

## **The First Two Pages of “The Moon God of Broadmoor” by M.H. Callway**

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edited by Judy Penz Sheluk (Superior Shores Press)

An Essay by M.H. Callway

I became a crime writer by a circuitous route. I started writing as a child, creating plays for my long-suffering buddies, but I segued into science at university. After graduation, I spent most of my working career working for or consulting to the Ontario civil service. Though my bosses praised me for my “strong writing skills,” I can assure you that wordsmithing in science and the bureaucracy was the complete antithesis of creative writing!

Scientific papers are written to a rigid formula. Personal insights and opinions are strictly verboten. The passive voice is preferred. And worse, since the bureaucracy is a political system, their communication does not mean clarity—rather the opposite. The purpose of bureaucratic writing is to obfuscate and to hedge, to protect one’s political masters at all costs, and to never ever paint them into a corner with a commitment.

But there was an upside. My work experiences in government and science have been rich sources of inspiration for my fiction and an absolute goldmine of comedy material. The creators of the British satirical comedy series, *Yes Minister*,

maintained that they never had to think up jokes for their show: they merely documented their working experiences. They weren't kidding!

I drew on my time served in the civil service to create my breakthrough story, "Kill the Boss." It won first prize in a contest held by the Crime Writers of Canada and encouraged me as a former scientist to keep writing fiction. Over the years I've returned to this comedy well again and again, most recently for "The Moon God of Broadmoor," my story in Judy Penz Sheluk's new anthology, *Moonlight and Misadventure*.

"The Moon God of Broadmoor" is about the almost insurmountable difficulties idealists face when they work to create a better world. My two protagonists, Liz, a junior health inspector, and Stanley, the self-professed Moon God, are both outsiders in their worlds. While Stanley has embraced delusion and denial of reality, Liz is young and resilient enough to fight the system. Their determination to act leads to an unusual friendship.

In the first lines of "Moon God," I establish Liz's idealism and her frustration with a political system that punishes action. I relied on impactful verbs to capture these ideas:

The life of a public health inspector is not easy. In college I'd studied to become one, because I **yearned** to protect the public from danger. But out in the real world, I quickly learned that my approach to **fixing** health problems **guaranteed** that I'd remain a junior inspector forever.

Liz's boss-from-hell, Rick, keeps her busy in the office writing meaningless letters and reports. The S.O.A.D. letters (Sod Off and Die letters) she crafts are actually real.

When creating Liz, I drew on my eight years working in public health for the Ontario Ministry of Health. The way I landed my job was right out of *Yes, Minister*.

Fed up with being pigeon-holed as a “techie” scientist in industrial health and safety, I applied for an administrative position with the Public Health Branch. Halfway through my interview, the manager held up her hand.

“Why, you’re a scientist!” she said, possibly paying attention to my resume for the first time. “My colleague down the hall is looking for someone who knows about environmental issues.”

Without further ado, she led me down the hall to the Disease Control and Epidemiology Service and introduced me to the young doctor who would become my boss for the next five years. I didn’t have a clue about environmental issues, but neither did he. He hired me on the spot—and slotted me back into my scientific pigeonhole.

My informal hiring was due to the chaos left by a great upheaval in public health department. In the 1980s, managers were running like lemmings from one organizational theory to another. In the provincial government, theories about

centralization versus decentralization waxed and waned like phases of the moon. I'd caught a massive decentralization wave.

Due to a recent reorganization, public health at the Ontario Ministry of Health had been cut to a skeleton crew, a tiny branch buried within a large and irrelevant division. Many civil servants had lost their jobs—something unheard of at the time—because their responsibilities had been hived off to other Ministries like Environment and Labour. Virtually all hands-on investigations had been dumped onto the municipal health departments. The political bosses loved this arrangement: in one stroke, they'd disappeared a big chunk of the Ministry of Health's budget by shuffling it off to other parts of the government. And they looked golden since they'd saved the taxpayers money.

Naturally the public was confused. People would still write the Minister of Health about public health issues like filthy swimming pools. One of my jobs was to write them back to say "Health doesn't handle swimming pools anymore. That's why I'm sending your letter over to the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations."

I couldn't just use a form letter. Heaven forbid! At all times, the Minister had to appear warm and caring to voters. My creativity was challenged to write a different SOAD form letter every single time.

I've longed to use this grinding experience in my fiction though I confess that my colleagues and I called the SOAD letters a much ruder name.

For the past year my boss, Rick the Dick, had me logging reports and drafting S.O.A.D letters for his signature.

S.O.A.D. translation: "We don't handle your problem at the public health department so I'm sending it over to [insert handy department name here]. Thank you so much for sharing your concerns with us. Now Sod Off and Die."

The trigger for the Moon God story, the complaint about a befouled lawn, happens to be true.

There are certain problems that no one in government wants to deal with. Other problems simply slip through the cracks in jurisdictional boundaries. Often as not these problems land in the public department and we became the court of last resort for the bizarre.

One ongoing problem we had was neighbourly disputes. When all other options to attack each other had failed, warring homeowners would light on the idea: "It's a health hazard!"

Dog poop was a favorite source of problems. One neighbour's dog unloading on another's lawn meant a battle royal. Many times, these citizens would send graphic photos to urge unfeeling bureaucrats to DO something. I used verbatim the comment my colleague uttered upon viewing such evidence.

One steamy August afternoon, my job turned to crap. Literally crap.

Rick dropped a color print-out on my desk. **“That’s not chocolate ice cream,”** he said with a smirk.

As part of the 1980s public health decentralization plan, we at the Ministry were told in no uncertain terms that we were to play an advisory role. We must never interfere in operations; in other words, do nothing.

From Rick I’d learned the hard way to avoid inter-jurisdictional disputes like poison.

But disease outbreaks, witness COVID, do not respect jurisdictional boundaries. And often the municipal health department did not have the necessary expertise to deal with a problem. That’s how I ended up tracking the source of lead poisoning case in two young children and measuring carbon monoxide levels in bingo halls and ice arenas. For several months I assisted a Centers for Disease Control investigation of a series of murders at a Toronto hospital, but that’s a story for another day.

Nothing could galvanize the Ministry into action like an inquiry from a Member of the Provincial Parliament. This vaporized inertia like magic: anything to avoid political fall-out. This is the way I got Liz out of the office and over to the Broadmoor Apartments where she meets Stanley, the Moon God.

Rick puffed up to his full five feet six inches. “Councilor Viola Best phoned me this morning. Personally. She’s very upset with the health department.”  
and

Rick swore. He'd ordered me to file all dog crap complaints directly into our system's Recycle Bin. Now one had risen from the grave to bite him in the butt.

But ever the true bureaucrat, Rick has to have the last word:

“Get yourself down to Old Lady Grump's garden and do an inspection. Show her that public health really cares.”

In other words, flood the old dear with warm words, but don't actually resolve her complaint.

Liz of course has other ideas, which leads to her encounter with the Moon God of Broadmoor and their subsequent misadventures.

So as you can see, even the satanic coils of bureaucracy can yield treasures that keep on giving for stories and novels to come.

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M. H. Callway's short crime fiction has been published in many anthologies and magazines. Her stories and novellas have won or been short-listed for several awards, including the Bony Pete, Crime Writers of Canada Award of Excellence, and the Derringer. Her debut novel, *Windigo Fire*, was shortlisted for the Debut Dagger and the CWC Awards of Excellence for Best Unpublished and Best First Novel. In 2013, she co-founded the Mesdames of Mayhem, a collective of leading Canadian crime writers whose work is showcased in four 13-themed anthologies. The Mesdames are the subject of a CBC documentary by director Cat Mills.