

The First Two Pages: “The Missing Delegate” by Neil Plakcy
From *Private Dicks and Disco Balls: Private Eyes in the Dyn-O-Mite Seventies*,
edited by Michael Bracken (Down and Out Books)

An Essay by Neil Plakcy

In 2021, Michael Bracken issued a call for submissions for an anthology to be called *Groovy Gumshoes: Private Eyes in the Psychedelic Sixties*. I was intrigued and began brainstorming a character and a story. “Heir Apparent” was so successful that I spun off a novel about George Clay, *Bless Our Sleep*, and continued to write stories about him.

When Michael issued a call for private eye stories set in the 1970s for an anthology to be called *Private Dicks and Disco Balls: Private Eyes in the Dyn-O-Mite Seventies*, I knew I wanted to write a new story about George and submit it.

I had to move George forward a few years to fit the 1970s timeframe. I did some research to understand what was going on in Miami Beach in the early 1970s and I discovered the Republican National Convention, which was held in Miami Beach in 1972. That gave me the time and the setting for my story.

Many of the most famous private eye stories, particularly in the noir genre, begin with the PI waiting in his office for a client to show up. I thought that was a good way to start “The Missing Delegate.”

It was a hot July morning, and the air conditioner in the window of my office over Mr. Ho’s Chinese restaurant on Washington Avenue in Miami Beach was already working overtime. I was considering

ditching work for the day and heading to the beach when a gaunt man in a suit walked into the reception area in front of me.

It was the area where I would put a secretary, if I could ever afford one. But I was still struggling as a private eye, four years into my practice, and though I was able to pay my rent and the insurance for my lime-green Chevrolet Bel Air, I wasn't what you'd call prosperous.

By the end of the first page, I had my story. A naïve 18-year-old delegate to the convention has gone missing. The older man who accompanied him is worried, but the police have refused to take a report.

“His name is Jacob Abel. It's just that I promised his mother I would look out for him. His first time out of Centralia, Illinois, first time in a big city. Everything was fine, we were busy preparing for the convention, until he said last night he wanted to go out for a walk.”

[Abel] stared at me, despair in his face. “He never came back. I waited up for him until almost eleven o'clock, way past my bedtime, but I didn't know what to do. I figured he'd met up with some of the delegates and gotten caught up. The boy is curious as all get-out to know other people and ways of life.”

By the end of the second page, I hope readers are drawn in by the missing boy and the intriguing setting. George sets out to search in a city “swarming with delegates, taking up meeting space and hotel rooms so that no other convention could be in the city at the same time. And the protesters were arriving every day, too, hippies and wheelchair-bound veterans in camouflage drab.”

There's an important element of the story that doesn't come out in the first two pages, but readers who are already familiar with George Clay will know that

he's gay, in a time and place when that requires subterfuge. Why not reveal that right away?

Years ago, I submitted a story with a gay protagonist to a writer's workshop, and the leader said something that has stuck with me. "Why is he gay? If you give a character such a strong trait, it has to be integral to the story."

If readers already know about George, they can begin wondering how he'll use his unique knowledge to find the young man. In this story, though, that revelation doesn't come until much later, because it's not important until George follows his "baser instincts" to kiss a man who knows who Jacob went off with.

It was fun to subvert some of the standards of the gritty PI story, and perhaps that subversion is why "The Missing Delegate" was included in the Honorable Mention section of this year's *Best Mystery and Suspense* anthology. If you'd like to read the whole story you can download it here:

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/t84i4e90lg>

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