

The First Two Pages: “Haven” by Joseph S. Walker
From *Crime Scenes* (Level Best Books)

An Essay by Joseph S. Walker

In March of this year, Level Best Books published *Crime Scenes*, collecting twenty of my stories—something I wouldn’t have believed, a few years ago, would ever happen. Choosing which stories would appear in the collection was, for the most part, surprisingly easy. A lot of writers might be hesitant to say so, but I suspect we all have favorites among our published works. Maybe they’re the pieces that got awards or nominations, or the ones that got the most vocal and enthusiastic feedback from readers, or just the ones with a plot twist or a few lines of dialogue we still remember fondly. The list of stories I wanted to include came together pretty quickly. It was the process of choosing an order for them and editing them for republication that gave me a chance to reflect on how (or if) my writing has changed over the years, so I thought it would be interesting to look at the earliest passage included in the book: the first pages of my story “Haven.”

“Haven” is not, mind you, the earliest *publication* in the book; that honor goes to “Pillbug,” which ran in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* in 2015. The opening scene of “Haven,” however, is something I had written several years before that—well before 2011, when I first saw my fiction published. I believe I may have written the first version of the scene as early as 2005. I always liked it, but I couldn’t think of how to continue the story. It would be a while before I

developed the discipline, as a writer, to realize that just plowing ahead usually works, one way or another.

Here's the first paragraph of the story:

I was sitting with Jess and Angie on the front porch at Haven, waiting for Mason Barnes to come try to kill his wife. He was running later than we'd expected, and my attention was wandering.

I have to say I'm still pretty fond of this. It does what I still try to do in the opening of most of my stories: immediately establish a dramatic situation, while using voice to give some idea of the main character. My narrator here is Wade, a small-town cop who takes the job, but not himself, seriously.

"Haven," in my story, is the name of a shelter for abused women and children, run by Jess and Angie, who are a couple. I'll acknowledge here that the name itself is the first instance in the story of, depending on your point of view, either homage or outright theft. In 1982, there was a story called "Haven," written by Len Wein, in *Detective Comics* #514. In it, Batman pursues a group of criminals into some remote mountains, where they encounter a hermit and committed pacifist who calls himself Haven. I won't spoil the story, but when I read it as a kid, it made an enormous impact on me, and I always wanted to use the name in a story as a tip of the hat, even if I was the only one who knew about it (but now you know, too).

While we're on the topic of inspiration: the character Jess is based on one of the bravest people I've ever known, a girl from my high school who was an out lesbian and punk rocker—at a Catholic school in the 1980s. That girl and Jess are different in a lot of ways (Jess is considerably more violent, as befits a character in crime fiction), but there are definite points of overlap.

The story now shifts into dialogue:

“If my legs were a little longer,” I said, “I could put my heels up on the porch railing and tilt the chair onto its back legs and pull my hat down over my eyes.”

Jess and Angie were sitting together on a bench swing a few feet to my right. Angie, focused on the long driveway leading down the hill, ignored me. Ignoring me was one of Angie's favorite pastimes. Jess snorted. “Only if by *a little longer* you mean ten inches,” she said.

“It would look cooler when Mason shows up,” I said. “Just sitting here in an old kitchen chair with all four legs on the floor makes it seem like I'm waiting on him.”

“We are waiting on him.”

“Sure, but why give him a big head about it?”

“Why do you want to look cool to a wife-beating drunk?” Angie asked.

“General principle of the thing,” I said. “Better to look cool than not.”

“You forgot how you're dressed,” Jess pointed out. “It's a lost cause.”

This is the passage that, looking back, I have deeply mixed feelings about. For many years, my favorite contemporary mystery writer was Robert B. Parker, and I devoured the Spenser novels like potato chips. To me, the dialogue here is so transparently influenced by Parker, in terms of tone, pacing, and rhythm, that I'm

sort of embarrassed by it. I'm actually almost positive now that the line "Ignoring me was one of Angie's favorite pastimes" may be a very, very close paraphrase of an actual Spenser line, though I haven't run across it in my rereads of those books. (If you recognize it, I'm not sure whether telling me would be a kindness or not.)

