insider Hook Secrets to Opening Paragraphs, Etc.

In this section I'll discuss a couple of slick literary devices employed before the opening sentence of "The Big Push." I'll then share some insider hook secrets from the first three paragraphs of the story.

The von Stray stories are first-person narratives told by von Stray's most trusted companion Professor John Dilpate.

"The Big Push" has what I call a "blotting-paper opening," a literary device I sometimes use before plotting my secret campaign to put the unsuspecting von Stray in a tree. See example below:

**From the Desk of
Professor John W. Dilpate
Berkeley Square, London
7 July 1923**

Since I am charged with steadying Professor Dilpate's quill hand, I like to picture him as he actually writes these historical narratives. He's in his study seated at his cluttered roll-top desk up to his elbows in blank paper, pens, and inkwells. Perhaps the kettle is on the boil—of course it is! The scene is early 1920s London and he's scribbling away in the cheery setting of the Berkeley Street lodgings he shares with von Stray.

Dilpate is a beetle scientist (coleopterist). Through an exciting twist of fate, he is also tasked with memorializing von Stray's amazing exploits. Hence, Dilpate becomes a *de facto* historian. It makes sense to me that he would want to advise readers of the narrative's "who, where, and when," before the story even begins. This task is quickly

and easily accomplished with a blotting-paper opening.

This literary device appears *before* the first sentence and tells the reader *who* narrates the story, *where* the story was written, and *when* the story was written. Readers know *before they even start reading the story* that they are about to journey back in time to early 1920s London. Hence, this device also serves as a great mood-setter before fans even read the first sentence. From the get-go, fans can expect to get what they bargained for—escapism.

How else might the blotting-paper opening reel in readers? Returning von Stray series fans know this mystery will be told in the fun and exciting way only Dilpate can narrate. Readers new to the series receive a quick introduction to the narrator before the story begins. As a result, they instantly become welcome members of this special crime-solving club.

When writing my opening to “The Big Push” I also considered physical structure. With a novella-length story in mind, I wanted readers to know upfront they weren’t going to get a story all in one long clump. *Remember*, most people sneak in their reading on the subway (or tube) to work, during lunch break, or waiting for a child to finish up a karate lesson. When readers open up to the first page, they see immediately this story is broken down into chapters or sections. Reading goals can easily be set and accomplished.

In the case at bar, our first chapter is titled, “Sir Hamilton Wade Huddersfield, KC.” If all goes well readers will begin asking questions: Who is this important-sounding

guy Huddersfield? What does he have to do with von Stray and Dilpate? I want to know!

By paying attention to physical structure, I felt I had a better a better shot of enticing readers to play along with von Stray's inevitable conflict.

Now, let's begin our climb up the tree with our heroes.

Here is the opening sentence to "The Big Push":

Of all the mysterious adventures I have had the honor to serve as the great private detective Henry von Stray's closest confidant and trusted assistant, few have reached the same intriguing and exciting dimensions as the baffling case concerning "The Big Push and Legend of Sir Morleans' Lost Pearls."

In Dilpate's opening he promises fans that they can count on mystery, adventure, excitement, intrigue, and a good puzzle. We also note the good professor is speaking to us from the Golden Age of Detection—our bygone era. Traditional mystery lovers are home again, and first timers know immediately they are about to experience a new tasteful treat.

Now, let's disrupt domestic tranquility at our heroes' lodgings.

Here is the second paragraph to "The Big Push":

The mysterious affair began on the beautiful spring morning of May the eighth in the year 1923. I was on a rare sabbatical from the University Clifford and spent the morning in my study located in the lodgings I share with von Stray at 121B Berkeley Street, London. I was engaged in some rather difficult research regarding the classification of an extinct South American beetle and making significant progress when a ringing doorbell interrupted my work.

Here we begin with a quick weather report. Mystery aficionados are likely to become quite suspicious of this pleasant weather and anticipate stormy times ahead. Hmm... why does Dilpate document the specific date? Better file that one away. Possible time element or perhaps unshakable alibi coming our way.

Dilpate conveniently finding himself on “rare sabbatical” throughout the von Stray series is a running joke. One wonders if he ever holds class at the prestigious University Clifford. Followers of the series will get the inside joke and feel a part of something special. New readers will conclude the mention of this convenient sabbatical is simply there to let readers know Dilpate has the opportunity to document the upcoming adventures.

We also see a little boasting here by Dilpate. His difficult work classifying extinct beetles is undoubtedly important enough to warrant these endless “rare” sabbaticals. Difficult or not, his work is interrupted by “a ringing doorbell.” Once we “hear” the doorbell, we know order will soon be disrupted at 121B Berkeley Street.

In just a few sentences we have now led our heroes to the tree. Also, curious readers might ask, “Who’s at the door?” Then, if they recall the chapter title, they can join in on the fun by doing a little detective work of their own. “I know, it must be...”

Here is the third paragraph to “The Big Push.”

Upon opening the door, I couldn’t have been more astounded. Before me stood the lean figure of a distinguished looking gentleman, appearing not quite sixty, whom I recognized immediately as London’s preeminent barrister Sir Hamilton Wade Huddersfield, KC. His reputation as a trial

attorney and *pro bono* advocate for the men returning from the War was second to none. I could not for the life of me imagine why he would call at our doorstep; but would soon learn he wished to engage von Stray on behalf of the bravest and most elusive heroines of the War.

Correct, it's Huddersfield at the door!

From this short paragraph we learn Huddersfield is London's preeminent barrister. Further, he is known for helping "men" returning from the Great War and yet here he is ready "to engage von Stray on behalf of the bravest and most elusive *heroines* of the War."

This paragraph should leave readers with additional questions they want answered, such as:

1. Who is this brave woman of the War?
2. Why does she require von Stray's detective services?
3. Why does she need Huddersfield to do her bidding?
4. Is the Great War somehow going to play into this thing?
5. What exploits did she engage in to make her the heroine Dilpate holds in such high regard?
6. What made this unknown woman so "elusive" during the War?
7. And what could a bunch of lost pearls have to do with all of this?

One thing we do know, if von Stray agrees to help the elusive heroine at Huddersfield's behest—and I'm wagering he will—then he'll find himself up the tree with his trusted companion Dilpate. Once there, begin throwing rocks (Act Two).

Tip: Don't think you can't move forward with your story if you don't have your opening worked out day one. As your story moves forward you can revise your opening at any time and improve your narrative hook.

Thank you and I hope this FTP discussion of the opening to "The Big Push and Legend of Sir Morleans' Lost Pearls" was as helpful and fun for you as it was for me!

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ANDREW MCALEER is the author of Edgar winner John McAleers's classic detective stories featuring Henry von Stray, the *101 Habits of Highly Successful Novelists*, and *Mystery Writing in a Nutshell*. He also co-edited *Agatha & Derringer*, *Shamus & Anthony*, and *Edgar & Shamus Go Golden* with Gay Toltl Kinman. The first von Stray book collection, *A Casebook of Crime*, was released in February 2025 (Level Best Books) and features an Introduction by Edgar winner Art Taylor. McAleer taught classic crime fiction at Boston College and served in Afghanistan as a U.S. Army Historian before returning to public service in the criminal justice system. His von Stray story "The Singular Case of the Bandaged Bobby," appearing in *Mystery Magazine*, was selected for *The Best Private Eye Stories of the Year 2025*, edited by Michael Bracken & Matt Coyle. Follow more of von Stray's fun adventures on Instagram at [Mcaleermysteries](#) or [Henryvonstray](#) or on X (Twitter) [@Henryvonstray](#)