

The First Two Pages: *Jack Waters*

By Scott Adlerberg

Jack Waters is a novel set in 1904, and from its first sentence, I wanted to set a tone that would make it clear the author is telling a story in what you might call a classic fashion.

The book begins with this paragraph:

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, near the city of New Orleans, there lived a man named Jack Waters. Throughout Louisiana, among gamblers, he had a reputation. His specialty was poker. He liked draw poker and five card stud, and his skill was such that he won more often than he lost. Jack Waters loved the challenge and excitement of gambling, but his deep blue eyes always held a look of slight dissatisfaction. He believed that a man, a gentleman anyhow, should gamble for the sheer fun of it, while he, on the contrary, did it to support himself.

In this opening, I let the reader know the story's era and where it is happening. I also made the first sentence sound vaguely fairy tale-like—not “once upon a time” but almost that—to give an immediate indication that the book's style, while not complicated, will be a little bit stylized. We're not in the world of today, and the goal is to take the reader into the book's early-19th-century world as quickly as possible. At the same time, in a matter of fact way, I want to present the basics about the character and hint at what makes him tick. Yes, he has a particular

skill he can live on, but I suggest that despite his competence in poker, he has an undercurrent of discontent. He may be a man somewhat divided within himself; he can't even accept without qualms that he gambles for a living instead of doing it as he imagines a so-called gentleman would, for sheer enjoyment. Later, when he winds up on a Caribbean island, caught up in a revolution there, a struggle that breaks down mainly along class lines, the island's affluent against those less affluent, Waters will be torn, at least for a while, in his loyalties.

In the second paragraph, I continue to develop Waters' character, creating a picture that hopefully makes him intriguing if not embraceable:

Waters came from a slave-owning family that had lost all its wealth in the Civil War. From his father, who was killed at the Battle of Shiloh when he was one, he had inherited a mansion outside the city. Here he lived, the last of his line, preferring to a wife the company of whores in the French Quarter. He retained a Creole cook and a black maid. Over the old estate where cotton had grown before Sherman's men burned it, he would ride his jet-black colt through the weeds and cypresses. Waters was a crack shot with a rifle and from time to time would enter the bayou to hunt birds and alligators. Though rugged as a Cajun, he looked urbane, with his short brown hair, smooth jaw line, and pencil sharp nose. He had a charming smile and his manners were polished. Even to his gambling friends, he was a generous host. The maid would fix the guest rooms, and for days on end, while he and others played cards, the chef would serve gumbo, oysters, and jambalaya. Sometimes he wished he had lived before the war, when slaves would have done all his work for him, but if he was not a true man of leisure, at least gambling allowed him to avoid real labor.

Not everything about Waters is at it seems in this paragraph. It's reasonable for the reader to think they are going to be getting a story about a post-Civil War

white guy who keeps black servants and wishes he had lived in the antebellum south during the heyday of slavery. Besides all that, does he think of women as whores? The reader may be wondering, “Do I want to follow this guy through an entire novel?” But sometimes when starting a book, you have to take a slight risk. Trust that if you can make a character interesting, not necessarily likeable, the reader will be sucked in and stick with that character. And then, gradually, layer by layer, you can peel away at the character. They may have secrets. They may not hold the views they seem at first to have. Whatever you do, you don’t want to give away too much about that protagonist too fast. If you do and readers feel early on that they know everything about the person, their interest will dissipate. So this second paragraph, though it does state certain things about Jack Waters, leaves a lot unsaid about him, to make surprises possible deeper in the book.

Still, some essential features of Waters’ personality are made explicit before the reader has reached the third page. Waters is known for his calm demeanor and for having “never welshed on a debt.” But he becomes infuriated if someone takes advantage of him. As he explains it, “If you’re a gambler, you must be straight in your dealings with money. This is our first rule of conduct.”

Waters, it’s apparent, is a man with a personal code of behavior, and this code he ascribes to will dictate most of his actions throughout the book. Indeed, how the plot unfolds will hinge on his sense of outraged rectitude. But to let the

reader see right away just what he is capable of when outraged, I describe an incident from Waters' life when a poker player refused to pay *him* a debt.

But maybe Waters thought he was holding the cash. Because the next night, in the French Quarter, in a dark alleyway near his hotel, the man was found with his throat cut. Policemen checked his pockets and examined his room, but they never came across his wallet. Though nobody could prove anything, the rumor spread that Waters had killed him.

Before the second page ends, readers will see Waters playing in the card game where he catches someone cheating, the event that sparks the murder he commits in full view of others. He'll have to flee the country as a fugitive and escape to the place where the rest of the book takes place, the Caribbean. It's there that he'll find himself playing one night in another fateful card game. But this time, the person who loses to him and refuses to pay him is the island country's president. No matter to Waters; as we've seen from the story's beginning, he can't stand to let a wrong go.

The first two pages of *Jack Waters* contain the seed for much of what will happen in the book, and it should come as no strain to credulity when Waters adopts a course of action more extreme than any he has taken before, where the personal and the political, the private desire for revenge and a growing desire to serve a cause larger than himself, both merge and conflict.

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Scott Adlerberg is the author of *Jack Waters*, a historical revenge tale, from Broken River Books. His other books include the noir/fantasy novella *Jungle Horses* and the psychological thriller *Graveyard Love*. He is a regular contributor to sites such as Lithub and Criminal Element, and every Tuesday he writes a piece for the crime fiction site Do Some Damage. He lives in New York City.