The First Two Pages: "Confess Your Secret!" by J.C. Bernthal

From *Double Crossing Van Dine*,
edited by Donna Andrews, Greg Herren, and Art Taylor (Crippen & Landru)

An Essay by J.C. Bernthal

Sometimes, a story starts life as a killer opening. Just a few words in the right order can be enough to cut open whatever keeps the story in place, in the writer's mind, and let it escape. "Confess Your Secret!" was not one of those stories.

I wrote it for the anthology *Double Crossing Van Dine*, where there were two imperatives: (1) each contribution must have a "Golden Age" feel, and (2) it must break one of S.S. Van Dine's famous rules for detective writers. In this case, the rule to break was an order for the crime to be solved by logic, not intuition or accident.

The premise I settled on was this: a newspaper runs a "confessional" column, where readers write in to say things they'd never say in public (think Post Secret, but 95 years ago). Someone uses the platform to confess to a murder. This premise let me combine a few things that had been pedalling around in my head, including a unique detective duo, a variation on a Hitchcock movie (saying which would give the whole thing away), and a very specific gripe about the English language (again, I say no more). I put them all together in a plot scaffold.

But it wasn't until I started writing that these elements *fitted* together. So perhaps I'm an unreliable narrator, and this did all start with the first lines. Knowing where the plot was going, I decided to write my way into the world. My own writing rule is not to think about wordcounts on the first draft, and the first draft of this story was 12,000 words long (over twice the final length!). I cut a lot, but much of the opening stayed. It hooked me into the world, and hopefully does the same for readers. Here is how the story begins:

> So far, 1930 was not proving a good year for the *Star of Suffolk*. Our decline had been so obvious by the end of the twenties that we'd reported on it ourselves.
>
> From announcing ourselves as "the source of news for the east of England," we had progressed to "the principal news source for East Anglia," and more recently I'd heard our Editor-in-Chief, Sir Willard, describe the *Star* as "a pretty well-trusted newspaper."
>
> "All this competition," Sir Willard liked to say. "What's wrong with one paper for each neck of the woods? It's all the same news, after all." Perhaps this reveals the extent of his business acumen.

This is not an action-packed opening. I didn't feel it necessary—or advisable—to go straight in with "I want to confess… a murder!" (although words to that effect will come). To my mind, if someone has chosen an anthology of murder stories and is reading one with "Confess" in the title, they can absolutely expect a murder, and a confession, to be forthcoming. In that case, throwing both into the first line would be too obvious and maybe even a little insulting. Speaking purely as a reader, I'm not gripped if a story starts to feel predictable on the first line. I trust the reader to know there'll be a murder.

Something you can't get from the title is the premise. I think there is a lot of information in these first few lines. We know the story is taking place in 1930, in Suffolk, a county in the east of England. After the first sentence, the reader may well have worked out that the *Star of Suffolk* is a newspaper. After the second, they've been told. They have also been told that it's a newspaper in decline, acknowledging increased competition in the age of mass media. And then they hear Sir Willard, the paper's Editor-in-Chief, speak in clichés and demonstrate a disconnect with commercial reality.

But these lines aren't really about Sir Willard (whose name evokes Willard Huntington Wright, the real name of S.S. Van Dine). They establish the world of the story, and the point of view of our narrator. There are no details yet, except that they work for the paper, are more engaged with reality than their boss, and notice things like subtle changes in wording. This is our guide for the story, welcoming the reader into their world.

Hopefully, the reader will accept the invitation. The narrator tells us more about herself in the next lines, by way of describing her workplace:

> But don't ask me. I was little more than a secretary. Although, since we made cuts—or, since we made "ahem – changes," as Sir Willard would say—I'd had actual writing work to do. Not quite journalism, but definitely work.
>
> When I joined, in '28, we kept a staff of thirty, not including the printers, and filled the offices, publishing seven days a week, plus evening editions. Now, the five section editors had become the sole reporters, I handled "letters and women's things," and the main part of our building, the shared office, stood largely empty, an army of dust-laced typewriters disturbed by occasional freelancers and mostly, echoingly, silent. We published only on Sundays.

Researching this story, I found out that freelancers were very much a thing in 1930! It surprised me how similar many workplaces were to offices today, while changes in technology were prompting very serious discussions about traditional workforces becoming irrelevant. I wanted to make that parallel but on a human, not overstated, level.

The narrator, Dot (Dorothy) Snape, is young and we can already tell she thinks and understands more than people around her assume. Her description of the office is light, woven into her description of the situation. While the office layout will become relevant to solving the mystery, I didn't want to bung it all in at the beginning, but to give enough information to let the reader see people use that space, and gather where they're going, how they're getting there, and so on through action later on. I liked her calling the dusty typewriters an "army", overtly ordered with underscored menace, and putting that next to the patronising language of Dot's superiors—"letters and women's things"—to indicate without heavy-handedness a kind of structural hostility that just seems faintly ridiculous.

It would surprise me immensely if any reader of this story has actually worked for a local newspaper in 1930, making the world of "Confess Your Secret!" an alien one to all involved. But you don't need to know the environment in detail to understand the people and contexts it operates in. One of the many things Agatha Christie has taught me is that you don't need a lot of

words to convey character or setting, because those come down to people, who never change. Dot's descriptions of her workplace invite us in, but they're not really about the office—they're about the person describing it.

All very well, but detective fiction is about plot. The whole point of the Golden Age is the puzzle (some of my friends in academia would find an elaborate way to kill me for that, because of course the genre is so much more than "whodunnit," but equally obviously the puzzle is a structuring principle). So, we move onto our first surprise.

Dot, we learn, has introduced that column encouraging people to write—or call—in with secret confessions: things they wouldn't normally utter in polite society. She does this under the name "Mrs. Miller," a comforting figure who doesn't really exist. But as she's writing up someone's confession, in comes a visitor—who claims to be Mrs Miller's sister!

I wanted something unexpected and a bit silly. It seems impossible. Whether we think this visitor is confused or lying, the question becomes why. I made the elderly Mary Miller (Agatha Christie's middle name and her surname before she married) to be an entertaining figure. Eccentric, talkative, and bafflingly inventive, she lets us feel sorry for Dot. She will become Dot's co-detective and accidentally solve the mystery (sort of). And their conversation is interrupted by a phone call, in which a familiar voice says: "I must confess … I killed someone."

So much discussion of crime fiction, including from writers' perspectives, focuses on the twist at the end, but openings are read significantly more than endings. Writing "Confess Your Secret!" showed me you don't have to start plot-heavy. If you trust your reader, your reader will come with you.

#

J.C. Bernthal is a British scholar of Agatha Christie and Golden Age detective fiction, who also writes fiction and works in offshore wind. His books include *Queering Agatha Christie, Agatha Christie: A Companion to the Mystery*, and, with Mary Anna Evans, the Edgar-nominated *Bloomsbury Handbook to Agatha Christie*. He is the creator of the eccentric—and invariably wrong—amateur detective Jessica Brick, and in 2025 won the CWA Short Story Dagger for his first anthologized story, "A Date on Yarmouth Pier."

Website: jcbernthal.com

Bluesky: @jcbernthal.com