

The First Two Pages: “Bad Egg” by Kendall Brunson

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An essay by Kendall Brunson

When the call came out for *On Fire and Under Water: A Climate Change Crime Fiction Anthology* from Rock and a Hard Place Press, I knew I wanted to write about my current obsession: python hunters battling the invasive species in the Everglades. Since Florida is no stranger to both crime and the immediate impacts of climate change, I thought this was the perfect opportunity to pair my current fixation with two of my loves: preserving the ecology of my home state and crime fiction.

I opened “Bad Egg” by immersing the reader in the danger of place:

Moonlight glistened off of Angel’s titanium hunting blade. It could pierce the head of a gator like it was slicing through butter, but she wasn’t here for gators.

My goal was threefold: convey time (night), location (swamp filled with gators), and intrigue (who is Angel and if she’s not hunting gators, what is she hunting). The inferred conflict of the knife and the hunt holds the reader’s attention, allowing me to pivot to setting. It was important the reader felt rooted in the Everglades and confident in Angel’s expertise since she’ll be our guide. As a woman in a man’s world, I wanted Angel’s self-assurance and knowledge to be no nonsense.

She secured the knife to her thigh and breathed in the hot night air. Sawgrass swayed even though there was barely a breeze. After sunset, the swamp was a symphony of cicadas screaming, crickets chirping, frogs grunting, and gators croaking.

Close-third POV lets us see the swamp through Angel's eyes—both the beauty and the risk. Her observations are sharp and specific, and she seems unafraid, which strengthens the reader's trust in her. I also wanted to play with reader expectations of the sounds the animals make. The cicadas are “screaming” (one of the smallest creatures making the most aggressive sound) while the gators are only “croaking.” Because the gators are making an innocuous noise—though you wouldn't want to be on the water at night and hear that too close to you—it shows they're the least of Angel's worries out here.

This helps me introduce the main theme of the story: it's the people, not the wildlife, that are the real predator.

A sea of stars cloaked the Everglades, though there weren't as many as there were when Angel was a girl. More and more builders encroached on the protected wetlands. She worried that soon, the stars would be drowned out by the bright lights from thousands of matchstick McMansions with expensive green lawns that required too much water and too many chemicals to maintain the unnatural façade.

With her flashlight, she skimmed the surface of the water. Gator eyes gleamed back at her. She swatted at the mosquitos swarming and applied another coat of deet. Clouds of the annoying insects were impossible to escape in mid-August. While it was the worst time to be outside, it was the best time to hunt pythons. Without a natural predator, the invasive snakes were destroying the fragile ecosystem. Kay deer, marsh rabbits, bobcats, and opossums had all but disappeared thanks to the constrictors.

Angel observes how developers have “encroached on the protected wetlands,” and they’re drowning out the stars with their “matchstick McMansions.” They’re also dumping chemicals into the water to keep their lawns green. She also shows how the night sky has changed since her childhood. Next, Angel observes how humans have unleashed invasive species into the ecosystem, and Angel’s here to help correct this by hunting for pythons. It was important to show that the entire ecosystem is impacted by the snakes’ presence, and multiple species are endangered thanks to a few people’s carelessness. I wanted the story stayed grounded in Angel’s core beliefs while not coming off as too preachy. If I’ve done my job correctly, readers will leave the story with a better understanding of the fragile balance in the Everglades, but more importantly—be entertained.

Another way I tried to convey the danger of humanity was to give all three characters in the story animal names—Angel(fish), Marlin, and Spider—as if to say to humans, nothing is sacred, and they will take and use whatever they want, however they want to use it. Each character in this story will have an impact on the swamp, one way or another.

On page two, I introduce the other two characters. The first is her brother, Marlin, who is fueling an airboat so they can go out hunting, or that’s what Angel thinks.

“I thought we were taking Birdie,” she said to him. Birdie was the smaller airboat in their fleet, perfect for two people. It was more

agile and easier to navigate through the smaller crevices of the glades, which usually meant more luck finding pythons.

Marlin ignored her, as he often did these days, but Angel brushed it off. They needed to go tonight. Late summer was blazingly hot, each day more blistering than the one before. Even the pythons, hating the heat, hid in the water until after sundown.

There were only two more days left in the state's annual python competition, and so far, she and Marlin had only bagged half of last year's catch. She blamed the tropical storm and relentless August rain, which forced them to stay home for almost a week. She hoped their other competitors were having similar luck.

I want the reader to question Marlin, like Angel does. However, I transition to her urgent desire to get on the water after a single sentence because my goal is to distract the reader. I don't want the reader to think too much about Marlin. This magic trick of character misdirection is part of the craft I pay close attention to. Give a character too much time and attention, the reader will look for what they haven't been told or shown yet; however, if you pay too little attention to a character, this lack of attention can alert the reader.

It's also important to introduce stakes. Why should the reader care if Angel and Marlin don't get out on the water that night? Can't they go another night? *Why now?* By imposing a ticking clock (two remaining days in the competition) and the problem of being far behind last year's catch, it creates the need for them to go now and allows Angel to show how passion and competition fuel her. If the stakes are clear to the protagonist, then they'll be clear to the reader. I never want the

reader to ask why they should care or question whether the character's actions are believable...unless I want them too. But here, I don't.

Next, I introduce the other character in the story. Spider arrives as a mystery.

In the distance, she heard the hum of an engine approaching their dock.

"You expecting anyone," Angel asked, but again her brother didn't answer.

The car roared into view. She shielded her eyes from the obnoxiously bright headlights. After the lights turned off, it took her eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness.

"You ready to fucking go?" Spider stomped onto the dock. He reeked of weed and cigarettes. She looked her cousin over. He didn't really think he was going out hunting with them, did he? Spider wore work boots, not waders, and she doubted he was wearing ankle protectors in case of strikes from moccasins.

My immediate goal is to make the reader wary of Spider. It's why his headlights blind Angel, disorienting her and the reader. Then there's his name, which likely speaks for itself. Because Angel isn't expecting Spider and seems caught off guard, it conveys to the reader that they should be concerned too. His greeting is also aggressive. Not only does he reek of "weed and cigarettes" but he also swears at Angel and Marlin, and since no one else has yet cursed in the story, it makes his "f-bomb" more impactful.

Something else I tried to do was show Spider's inherent disrespect for Mother Nature. He's too cocky and self-assured. By arriving in the wrong clothes, he expresses that he doesn't care about the power of the swamp. This was also an

opportunity to show Angel's knowledge of what he should be wearing as well as her own reverence for where they are.

Lastly, my goal here is to distract from the initial questioning—and growing dislike—of her brother Marlin. With any luck, the reader is focused on how much Angel loathes her cousin and how his presence could impact the hunt. By the end of these first two pages, I hope the reader wants to stick around to find out just what Angel is going to do. Why did Spider come? Why is her brother ignoring her? Will the hunt continue? Will she really have to go out into the swamp with Spider in search of pythons? And what dangers are really lurking in the water?

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Kendall Brunson is a crime and thriller writer from Florida. Her work has been published in *Kelp Literary Review*, *100 Word Story*, *Fearsome Critters*, and more. She's written and directed short films that have played at festivals, including Final Girls Berlin Film Fest, The Loft Cinema, and Wasteland Film Festival. She earned her MFA from UC Riverside at Palm Desert. She currently lives and works in Jacksonville, Florida. You can find her spending too much time on [Instagram](#).