

**The First Two Pages: “Front Desk Staff” by Bethany Maines**

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An Essay by Bethany Maines

I didn't originally write my story “Front Desk Staff” to be published in the *Midnight Schemers & Daydream Believers*. I intended it to be read at Noir at the Bar. Noir at the Bar is exactly what it sounds like: noir fiction being read in some delightful gin joint with writers and crime enthusiasts. (In Seattle, we meet at the aptly named Alibi Room.)

In my fiction, there won't be gore, the dog never dies, and women's bodies never end up in a refrigerator. I could probably write cozy mysteries, if it weren't for my damn swearing problem. And the sex. Sex isn't a problem, but it does keep happening. And in general, I like a good happily ever after. Which was why the first time someone reached out to me and asked me to read at a Noir at the Bar event, I was a bit nervous. With my preferences for humor and an HEA, I wondered if I was *noir enough*.

Then I remembered I'm a woman.

Female rage may be a trending term or a comedian's punchline, but it shouldn't be underestimated. With that first Noir at the Bar reading, I began to produce a series of short fiction stories that looked at mystery and crime from a

distinctly female perspective. From asking *What if Miss Marple were the killer?* to *What would happen if you focused the mafia movie on the mobster's wife?* my stories explored what happens when women “get away” with crime. Noir audiences have historically been more comfortable with more morally gray characters, and I hoped that they would resonate with my characters. These shorts also allowed me to explore format and test areas of writing that I don’t always get to do in long fiction. The second, and more tangible benefit is that most of my NATB stories have subsequently made their way into anthologies, publications, and film. (Except for “Angel Lust,” the story about the stiff with a stiffy. Not sure why that one didn’t go anywhere.)

So when I saw the call for the *Midnight Schemers & Daydream Believers* anthology, I knew I had the perfect story. In “Front Desk Staff,” Camila is the face of the hotel, but she gets paid like the hind end, and that means that she's always scheming for extra cash. But when her shakedown of a hotel guest reveals a criminal plot she wasn't prepared for, she must make a choice between what's right and next month's rent. I knew thematically it worked for the anthology, but I wasn’t sure if the crime I wanted to use would be a fit. Fortunately for me, the editor, Judy Penz Sheluk, and her editorial readers felt like it worked.

But like all fiction, there are (at least) two layers—the plot and what the story is about. What I wanted to explore with this piece was the nature of

likeability. Too often, women focus on being liked because that is our unspoken social chip in the bank. (If you like me, then maybe you won't kill me.) This likeability factor spills over into fiction as well. Having a female character be "unlikeable" is often code for "unsellable." It's an interesting phenomenon, and while I wasn't looking to have any answers to the likability problem in this story, that was the sandbox I wanted to play in. My ultimate goal was to force readers to think about whether their morals depend on how likable someone is.

For "Front Desk Staff," I focused on using the first pages to establish the rhythms of the hotel and place the characters on the spectrum of likeability. Once the reader knows what *should* happen, they can be surprised by what does happen. This means that I'm attempting to jam in a lot of world-building into the first few pages. It also means that I need to establish who is important within the first paragraph, if not the first line. In this case, I used the first line to tell the reader who to hate.

I was about to lose a hundred dollars to a douchebag named after the blonde himbo from *Saved by the Bell*. I tried to hurry Mrs. Martin into the elevator and shot a glare at Zack Sherman. Zack ignored me.

Do I hate Zack from *Saved by the Bell*? No, of course not. I hated Screech. But there aren't a lot of blond men who are cultural reference points and can conjure up so much smug and scheming in one image. But now that the reader knows who the problem is, I can focus on my main character.

Mrs. Martin tottered along, still chattering, and I smiled, lifted her shopping bags, and tried to look like I gave a damn. She didn't need the help, but she liked to be waited on. Technically, the bellhops should have been carrying her bags.

I start out with a bit of cognitive frizz for the reader. The main character, Camila, is self-aware and ambitious, but is she likeable? She blatantly doesn't give a damn about Mrs. Martin—she wants a tip. Readers may not instantly fall in love with her because she's not perfect.

It's my theory that we're all the hero in our own stories, and therefore we like to put ourselves into stories where the main character is easily identifiable as heroic. But is Camila a bad person just because she's dismissive of the guests? Anyone who has worked in customer service knows that it's possible to be "nice" but not particularly care about the customers. But for anyone on the receiving end of customer service... ooh, we don't like to hear that. (And in other news: The stripper does not care about you.) We want to believe we're special, and revealing the lie of likeability can make people and readers angry. Since that's what I'm here to talk about, I doubled down on that with my next statement.

It was well known that front desk staff didn't carry anyone's anything. The bellhops thought we were stuck-up bitches, and we probably were, but I was paid to be the face of this establishment, and I had earned the right not to lift things.

While most visitors to a hotel experience front desk staff as welcoming and friendly, other staff members don't get the same treatment. By now, the reader

should be into the story, but possibly not in love with Camila, so I introduce the other staff members—Maurice and Zack—as contrasts. Maurice, the oldest staff member at the desk, tries to stay out of everyone else’s drama, but Zack, as previously mentioned, is a douchebag.

Unlike Maurice, Zack wasn’t gay. As far as I knew, he wasn’t even bi. Zack’s sexual orientation was money. And he would code switch to the language of whatever got him cash the fastest.

Here, I’m demonstrating that Zack has zero guilt about pretending to be something he’s not to not only get a tip but get a tip that should have gone to Camila. Camila may not love all of the guests the way she pretends to, but she’s not lying to them. It’s the difference between customer service and a con—something that will become important later.

By the time we get to the end of the second page, I want the reader to intensely dislike Zack. Usually, in movies and fiction, that means the audience is allowed to later cheer when bad things happen to that character. The risk that I’m taking as a writer is that I have planned a comeuppance for Zack that may make readers uncomfortable. Readers like patterns and tend to get grumpy if they don’t get their emotional payoff. Camilla will find herself in a position of having to help someone she—and hopefully the reader—hates. My challenge was to make the story feel satisfying and make the reader cheer for Camila while still hopefully pausing to wonder if they would have helped even though they didn’t like Zack.

While exploring the relative likability of my characters and specifically how unlikable a female character can get away with being, I also hope to entertain folks with a noir-appropriate mystery and hope that my exploration of relative likability translates to a larger mystery audience as well. I cannot force anyone to think (unfortunately), but I do hope that at minimum, readers enjoy the story and remember to tip their customer service representatives.

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Bethany Maines is the award-winning indie and traditionally published author of romantic action-adventure and fantasy novels that focus on individuals who know when to apply lipstick and when to apply a foot to someone's hind-end. She also holds numerous screenplay awards and writing awards and is a member of the Pacific Northwest Writers Association. She can usually be found chasing after her daughter or glued to the computer working on her next novel or screenplay. Track her down at [www.BethanyMaines.com](http://www.BethanyMaines.com).