On the other hand, darn it, I still kind of like the passage. I think the exchange is at least acceptably amusing, and it efficiently establishes important things about the relationships here: Wade and Jess have the kind of close friendship that's built on teasing banter, while Angie is more reserved, the grown-up of the group. I *think* that, in the years since I wrote this and especially since I began publishing regularly, I've developed a style of dialogue that's more particular to me, though the Parker influence is always going to be there. What I tell myself, at the moments when I read something like this from my early work and feel the urge to cringe, is that a lot of great bands started out playing ragged covers of "Johnny B. Goode." Imitation is part of learning to be an artist—right?

The story now shifts from dialogue to action:

I was trying to think of someone who looked cool in a deputy's uniform when a cloud of dust lifted into the air down where the long gravel drive met the highway. A second later we heard an engine coming.

"Here we go," Jess said. She stood up and cracked her knuckles, stretched her neck back and forth. She was wearing a tank top and a pair of denim shorts, and her arms and legs showed a lot of hard, defined muscle. The left side of her head was shaved down to a light blond fuzz, and a curtain of neon-purple hair hung down on her

right. Sometimes people get distracted by the hair and miss the muscle. That's a mistake.

"Go easy, champ," I said. "We've got fourteen different charges to hang on him."

"He'll walk," Angie said. "They always walk."

That wasn't true, but I let it go. Angie's earned the white-hot anger that keeps her moving through the day, from one crisis to the next.

Again, I think there are things here I can still be reasonably pleased with. I like the way Wade tells us he's a cop without telling us he's a cop. I rarely use detailed physical descriptions in my stories, but I think the description of Jess does a good job of suggesting elements of her character. The dialogue continues to flesh out the relationships, with a particular focus on Angie's anger and cynicism. The dust in the air and the sound of the approaching engine contribute to a bit of suspense as Mason approaches.

But what would happen when he arrived? I didn't have any idea. This is, more or less, where things stood for years. I kept coming back to what I'd written, and I kept coming up blank on how to continue it, in part because for a long time I thought it was the start of a novel, not a short story. I really think this is one of the things that separates my decades as an aspiring writer from my years as an actual professional. The aspiring writer fooled around with ideas and mused about what the story *might* be. The professional nailed it down and finished it, for better or worse, and moved on to the next thing.

What enabled me to move from one stage to the next, to being able to actually complete “Haven,” was simple: a deadline. In 2019, I wanted to enter the contest for the Al Blanchard Award, an annual prize associated with the New England Crime Bake conference. The deadline to enter was coming up fast, and I didn’t have an idea for a new story—but I did have that opening to “Haven.” So I dug it out, shifted the setting to Maine (the Al Blanchard Award is for writers from New England or stories set there) and had Mason drive up to the house and get out of his truck. If you want to know what happens after that, well, *Crime Scenes* is available from your favorite bookseller. I have reason to think I figured something reasonably good out, since the story actually did win the Blanchard that year, and all these years later it’s still one of the stories I immediately knew I wanted in my first collection.

As I’m writing this, the deadline for this year’s Al Blanchard Award is about fifty hours away, and an idea for a story is tickling the back of my brain. Maybe someday I’ll be including it in *Crime Scenes II*?

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Joseph S. Walker is the author of more than one hundred short stories and the current president of the Short Mystery Fiction Society. He is a two-time winner of the Al Blanchard Award, and has been a finalist for the Edgar, Derringer, Shamus, and Thriller Awards. His stories have appeared in *Best American Mystery and Suspense* and four editions of *The Mysterious Bookshop Presents the Best Mystery Stories of the Year*. He lives in Indiana. Visit his website at jswalkerauthor.com.