

## **The First Two Pages: *Dominic***

By Mark Pryor (Seventh Street Books)

I'm sorry to inform you that the very first thing the title character, Dominic, does in this book is deceive you. He's a cheeky bugger, this chap, and of course he does it in his natural glib and believable way: by making you think he's laying himself bare to you.

"The first time I realized my potential for manipulating people was at age eleven," he says, right out of the gate. What wonderful honesty, what a brave man to come right out and admit his faults, confess to being manipulative!

But it's not honesty. It's a warning.

And guess what happens next?

I start the book with a story about him running away from a horrible boarding school, and I do this because Dominic, if we're about honesty here, is not a very nice man. To put it mildly. Yet he's the protagonist, so I have to make absolutely sure the reader is engaged with him, is rooting for him and somehow sympathetic to him. Somewhat ironically, then, I had to do precisely what the character himself would've done; I immediately make the reader feel sorry for him by describing the school, called Maidstone Hall: "It was a frightful place, marbled by incompetent and brutal teachers and stuffed to the rafters with despicable brats,

tweed-clad snobs who chattered incessantly about Daddy's chalet in Switzerland or Mummy's new Jag."

Hogwarts this place ain't. But I suspect that's what many readers will picture when I first mention a boarding school, so I hope that the distinction between Harry Potter's world and Dominic's is very real. And sympathy generating.

I also want the reader to know early on a few very important traits that Dominic possesses, and so I try to pack the first two pages with actions that show these traits. The first is his impulsive and risk-taking nature. We see this when he runs away from boarding school, planning to walk 500 miles home. That in itself is crazy, but Dominic takes it a step further by being totally unprepared for the trek, and he ignores the possible consequences: he expects to be caught and beaten by the headmaster. Nevertheless, he takes his chances and runs away.

Second, we get a glimpse into Dominic's view of himself. After he's picked up by the police, he tells us, "I sat in the back seat for the ride to the school, watching the countryside roll past the window, impressed with myself at how far I'd come. Impressed that I'd survived." So, his plan to escape has failed, he's expended nine hours of walking for nothing, is expecting serious punishment, and yet he's still impressed with himself. Either he's truly a glass-half-full kind of guy, or there's something else going on inside his head.

This same passage also gives the reader an idea about Dominic's failure to see danger, or more specifically his failure to recognize the danger he puts himself in. On that drive back to school, he finally recognizes that something bad may have happened on that long walk. He sees (in hindsight) that "the lanes looked narrower in the car, the hedges higher, and the trees that lined the roads reached over and extended their black branches as if to pluck us from our route." His imagination? Maybe, but Dominic is not someone prone to flights of fancy, so the more reasonable conclusion is that while he was walking he didn't recognize the narrow roads and high hedges. Such a lack of situational awareness, of course, is not a great trait for someone prone to impulsive behavior and large-scale risks.

Also, we see in the opening pages Dominic's utter contempt for authority. Not only does he dismiss concerns about his headmaster, but when he finally gets picked up by a policeman, he shows no respect or remorse, asking instead: "Can you put the lights and siren on?" Even his description of the police officer is disrespectful: "a slightly weary and overweight constable whose shirt wouldn't stay tucked in."

And this, perhaps, is the first clue in the book. When we learn that Dominic has become a prosecutor, the reader may well think, *Huh, that's odd*. Yes. Yes, it is.

What happens to Dominic when he is returned to the school is very important too, both to him and for the reader. Instead of a beating for running away, he's presented a bowl of soup and some bread, in front of the television: "That bowl of soup told me I'd won.... That was my punishment for pulling a huge stunt, one the school had never seen before. One that could have killed me and ruined the school forever."

For Dominic, it was a life lesson. He learned that "go big or go home" is a legitimate strategy, one that actually works. He tells us that, "The year of microaggressions I'd committed and gotten away with had gained me little." But pulling this "stunt"? A success. A huge success. And so when it comes to dealing with future... problems, shall we say, it's a lesson he remembers. No small measures for him; it's a 500 mile walk or nothing. We see, then, that Dominic learns from his mistakes. But he learns differently from most people: the mile-high plan wasn't an error for him, it was the execution of it. In other words, he learns not to temper his expectations or lower his goals, but to plan to achieve them more carefully.

For the reader this matters because Dominic's recklessness is in place by the time the story brings us to the present. This isn't a story or character arc for him, it's a learned trait, and so when, further into the book, he *does* decide to take

drastic action to get what he wants, we're not surprised and it's perfectly believable.

And trust me when I say that when it comes to getting what he wants, Dominic goes big.

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Mark Pryor is a former newspaper reporter from England, and now a prosecutor with the Travis County District Attorney's Office, in Austin, Texas. Mark is the author of the psychological thriller, *Hollow Man*, and its sequel, *Dominic*, published in January of 2018. He is also the author of the Hugo Marston mystery series, set in Paris, London, and Barcelona. The most recent is *The Book Artist*, and previous novels in the series include: *The Sorbonne Affair*, a "flawlessly constructed whodunit," according to *Booklist*; *The Paris Librarian*, which the *Toronto Globe & Mail* says "has it all... a finely structured plot that's one of Pryor's best books yet"; and the first in the series, *The Bookseller*, which was a *Library Journal* Debut of the Month and was called "unputdownable" by [Oprah.com](http://Oprah.com). He also created the nationally recognized true-crime blog "D.A. Confidential." As a prosecutor, he has appeared on CBS News's *48 Hours* and Discovery Channel's *Discovery ID: Cold Blood*.