

The First Two Pages: *A Well-Timed Murder*

By Tracee de Hahn

Main character. Pace. Tone. Place.

That sums up what I want to accomplish at the *very start* of my story. *A Well-Timed Murder* is the second in the Agnes Lüthi mysteries, so this means I need to hook both new readers and continuing ones. The wrong details are confusing. The right ones draw readers in.

Main character: New readers need to know that Agnes is the central police presence. Returning readers shouldn't be bored by familiar details. This means carefully selecting carry-over from book one. For example, returning readers will understand why Agnes has a slight limp; they will know why she is on leave. Those details don't matter to new readers. They will read over the limp, accepting it as fact. They won't slow over an unknown "why" the way they might over an explanation. Why include the limp at all? I believe returning readers appreciate a reminder of a story they enjoyed. I hope this detail lets new readers know that Agnes is experienced at her job, and that she has faced adversity in it. They also need to know that she is respected by her colleagues. That's my checklist on character for my returning protagonist.

Pace: I wanted to start the story with action, but it wasn't appropriate to the main plot line. Instead, I used a subplot: apprehension of "the Roach." The goal

was to create an immediate sense of urgency. Deciding on this scene was the hardest decision of the opening pages and impacted the entire story. The premise of the book is a crime that was almost perfect. The killer had effectively gotten away with murder. The victim was buried and no one had questioned the verdict of accidental death. This eliminated starting the book during the murder or immediately after when police are usually called. How to make the possibility of a crime bubble to the surface (without making local police look like idiots)? I decided that the victim's daughter was the most likely person to insist it wasn't possible her father died as a result of carelessness. She turns to a well-connected friend (Julien Vallotton, a returning character) who logically involves a police inspector he knows. This is Agnes's introduction to the crime. Now, how to actually begin? I wanted to bring them all together without a lot of preliminary set up. Baselworld, the famous watch and jewelry exhibition, would be an important location for the remainder of the book so I started there. The daughter and Vallotton had a reason to be there. A longtime criminal who was also there (The Roach) gave Agnes a reason that also introduced her professional abilities. The Roach also let me start the book with action, even if it was sub-plot action. I had my opening scene and the pacing I wanted.

Tone: The mystery genre spans a broad swath from thriller to traditional to cozy. I want readers to understand where this book fits in the continuum. The

Agnes Lüthi series leans toward traditional mystery more than police procedural. At the same time, Agnes is a police inspector so it's also not a cozy. As I already mentioned, the first pages involved "the Roach" for pacing. He also impacted tone: his was white-collar crime. While Agnes delves into violent crimes, the initial tone should suggest that the book won't involve graphic violence.

Place: The series is set in Switzerland, which is a draw. That needs to be clear right away.

Diving into specifics based on these four points, the opening paragraph is short.

There was a crowd but none of them mattered. Agnes Lüthi had eyes for only one man, the one she'd nicknamed the Roach. The one she'd only dreamt of finding in Switzerland.

Here, I establish the name of the main character, hint at her history (she's dreamt of finding the man, which indicates prior knowledge), and state that they are in Switzerland. The first sentence could be a throwaway but I wanted to quickly highlight Agnes's focus: She's not alone, nor is she distracted by other people.

The next paragraph changes pace and expands to more description.

She [Agnes Lüthi] moved quickly despite her injured leg, focused on her destination, closing her umbrella when she reached the high canopy. A chain of buses discharged passengers in front of the Messe Basel Exhibition Halls and they flowed past her toward the doors as if the world's premier watch and jewelry show might sell out of goods if they dallied. She had never before been to Baselworld, but from the

look of the well-dressed crowd judged it was a fitting place to find this particular man.

This is our first taste of place. I take time with it because much of the book will happen here; it's not wasted description. Not only is the action in Switzerland, but in Basel, at a glamorous watch show. Hopefully readers think: Yes, watches and luxury goods sound like Switzerland. I trust this description and therefore the author. At the same time, I establish that the luxurious surroundings are not part of Agnes's everyday world. Dropping hints about the personality of the character is important, particularly when it can be spread across other vital information and not delivered in a data dump. The limp is part of this. Returning readers will remember why she is limping, and it situates this story in a short time period after the end of the first book. It would be easy to insert that it has been a specific number of weeks since her injury, however that detail was trimmed from earlier drafts.

