

The First Two Pages: “Farewell to Baytown”

by William Bankier & Josh Pachter

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An Essay by Josh Pachter

The September/October issue of *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine* features a story titled “Farewell to Baytown,” which I wrote collaboratively with Canadian author William Bankier, who contributed more than a hundred and sixty stories to *EQMM* between 1962 and 2010—twenty-six of them set in the fictional Baytown—and died in 2014. How did I manage to write collaboratively with a man who died a dozen years ago? That question is answered in a post that appeared at *EQMM*’s “Something Is Going to Happen” blog last week, and if you’re interested you can click [this link](#) and read the story behind our story there.

In *this* blog post, I want to zoom in on the first two pages of “Farewell to Baytown” . . . but not the first two pages you’ll find in *Ellery Queen’s*. No, I want to tell you about the *first* first two pages, which you’ll be able to read here and nowhere else.

Bill Bankier’s original draft of the story—which he wrote in 2007, seven years before his death—started out in typical Bankier style:

It was Sunday morning. About half-past one. Buddy Bristol and I were standing in the middle of Front Street throwing our pocket change as far down the road as we could. The coins jingled on the deserted pavement out of sight into the darkness.

At the time, this seemed to us a revolutionary thing to be doing. In the years since, I have learned it is a fairly commonplace activity. But in those days, Buddy and I felt we were saying something about being independent spirits.

In its third paragraph, the story exploded into action . . . but then almost immediately veered off into a digression:

Suddenly a black sedan raced past us at speed forcing us back onto the sidewalk. The car ignored a red light at the Four Corners and smashed into a telephone pole sending the front seat passenger through the windshield. We began running that way as the driver crawled out on all fours. He got up and staggered into the alleyway beside the Paragon Café. The restaurant was closed. Buddy and I had been the final customers to leave having come down the hill at midnight from the Park Pavilion following the end of the dancing. We went there stag most Saturday nights more to listen to the orchestra than to press bodies with the girls who had no dates. The Commodores played stock arrangements so we heard Stan Kenton and Tommy Dorsey and Les Brown. Then Stan Whitney put aside his trumpet and came to the microphone to sing ‘Hey Bob-A-Rebop.’

“Matilda Brown told old King Tut, if you can’t say rebop keep your big mouth shut...”

The missing commas were confusing, I thought as I read, but that would be easy enough to fix, and I was pleased to see the story jump back from King Tut to the car wreck in paragraph five:

The girl on the pavement in front of the wrecked car was still alive. There was a pay telephone outside the Paragon. I told Buddy, “Call the cops.”

He said, “I don’t have any change.”

I’m sorry, we started laughing. There was a clash of garbage cans from the alleyway. Buddy kept things going by saying, “Maybe the driver has some.”

I went into the dark lane. When I reached the toppled garbage cans the driver was not there. I saw a fence, a tree, the sky, the moon.

And then we seemed to backtrack inexplicably to the Park Pavilion for one brief paragraph ... then leave that promising car wreck forever in the dust.

“Couple of jiggers of moonlight and add a star...” *Moonlight Cocktail* had been one of the band’s ballads a few hours earlier.

They never found that driver. The car carried Quebec license plates. It had been stolen the day before in Montreal. The girl was hitch-hiking out of Kingston. She was with the driver less than two hours and knew nothing about him, not even his name.

Her name was Anita and she became Buddy Bristol’s girl friend for almost a year because he had performed CPR which probably saved her life. She took a job on the counter at Higgins’ Drug Store. Ten months later she moved on and that’s all we know about Anita.

From there, the story went on for another six pages, and as I continued to read I believed I understood why *EQMM*’s then-editor Janet Hutchings had decided not to publish it when Felice Nelson-Bankier found it in Bill’s desk and sent it to her shortly after her husband’s death.

Although its first two pages were interesting and typical of the style of Bill’s previous two dozen tales of Baytown, the rest of the story turned out to have very little to do with Anita or the car crash or Luke the narrator but revolved entirely around Buddy Bristol and something he did many years later—so, frankly, those first two pages were pretty close to (though, as I’ll explain in a moment, not entirely) irrelevant.

As you can read in my “Something Is Going to Happen” post, Janet sent me the story last year because she knew I’ve written quite a few collaborations over

the last forty years—all of them, I should point out, with *living* authors!—and thought I might like to try to do something with the manuscript Bill Bankier intended to be his last published piece of fiction.

