

The First Two Pages: “Screaming Jenny” by Pat Remick

From *Hooked on Urban Legends—And Murder!*

Edited by Donna Andrews, Barb Goffman, and Marcia Talley (Wildside Press)

An Essay by Pat Remick

When I researched urban myths for my submission to the *Hooked on Urban Legends—And Murder!* anthology, I was thrilled to discover that Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, is home to a whopper. It meant I could spend writing time conjuring the lovely historic and scenic river town where I once briefly considered relocating—and share it with readers.

However, the legend is the opposite of lovely: It’s gruesome and vague. I conveyed that sharp contrast with Harpers Ferry’s beauty and otherwise well-documented past in the opening of “Screaming Jenny” because setting is significant to the story:

The West Virginia town of Harpers Ferry is rich in authenticated history. It’s also home to the legend of Screaming Jenny, an impoverished woman who suffered a horrific death along the tracks of the old Baltimore and Ohio railroad line that still runs through the small community today.

Some people, led by Mayor Beverly Johnson, consider the tale of a woman burned alive in the 1800s to be unhelpful to Harpers Ferry’s image as a tourist destination. Especially when the town at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers has other stories to tell: the raid that abolitionist John Brown led there, Civil War battles, about one hundred historic structures, and the distinction of often being called the “psychological halfway point” of the Appalachian Trail.

I also wanted to underscore the mayor's reasoning for hiring someone to disprove folklore dating back to the 1800s. To bring the story forward, I blame social media for spurring a resurgence of interest in the yarn. To give the mayor more depth, I underscore her resulting frustration at being unable to persuade news media outlets to invalidate it:

“As mayor, I'm responsible for maintaining the character of our community. I don't mind the ghost tours highlighting John Brown or the Civil War soldiers, but spreading a ghastly fabrication about a poor woman's flaming demise is distasteful. Particularly since it isn't true.”

Of course, there's more to the story, as they say. But first, I need the reader to become invested in the mayor and believe her purported motivations.

My next challenge was to explain why the mayor believed an outsider, rather than a local historian, has become her best option for destroying the myth. Having my narrator, Susan Gray, be a former journalist turned freelance writer (like me) ensures she possesses the investigative and writing skills—and contacts—that will be helpful to the mayor's assignment:

The mayor said she hoped that I could establish that Jenny never existed and sell my account to a reputable, widely circulated publication, forever labeling the legend a sham.

I'm a self-employed writer always hustling for the next gig. So I was intrigued by the prospect of being paid twice for the same article—first, for the research and then by the publication that purchased it.

Speaking of research, mine turned up multiple versions of the Screaming Jenny tale, but none offered information to prove—or disprove—that she existed.

For authenticity, I decided not to add to the existing versions. Instead, I brought the reader up to speed by using Susan's (and my) compilation with overlaps and discrepancies eliminated:

A penniless woman named Jenny lived alone in a small construction storage shack abandoned along the B&O line shortly after the line's 1833 completion. As she was warming a meal over a campfire, a spark flew onto her skirt. The fire rapidly engulfed her. Screaming for help, she staggered onto the tracks but didn't see an oncoming train, which was unable to stop before mowing her down. She was given a pauper's funeral and buried in an unmarked grave in a local churchyard.

A month later, the engineer of a B&O train rounding the bend west of the Harpers Ferry train station plowed into a ball of fire before he could stop. He ran back down the tracks to search for a burning body but found nothing. When he reported his experience, the stationmaster speculated that Jenny's ghost had returned to haunt the tracks.

Various people claim that on the anniversary of her death, Jenny's burning ghost can be seen on the tracks, and some contend her bloodcurdling screams are heard at night. One article said that for decades, trains have slammed on their brakes to avoid hitting a screaming woman engulfed in flames who vanishes as quickly as she appears.

To advance my narrative, I have Susan convey early on how challenging it will be to solve the mystery of Screaming Jenny with so little information:

Journalists are taught to find the who, what, when, where, how, and why. But I didn't find much for any of those—especially the “when,” beyond learning that the rail line was finished in 1833. Not one account included the date of Jenny's death or her full name.

Subsequent pages detail the steps she takes to fill out her article so she can sell it.

Although “Screaming Jenny” begins by referring to her ghastly death, the word murder does not appear in the first two pages of text. In fact, we learn that the fable blames a campfire spark for her demise. However, “murder” is in the title of the anthology. I want readers to be mystified (pun intended) after the first two pages about whether someone was murdered and if so, when—in the 1800s or present day—so they will keep reading to find out.

#

Pat Remick is an award-winning mystery short story author and nonfiction writer. Her stories have appeared in various anthologies and online. She also co-authored two professional development books. A veteran print, wire service, TV, and web journalist, Pat retired as a press officer for an international environmental organization and now provides communications coaching. A member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America, Pat still lives in Washington, D.C. Her website is www.patremick.com.