At the half page point of the first page we meet one of Agnes's colleagues, Marcel Aubry. Why? Because information is often better conveyed through interaction. I still haven't mentioned that Agnes is a policewoman; however, she is focused on a man with the moniker "the Roach." This should signal that she's not stalking a love interest. It also eliminates him as a friend or family member. A reader might glean that she is on a police force or at least in the world of apprehending criminals. I still need to set up what kind of work Agnes does and

establish her as a trusted member of a team. At the same time, I can delve into a physical description of Agnes without laundry listing her characteristic.

Agnes moved closer to Aubry, it felt like stepping into a shadow. He was a big man, not exactly fat, but big enough to make her feel slim.

We start to “see” Agnes. Then:

They’d worked together for years in Financial Crimes.

This clarifies that it is police work. I don’t mention that Agnes is now in Violent Crimes; it’s more important to show her long past and the sense of respect from her former colleagues. Eventually the reader will understand that she is new to Violent Crimes, but she’s not new to her job in a larger sense. I chose to stay with work detail closely related to the person she is interacting with, and not launch into a full history.

In this second part of the first page, while Aubry focuses on the stakeout he’s orchestrated, we can tell that Agnes’s judgement is valued and that she feels free to share her opinion.

“Did you ever think you’d see us catch him?” Aubry said to her, still focused on the chatter in his ear.

“No, and I don’t believe it yet today.”

This is part of a longer exchange about details of the Roach, and Agnes’s search for him. The dialogue provides details about the man’s criminal

behavior, but, more importantly, it sets Agnes's tone, establishes her professional credentials and the breadth of the work she's done. The exchange also gives details about Baselworld – referencing Aubry's plan to apprehend the Roach – but it really sets the stage for other events that unfold later. Aubry says:

“Problem is, the place is littered with exits and there's a record crowd, Feels like half the world's come to Baselworld. Good for the economy, bad for us, since on-site security doesn't want a fuss disturbing their clientele.”

The second page gives two more pieces of important information. In response to Aubry saying he's glad she's here to watch the arrest, Agnes replies:

“I was nearby when you called. I left my mother-in-law at the Beyeler Museum like a bride at the altar. She may not forgive me.”

This establishes that Agnes is or was married. Returning readers will know that this is her *deceased* husband's mother. That detail doesn't matter. I simply want to set up a framework of family relationships. Past or current husband, children, those details aren't important yet. Also, the reference to her day prior to the start of the scene reiterates and clarifies that Agnes is off duty. Aubry called her while she was at a museum and their exchange doesn't sound like a formal call to duty, but a favor extended both ways. He did her the favor of asking her to be present at an important arrest (showing

his respect for her earlier work on the case) and she did him the courtesy of foregoing her off-duty activity (eager to follow up on work, perhaps eager to leave her mother-in-law). On the next page this will move directly into more detail about Agnes's situation. By the end of page three we know that she is in Violent Crimes, recently injured on the job, and returning to work in three days. The value in setting it up before jumping to these specifics is that we are more settled in the story by that point. It feels like part of a conversation between Aubry and Agnes in the normal course of meeting, rather than an information dump at the beginning. This is probably the trickiest part of first page decisions. How much information is enough to lure the reader into the story without bogging them down. If I look back at a mental checklist for this start I would say:

Main character established, small opening details about home life, personal appearance, relationship to those around her.

Pace should suggest immediate action forthcoming (and not disappoint).

Tone established as mystery with police professionals, but possibly not a procedural and definitely not a cozy.

Place is clear and setting is established for a significant part of the book.

Two pages down, 338 to go!

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Tracee de Hahn is the author of the Agnes Lüthi mysteries published by St. Martin's Press / Minotaur Books. They are based on her time living in Switzerland, with her Swiss architect husband. Born in Missouri, Tracee spent most of her early years in Kentucky followed by time in Europe and California. Currently she lives in southwest Virginia, enjoying the four seasons.

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