

**The First Two Pages: “Musicians of Bremen,” by Debra H. Goldstein
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An essay by Debra H. Goldstein

Crime fiction authors often begin stories with a “bang.” The idea is that a dead body or a crime being committed will immediately engage the reader. That was my first approach when I tried to incorporate the donkey, dog, cat, and rooster characters from the Brothers Grimm version into my inspired Musicians of Bremen tale. It didn’t work. My words fell flat. I put the story aside.

Then, the October 7th massacre of more than 1400 people occurred in Israel. I couldn’t turn away from the news reports of its sheer brutality and the comparisons being made to the Holocaust. As a student of history and a daughter of a Holocaust survivor, I felt compelled to express my churning feelings in writing. But, how?

That’s when I remembered attending a fundraising gala where a protégé of Itzhak Perlman played a violin from The Violins of Hope collection. The collection, which is housed in Tel Aviv, Israel, consists of string instruments, most of which belonged to people killed during the Holocaust. Father and son violinmakers have purchased or received these violins with the goal of bringing each back to life.

Putting all these thoughts and emotions together, I had the basis for my story. I started the draft with a “bang,” but quickly realized the subject matter required a quieter approach. Rather than beginning with a high-tension point, I needed to make the reader understand what was overtly happening and who the characters were. At the same time, my words had to convey that something was bubbling below the surface.

I accomplished this by using a simple opening sentence: “Do you know what a tontine is?”

The subject of a tontine isn’t usually a hot conversation topic. To make the reader realize its importance to the story’s climax, I next wrote a conversation between two tangential characters.

In the months since I’ve been the executive director of the Holocaust Education Center, I can’t remember anyone asking a more bizarre question than the one just posed. Speechless, I failed to respond. The well-dressed middle-aged woman, who carried a wooden violin case that had seen better days, repeated her question.

In the aftermath of the horror of the October 7 massacre, most of our education center guests have asked historical questions about Israel and Hamas. Not one raised the specter of a tontine.

The next paragraphs gently interwove backstory and the development of two deceased characters to ratchet up the story’s tension. Slowly, but by the end of the first two pages, it is apparent that the dead women of the tontine and the violin are the essence of this version of the Musicians of Bremen. This is underscored:

The violin is the tontine. Mother's friend, Red 'Rooster' Rosen, was murdered when the Be'eri kibbutz was raided during the Hamas massacre. Mother became the group's last one standing.

My hope is that the foreshadowing found in the first two pages is recognized as key to the story's upcoming "bang." If so, readers will turn to the third page.

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