

The First Two Pages: *Root of All Evil*

By Liz Milliron

Level Best Books

Beginnings are hard. No matter what kind of story, the goal is the same: get the reader hooked so they want to turn the next page, and the next and next, again and again. Depending on who you talk to, that hook has to come fast, some say as soon as the first sentence. It's a lot of pressure.

The beginning for *Root of All Evil* underwent a lot of revision over two years. The first ending was roundly rejected as too slow (too much chatter, too much coffee). The second was better, but it gave the wrong impression for the story. The subject matter led the reader to believe it was about X instead of Y.

I toyed with the idea of starting with the discovery of the body. But while this is a fine thing for a mystery, and quite common for a police procedural, it felt *wrong*. Starting with the body drop was rushed. The reader didn't know who the victim was or why it was shocking he was dead. I wanted to show a little bit more about him.

With the help of my critique partners, I hit on a beginning that showcases some of the personalities while hinting at the trouble to come.

Sally Castle studied the menu for a moment, then put it down. "I'll try the Fero leMBERger and a tower of onion rings, please." She looked across the table at Colin Rafferty, her colleague from the

public defender's office. The usual crowd at Lucky 7, men and women in varying levels of business and business-casual clothing, milled around their table. "Split them with me?"

"Sure. A bottle of Miller Lite for me." He slid the beer list back in the holder.

"Miller Lite?" Sally asked as the waitress jotted down their order and walked off. "How long have you worked in Fayette County again?"

Here you have an introduction of two of the characters, including a co-protagonist (Sally). Hopefully you get a hint of her personality through her choice of food. She's practical (the onion rings), but a shine of sophistication (the fancy red wine). She ends her week out with a colleague. Friend or more? He is not as sophisticated. In an area with lots of micro and local brews, he picks a generic, mass-produced beer.

But I don't want to spend too much time chit-chatting about beer; that's almost as bad as coffee. The topic of conversation quickly shifts to work, with Colin answering a standard question like so:

He pushed away the cut-glass shakers. "Got assigned a new case today. De'Shawn Thomas, misdemeanor possession. This will be the third time I've been in court with him for the same damn charge. What the hell is the point?"

This should give the reader a sense of Colin's mind. He's frustrated and is questioning the value of his work. The intent here is to give the reader a sense that this is a guy who might be led down the primrose path if he's not careful, a foreshadowing of what's to come.

Sally remembered the young hotshot who'd arrived believing public defense was rock bottom. Their regular end-of-week outings were part of trying to change that. Sometimes she thought she was getting somewhere. Other times, like now, maybe not. "Colin, I know it's frustrating. But say you were in a high-priced private practice. Is defending someone's trust-fund kid from his third DUI in six months any different?"

From Sally's response, the reader will hopefully get two impressions. The first should be she doesn't share Colin's ennui about public defense; she is very committed to her job. Two, she sees potential in Colin and is trying to bring him along. Perhaps she also senses that this is a young man who could easily be led astray (remembering him as a "hotshot") and is willing to put in the effort to keep him on the straight and narrow—maybe change his mind set in the process.

This continues for a bit, strengthening the scene and Sally's sense of responsibility. Making this connection between Sally and Colin is going to be important later on because it speaks to Sally's motivation. Why does she do what she does? While she is a lawyer, she is not a criminal investigator, and it is critical to give her a credible reason, what an editor friend of mine calls "the Very Good Reason" to become involved in the investigation. Otherwise, she's just a snoop who ought to leave things to the police.

But again, I can't let this go on for too long or the reader will get impatient. Something has to happen.

Colin's lighthearted expression had evaporated. He rearranged the standup cards listing available desserts and beers, trying to obscure his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

He ducked his head, his chest almost flat to the table. "A guy I don't want to see just walked in."

Sally craned her neck as she looked toward the door, but even the height of the bar-style chair didn't allow her to see well over the crowd. She lifted herself up.

"Get down!" Colin hissed, pulling at her sleeve.

There it is. The hint of something to come and the first suspicious happening. At this point, the reader should be asking questions: Who just walked in? Why doesn't Colin want to see him? It's an extreme reaction for a social setting. Sally doesn't buy his attempt to brush off her concern and tries to see who is causing the commotion, but Colin reacts strongly to the action. This should prompt more questions. Why doesn't he want Sally to see? Because he's embarrassed? Because he did something wrong? Because she could be in danger?

As it turns out, Sally can't see who is making Colin so anxious, an attitude that is very uncharacteristic for him. Colin almost immediately excuses himself and leaves the table, raising questions in Sally's mind as to what is going on.

Hopefully these are questions the reader has as well...and with any luck, they will continue reading to find out.

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Liz Milliron has been making up stories, and creating her own endings for other people's stories, for as long as she can remember. She survived growing up through reading, cutting her mystery teeth on Agatha Christie, Mary Higgins Clark and, of course, Nancy Drew. As an adult, she finds escape from the world of software documentation through creating her own fictional murder and mayhem. She lives near Pittsburgh with her husband and two teenage children, and fantasizes about owning a dog—one of these days. (Headshot courtesy of www.erinmclainstudio.com)