

The First Two Pages of “The Hollywood Gangster” by R.J. Koreto

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An Essay by R.J. Koreto

In my writings, I go back and forth between first person and third person. There’s no question it’s a lot easier to stay in the third person, with a commanding view of the action. However, I really enjoy the challenge of getting inside the head of a narrator and seeing the plot and everyone’s behavior through their eyes.

I had always wanted to do a 1930s-style crime story with tough flatfeet, gorgeous dames, and slick gangsters. But I knew I needed to give it a fresh perspective to keep it from being just a pale imitation of one of my literary heroes, Dashiell Hammett. So I gave the narration to a 16-year-old boy. It wasn’t too much of a stretch—some 40 years ago I was one!

I put myself inside that teenager to think about what would be significant to him, particularly a boy like this, who had spent his early years in an orphanage. What would a boy that age see? What would he concern himself with? Self-centeredness is the default mode for teens: How does everything affect MY life? Even a sudden murder is going to be about his part in it, how it touches his narrow fears and desires, well-divorced from the concerns of the adults involved.

That meant a particular kind of opener. Certainly, the boy admits that everyone wants to know about his stunning movie star mother—but he hardly knows her, isn't interested in her, and so, “tough luck, dear reader, you're not going to get her.” He quickly glosses over his privileged life and jumps to what really makes his world worthwhile: his housekeeper/nanny, probably the only adult who has ever cared for him.

She is the focus of his life. His curiosity is about her, and for all the excitement about a dead body and the glamorous Hollywood connection, the narrator gives his time, affection, and admiration to the housekeeper who raises him, who feeds him, and who it seems is the smartest person he knows. Without directly planning it, I had my narrator order, in the second sentence, what's really important in his story: himself and the woman who raised him.

It wasn't until I was done writing the first draft that I realized that I had confounded readers' expectations from the first line, and by continuing with that approach, put a new spin on an old story: a noirish plot seen through innocent eyes.

Caressa del Torrio was one of the most beautiful actresses of the 1930s, and so everyone wants to know what it was like to have her as my mother, but in fact she lost interest in us pretty quickly, and so this story isn't really about her. It's about me, my sister Juliana, and the dead body in our study, but mostly it's about Despy, who pulled the neatest trick I ever saw and walked away from it all scot-free.

Miss del Torrio adopted me and Juliana from the same orphanage at the same time, which was a popular thing to do back then. We always thought of ourselves as brother and sister, even though we weren't blood relations. We looked similar enough for

people to think us twins, being almost the same age. By the time we were sixteen, we hardly saw Miss del Torrio anymore, because she was busy making movies and going to dinners and parties, but we went to a good school and lived in a big house, so it wasn't so bad—and we had Despy.

Her real name was Mrs. Despina, and we never knew her first name, or if there had been a Mr. Despina, or even where she came from. She had a slight accent, but I couldn't place it, and she didn't speak about her past. She pretty much raised us and managed the household and was a great cook—and was the only one Miss del Torrio would listen to.

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Over the years, R.J. Koreto has been a magazine writer and editor, website manager, PR consultant, book author, and seaman in the U.S. Merchant Marine. He was born and raised in New York and has a B.A. in English and Latin from Vassar College.

He is the author of the Lady Frances Ffolkes and Alice Roosevelt historical mysteries and his stories have appeared in both *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. He also published a book on practice management for financial professionals.

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