

The First Two Pages: “Mercenary” by Bryon Quertermous

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Edited by Holly West (Down & Out Books)

The first two pages of this short story are me trying to challenge myself to write more characters who aren't white men and in one case I think I succeeded, and in the other, I fell into a common trap that I regret now, but that will hopefully serve as a warning to me to do better as I work through the novel I'm writing.

Let's look first at the one I think I did right.

After writing two (technically three, but let's not talk about that) novels about a white, male writer named Dominick Prince that featured some pretty strong female characters, I decided my next book needed to be bigger and a little less silly. I wrote out some notes and even wrote myself an outline for the first time in my life. Some folks I showed it to thought the idea had potential but expressed concerns about the main character, a white male, though not a writer. He was different from Dominick, so I had succeeded on that front, but I would eventually figure out that he still fell into too many tropes of white and male saviors in fiction and I wanted to do better. The exact nature of the problems with this character was synthesized by a tweet from Christa Faust who lamented another “sad daddy” story. She wasn't referring to my book, but I felt called out anyway because that's exactly what I was writing. I wanted to do better and figured the best way to do that was to take the main female character in the book—who didn't have any other

real purpose in the story other than to motivate the main character (can you fridge a female character without killing her?)—and dig deeper into her story and elevate her to co-star in the book.

To really do a deep dive into the character of Lodi Meyers, I wanted to do a short story and had this vague idea of using elements from a local story about a woman who was terrified of her ex-husband who was currently in jail but was scheduled for release even though he had made several attempts while in prison to hire someone to kill his ex-wife. It seemed like a good starting point, but nothing in the news stories really jumped out at me as a defining moment or characteristic for Lodi or for her story until I heard an NPR interview with the woman. She mentioned the pathetic efforts local and state law enforcement had made to keep her safe and one of the details slapped me right up in my seat and I knew I had the opening line for the story:

“They asked for my dental records,” Lodi Meyers said, holding back tears, “so they can identify my body if he kills me.”

I thought that visual of a woman giving her dental records to the state police in case someone tried to kill her cut through the common ways of talking about domestic abuse. In no way do I claim to be making any new strides as a male in a field that women have been working for decades with great success, but from a strictly creative point of view, it seemed distinct enough to me to power this story, and it also immediately gave me the voice of a character I had been struggling to

define. She says this line through tears, hinting that she might not be a particularly strong character, but paired with her next line, I think it shows a savvy woman who knows what men want to hear when she needs their help, but who can change her story and her character as needed.

“I don’t have any other options,” she said, the tears giving way to an angry flush across her cheeks. “They’re putting together this moronic safety plan for me while insisting there’s not enough evidence to keep him in prison.”

In two chunks of dialogue I had learned more about this woman than I had through almost a year of planning an outlining. Story: success!

On that front at least. The other thing I’d been trying to do through all of my books was accurately reflect the racial realities of a story set in Detroit. In the book I was working on, I had a black male named Andre Taylor I thought was a great character, and I also thought he had the potential to be a perfect foil for Lodi. I already knew how his lines would go in the story, but I wanted to find a way to make sure people knew he was black right away because I know the tendency for most readers is to assume a character is white unless otherwise noted. Readers, I assumed, would be irritated if it wasn’t noted until later in the story, if at all, that a character they had envisioned as white was really black. I didn’t want to use context clues that might come off as racist, so I thought a descriptive note as close to the beginning of the story was the best way to handle things.

Andre flexed the fingers of his beefy, gnarled hands and picked up his coffee cup without taking a drink. The bleached white of the cup contrasted with the dark black skin of his hands that were shaking enough to splash a bit of the freshly poured coffee onto the table.

Aside from the, perhaps, labored comparison between his skin and the cup, I think this works, and if given the chance to do over again, I would probably do it the same way, though maybe a little more creatively. My error, and the one I would correct if given the chance and will endeavor to do in future works, was describing *only* the black character's skin color. By letting readers assume all of the other characters were white, which they were, I was playing into a harmful reality and reinforcing it rather than contributing to its breakdown.

I need to do better. I will do better.

The first two pages of a book or story or essay or confession are vital real estate and in addition to making sure we meet all of our creative goals with those important pages, we as writers have a responsibility to ourselves, to our audience, and to our industry to break down harmful stereotypes and encourage a more diverse and progressive way of introducing and building our characters.

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