

**The First Two Pages: “Lagniappe” by donalee Moulton**  
From *Elementary, My Dear Marple* (The MockingOwl Roost)

An Essay by donalee Moulton

I’m going to start at the beginning—with the title.

“Lagniappe,” pronounced lan\*yap, features Ruth Harper as the investigator.

Ruth used to be a lawyer; now she sells sex toys. When I originally introduced Ruth to the world, and to my world, I wasn’t sure if she would make a return appearance. That inaugural story was entitled “Good Vibrations,” hinting at one of the many items for sale at the Naughty and Nice parties Ruth hosts across New Orleans.

It quickly became apparent Ruth was not content with a cameo and demanded a regular role. That got me thinking about making the titles more relevant to the stories. I could continue along the “Good Vibrations” theme—or I could shift my perspective. I shifted. That first story is now called “Laissez les bons temps rouler,” New Orleans for let the good times roll.

“Lagniappe” is the second of what are now four Ruth Harper mystery stories. As I was searching for a title, I discovered the Louisiana word *lagniappe*, which means something given as a bonus or extra gift. There are lots of little something extras in the story, but the word itself is not used in the piece outside of the title. I am rethinking that decision now.

For me, the first line of the story and the paragraph that follows begins introducing Ruth to readers. There will be more about the former lawyer as the story unfolds, but this opening volley provides context on which to launch the story.

I'm big on short, pithy sentences, like this:

I'm tallying my accounts for the month.

I also recognize the need to vary sentence length and to use length to convey tone. The second paragraph offers some insight into Ruth's character: forthright, practical, realistic.

It's simple. I add up how much money I made as a home party consultant for Naughty and Nice. Then I smile. When I was a lawyer with Chastain, Boudreaux & Gaspard LLP, billing was tedious at best, unpleasant at worst. Everyone, partners and clients alike, questioned the fees, the hours, the rates. No one, it seems, questions the value of the vibrator or the Ben Wa balls they bought.

This paragraph also raises an issue for me that I struggle with in all the Ruth Harper stories. Sex toys. That's Ruth business, and discussion of it can't be avoided. Still, when words like *vibrator* and *Ben Wa balls* start popping up, I worry readers will think they are about to delve into a story of a very different kind. They're not. This is a traditional mystery: crime committed, clues scattered, deduction done, justice served.

I'm hoping the straightforward tone and the almost offhand way these products are referenced will alert readers to the fact they are part of the backdrop and not centerstage.

The next few paragraphs introduce us to Ashley Burton, who will make repeat visits in future stories, so it is worth getting to know her. These paragraphs also clue us in on the nature of the relationship between Ruth and Ashley, and this will evolve over time.

We move to the meeting where unpleasant facts will be laid on the table and an ask made—and answered. I am acutely aware of length when I'm writing, and this story was written in response to an anthology call that limited submissions to 5,000 words. I'm in at 4,290. Some breathing room but not a lot.

So I bounce back and forth between showing and telling. Truth be told, I favor the latter over the former. Take this piece of dialogue, for example:

“Are you home?” The gentle Louisiana sigh has been replaced by something that borders on panic.

I could have said something like, “Ashley inhales sharply and holds her breath. The rush of her exhalation travels along the wire. It's accompanied by a tremor in her voice, an uneasy quiver.”

I could have said that. I didn't. Still not sure if this was the right decision. But word length and a propensity for brevity propelled me in that direction.

The next few paragraphs lay out the crime and the challenge that will be facing Ruth. This is essential information, but it can't be an info dump. It is also an opportunity to begin fleshing out Ruth's and Ashley's personalities.

Now the scene is coming to an end. I lean into humor even when I don't think I have anything witty, sarcastic, or clever to say. Somehow it's there. I need to be careful not to give diverse characters similar punchiness, and I need to be sure what I think is funny is not self-indulgence. It really needs to bring a smile to readers' faces. Please let me know if I've succeeded.

I sigh and tap my fingers against the teacup. When the woman is right, she's right. She also exudes southern charm. I may have just been played.

"We'll pay," Ashley adds.

I want to grin, but I hold it back. Money is good. So is free time and existing outside a law office. I'm not convinced the former outweighs the latter.

"I'll book a Naughty and Nice party."

And I'm in.

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donalee Moulton's first mystery book, *Hung out to Die*, was published in 2023. *Conflagration!* was published last year. It won the 2024 Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense (Historical Fiction). donalee has two books coming out in 2025, *Bind* and *Melt*, the first in a new series, the Lotus Detective Agency.

"Swan Song" was one of 21 stories selected for publication in *Cold Canadian Crime*. It was shortlisted for an Award of Excellence. Other short stories have been published in numerous anthologies and magazines. "Troubled Water" was shortlisted for a 2024 Derringer Award and a 2024 Award of Excellence.

Find donalee's books at [BWL Publishing](https://www.bwlpublishing.com) and check out her website at [donaleemoulton.com](https://donaleemoulton.com).