Having read the material, I was happy to take on the challenge.

The first thing I did with “Farewell to Baytown” was take Bill’s first two pages, condense them to about a dozen lines, and move them down to the bottom of page 3, where I felt they worked much better as a flashback than they’d worked as a prologue:

About half past one on a long-ago Sunday morning, Buddy and I were standing in the middle of Front Street after one such concert when a black sedan raced past us at speed, forcing us onto the sidewalk. The car ignored a red light at the Four Corners and smashed into a telephone pole, sending the passenger in the front seat flying through the windshield. We began running that way as the driver crawled out on all fours and staggered into the alleyway beside the Paragon Café.

The girl who landed on the pavement in front of the wrecked car was still breathing. Buddy performed CPR on her, which probably saved her life. They never found the driver of the car, which carried Quebec license plates and had been stolen the day before in Montreal. The girl was hitchhiking, had been with the driver less than two hours and knew nothing about him, not even his name.

Her name was Anita, and she became Buddy’s girlfriend for almost a year. She took a job on the counter at Higgins’ drugstore. Ten months later, she moved on, and Buddy never got over her.

Why include that information at *all*? Because it helped provide a motive for the thing Buddy did so many years later.

I also reworked the *last* two pages of the original manuscript, turning it from what's referred to as a shaggy-dog story into something more serious, something I hope readers will find both spooky and satisfying.

When I sent my revision to Felice, she called me in tears, said that I'd brought "Billy" back to her, and encouraged me to submit the story to Jackie Sherbow, *EQMM*'s new editor. Jackie bought it for the current 85th-anniversary issue, and I'd like to think Bill would be pleased to see it appear in print with both our names on it.

I think he'd also be pleased to know that its publication makes him only the third person in *EQMM*'s eighty-five-year history to place new fiction in the magazine in seven consecutive decades. (The second was long-time contributor Jon L. Breen. The first, ahem, was me.)

Bill Bankier's *first* contribution to *EQMM* was a story titled "What Happened in Act One," which appeared in the July 1962 issue. In his introduction, Frederic Dannay—the magazine's founder and original editor—said that it had "a touch of the supernatural." And as I said above, there's some spookiness at the end of "Farewell to Baytown," which bookends this, Bankier's final appearance in the magazine, nicely with his debut.

For those "First Two Pages" readers unfamiliar with the work of the prolific William Bankier, I'm delighted to be able to announce that Crippen & Landru

plans to release a collection of all twenty-seven of his Baytown stories, titled *Welcome to Baytown*, later this year. (And, yes, twenty-seven is correct, not a mistake in arithmetic. The first entry in the series, “Crazy Old Woman,” appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine* in 1980, though the next twenty-five were all published in EQMM between 1984 and 2007. And “Farewell to Baytown” makes twenty-seven....)

I’m fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know a lot of the men and women who wrote for *Queen’s* and *Hitchcock’s* as long ago as the 1960s and ’70s ... but certainly not all of them, and Bill Bankier is one of the ones whose path never crossed with mine. Now that I’ve collaborated with him on this story—albeit posthumously—I feel as if I’ve gotten at least a *bit* of insight into the man behind those hundred and sixty-plus *EQMM* stories, and I regret never having had the chance to meet him in person. I believe we would have had a lot to talk about....

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Josh Pachter is the author of two novels and more than 140 short stories, the editor of two dozen anthologies, and the translator of almost a hundred novels, short stories, comic books, and works of nonfiction, mostly by Dutch and Flemish writers. In addition to two Derringer wins, his work has been a finalist for the Edgar, Anthony, Agatha, Macavity, Lefty, Thriller, and EQMM Readers awards, and he was the 2020 recipient of the Golden Derringer for Lifetime Achievement. joshpachter.com

William Bankier (1928-2014) was one of Canada's premier crime/mystery writers, with over 200 short stories published in *Ellery Queen's* and *Alfred Hitchcock's* mystery magazines and in numerous anthologies. He wrote scripts for a Canadian television series, and one of his stories was adapted for the 1980s revival of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Collections of his short fiction were published in 1995 and 2014, and Crippen & Landru will be releasing a new one, *Welcome to Baytown*, this December. Bankier was nominated for the Edgar Award in 1980 and three times for the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award. In 1992, he received the Crime Writers of Canada Derrick Murdock Award for Lifetime Achievement. He is survived by his second wife, Felice Nelson-Bankier.