

## **The First Two Pages: *The Blues Don't Care* by Paul D. Marks (Down & Out)**

An Essay by Paul D. Marks

Thanks, Art, for having me here at The First Two Pages to talk about my new mystery-thriller, *The Blues Don't Care*.

We're often told do this, don't do that. For example, don't use flashbacks, don't use prologues, or whatever the rule du jour is. When I was doing screenplays there was a producer—it was rumored—who, if he saw ellipses in a screenplay, would toss it right there. I'm not sure if that was true, but it wouldn't surprise me. But why be so rigid? Shouldn't we do what works for the story, as long as it's told in a way that's interesting and can be understood?

*The Blues Don't Care* opens with one of those no-nos—a prologue. I'm not sure who decreed the rule of not starting with a prologue, but once it was decreed, lots of people seemed to jump on the bandwagon. So what happens then? Of course, there are still books with *prologues*, and sometimes they're labeled as such. Sometimes not. I often see books that start on Chapter One, but it really isn't *chapter one* but a prologue under another name because the author or editor didn't want to open something with the dastardly prologue.

To me, there's a difference between a prologue and an opening chapter. A prologue is something that happens before or separate from the main storyline. Sometimes it's used to provide background information that will help the reader

understand the story. In my case the prologue takes place many decades after the main story, but it gives context to that story and acts as a teaser to draw the reader into the story, which begins in Chapter One.

In *The Blues Don't Care*, the prologue takes place at the turn of the Millennium, from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the bulk of the story takes place on the Los Angeles home front during World War II. I could have gone one of two ways in *Blues*, with or without the prologue. I could have done as some people suggested and gotten rid of it (and the epilogue, also set on the verge of the new millennium) and just told the story in the 1940s. But I chose not to do that.

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In the first two pages of the prologue, one of big band musician Bobby Saxon's grown daughters gets a phone call in the middle of the night—her father (Bobby) has died. The caller wants her to come down to L.A. to identify the body.

The late-night phone call jangled Diane awake.

“Diane Saxon?” the officious voice on the other end said.

“Yes.” She tried to shake the sleep out of her voice.

“This is the Los Angeles County Coroner's office—”

In those few words, any leftover sleepiness Diane had escaped, replaced by dread.

Diane heads down to L.A. from her home in San Francisco. She spends some time in Bobby's house, reminiscing, rummaging through old scrapbooks, playing some of Bobby's old records—records he performed on—before heading

to the coroner. In this way we get to know a little bit about Bobby before we actually meet him as a young man in Chapter One.

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*The Blues Don't Care* is something a little different for me. For one thing it's set on the Los Angeles home front during World War II as opposed to the present or recent past. So I could have told the story simply from that perspective. But I chose to use the framing devices of a prologue and epilogue set in contemporary times.

And the character of Bobby Saxon was interesting for me to write in that he's an outsider amongst outsiders. He's on a mission. He wants to play piano for the Booker "Boom-Boom" Taylor band, the house band at the famous Club Alabam on Central Avenue in the heart of Los Angeles during World War II. But there's a problem: he's young and he's white. So if he gets the gig, he'd be the only white player in the otherwise all-black band. That's not the only thing standing in his way. In order to get the gig, he must first solve a murder that one of the band members has been accused of. And if that's still not enough there's another big thing standing in his way...but you'll have to read the book to find that one out.

*The Blues Don't Care* is a little more *expansive* than my other novels. I wanted to be able to delve deeper into the characters—especially Bobby, as he's

rather unique, particularly for that time period. I also wanted to dig into the era, hopefully giving the reader a truly immersive experience. I wanted them to drop in and feel like they were there: taste the smoke, feel the beat, and face the heat that Bobby's under when, in order to get that gig, he must first solve the murder that one of the band members is accused of.

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After Diane spends time at Bobby's house, she heads for her appointment at the morgue:

She [Diane] stepped out into a world that was more what she expected. Sterile, tile, gurneys. People in white smocks. An attendant escorted her to the viewing room. A spikey-haired doctor joined them.

"I'm Doctor Takamura. I'm sorry you had to come down here."

"I guess it's something that has to be done."

"We don't usually have people come down to the morgue to identify remains anymore. That's just in the movies. But this was a special case."

So, hopefully, this being a "special case" will intrigue the reader. Why is Bobby's death special?

Then, two other people show up, a reporter from the L.A. Times and an elegantly dressed older African-American man. This is Booker, the band leader whose band Bobby had wanted to join back in the day. The man who'd played piggyback with Diane and her sister when they were kids. And the man who is about to tell Bobby's real story—the story Diane and her sister never knew. And very shortly we're in Chapter One, in the '40s in the middle of the war.

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I generally like to open with a strong hook or teaser scene, often action, often someone in jeopardy. In *Blues*, I also wanted it to be as much of a character story as it is a mystery-thriller. To that end, I wanted to show Bobby's family. We don't meet them in the main body of the story, but because of the framing devices we do know something of what happened to him later. We also know that he kept secrets from that family, and I hope that acts as the hook that will make people want to keep reading past the prologue.

The bulk of the story is set in the 1940s, with Bobby trying to get that gig while, at the same time, trying to figure out who he is, and while trying to solve that murder. But the prologue and epilogue bring it into the present (or near-past), to show a bit of who Bobby was—and who he became. But in the present, Diane comes to L.A. and is intrigued by a side of her father she never knew. As Booker begins relating Bobby's story, she's drawn into his story, as I hope the reader will be and want to find out more about him, just as she does:

“We weren't in the music business together. We owned it. We had this town of Los Angeles locked up tighter than a bass drum. And your pop, he really could have gone somewhere. And no one could tap the eighty-eights like he could.”

“Eighty-eights?” the assistant said.

“The piano, hon. Tickle the ivories. Back in the day, Bobby Saxon was the man. And he knew one thing better than anyone, that we're all bluffing our way through life.” Booker tripped on his words as another man entered the room. Dressed casual cool.

“Who're you?” the doctor said.

“Irvin Hernandez, L.A. Times.”

“The Times—what does the Times want here?”

“This is Bobby Saxon, right?”

“Yes.”

“I want his story.”

“I didn’t know anyone remembered my father. He hasn’t played music in years.”

“You’re his daughter? You must have some story to tell.”

To Diane, Bobby was just dad. She didn’t have much to tell.

Her puzzlement must have been clear to everyone in the room.

Booker sat on a chair in the corner, leaning his chin on his cane. “I have a story to tell,” he began. “It was the middle of the war when I met Bobby...”

That’s how the prologue ends. From there it launches into Chapter One with Booker telling his and Bobby’s tale. I hope I made the right choice going with the prologue.

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Paul D. Marks is the author of the Shamus Award-Winning mystery-thriller *White Heat*. *Publishers Weekly* called *White Heat* a “taut crime yarn.” Betty Webb of *Mystery Scene Magazine* called its sequel *Broken Windows* “Extraordinary.” His short story “Ghosts of Bunker Hill” was voted #1 in the 2016 *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* Readers Award, and “Fade-Out on Bunker Hill” came in second in the 2020 *Ellery Queen* Readers Poll. “Windward” was selected for the *Best American Mystery Stories of 2018* and won the 2018 Macavity Award for Best Short Story. He has written four novels, co-edited two anthologies, and written countless short stories, including many award winners and nominees. His short fiction has been published in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, Akashic’s Noir series (St. Louis), *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Hardboiled*, *Switchblade*, *Mystery Weekly*, and many others. He has served on the boards of the Los Angeles chapters of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. His latest novel is *The Blues Don’t Care*.