

The First Two Pages of “Cardigans” by Wendy Hornsby
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An Essay by Wendy Hornsby

Some short stories hover in the background for months or even years, needing time to germinate before taking form. Others happen like a sudden bright flash. “Cardigans” is one of the latter.

I’m an incurable pantster, meaning I write by the seat of my pants rather than outlining, planning, and plotting before I begin writing. “Cardigans” emerged unbidden out of conversation my husband and I had during a road trip; road trips are great for thinking about nothing and everything. At the time, we were just emerging from our pandemic cocoon, still wary about where we would stop to eat and where we would stay, but we were happy about being out loose in the world again. The day was chilly, so I reached into the backseat for the big gray cardigan I keep in the car. As I put it on, I said something about how much I love a good cardigan and from the conversation that followed, I had the opening lines of the story:

Cardigans. Is there a garment more sublime than a beautiful cardigan? In the strange new post-pandemic world we have landed in, cardigans are an absolute necessity for working women. Preferably a vee-neck cardy with pockets. In my opinion, without pockets it’s just a sweater that buttons up the front.

In a novel, a writer can mosey around, use some pages for digression about something or other. But in a short story there is no space for authorial folderol. The opening has to be packed tight, like the trunk of a VW bug for a three-month campout.

I was writing a crime story because that is my market niche. Right at the beginning, I needed to inject presentiments of some mischief or mayhem to follow. I also needed to introduce the story's narrator and give her a voice before going further.

What I like about that opening is that the image projected by cardigans is so very benign that it sets up a contrast for the two lines that follow:

The perfection of the cardigan is, of course, where what we will call an unfortunate series of events began. I bear all due regret and responsibility, but I don't know how I would have survived the re-entry to the workplace were it not for the cardigan.

Those two lines have a lot of work to do. I chose to use first person point of view because I wanted to hear the narrator's interpretation of the "unfortunate series of events." Even though the understory will become darker and the stakes for her become more dire as it progresses, I wanted to keep the tone light by using her voice. When she adds *but* after saying "I bear all due regret and responsibility," I wanted to convey that she does not actually feel guilty because circumstances justify what she does. That is an important part of her character development. The same two sentences also defines the timeframe—post-pandemic—and the setting—her workplace—and they offer the suspense of unfortunate events to come.

For many people, the return to the physical workplace has been disorienting. That disorientation is important to the story and to the character who tells it. I don't define what the protagonist's work is, but I wanted it to have her travel from dull place to dull place (apologies to Akron and Duluth), committing each acquisition in a different city

and always being the outsider in a roomful of men she outranks. The next paragraph further reveals her character by having her talk about how she handled a stressful situation in the past:

When the call came for us to go back into the office after the shutdown, it seemed that all of the men in my field had pulled a message out of the ether granting them permission to show up for work wearing polos and chinos. No one, it seems, wears business suits anymore. Except maybe in court, but the less said about what I know about that, the better. I mean, when you're in a rush and a parking valet hands you the key fob for the wrong car, how can you call driving off in some guy's Jag an actual car theft if you have a plane to catch? It's not as if I kept the car. But that's over and done with, so let's just close that file.

Intentionally, in the following paragraph, I juxtapose feeling like an outsider with the segue to her mention of her “first *ad hoc* sweater acquisition” because one motivates the other:

When I look back, it seems to me that my first *ad hoc* sweater acquisition was nothing more than an opportunity that presented at a fortuitous moment, very like accepting that key fob when it was expedient to do so.

She goes on to explain why she needs a particular cardigan:

I was in Akron for meetings at one of the company's branch offices, the first in-person meetings after the quarantine. I walked into the conference room wearing a tailored wool jacket over a silk shirtwaist dress—gorgeous abstract pattern in tones of blue on a black—and high heels, totally unaware that I would be presiding over a collection of comfortably attired, polo-shirted men. The situation caught me unawares, unprepared. And I hate that. If I'd had the right cardigan to dress down the shirtwaist and had worn flat shoes instead of heels I would have looked more like a team player than the hammer sent by the head office, which I was. But there I sat at the head of a conference table in my tailored jacket looking

more like a starchy nun who is just waiting to smack some knuckles with a ruler than like a team player.

After that dreadful first morning meeting, feeling frankly pissy about feeling out of place and in serious need of a caffeine infusion, I stopped at a Starbuck's on my way to find lunch. As I stood in line to give my order, I noticed a woman sitting by the window with her coffee and newspapers, wearing a jacket-cut cardigan of the perfect blue to pair with my dress. Aegean blue, not royal, not aqua. Aegean. I decided that when I got my drink I would sit down beside her and casually ask where she acquired it. But the line was slow and the woman in the perfect Aegean cardigan was gathering her things and heading for the door before I had even ordered. I looked at my watch, said, Oh, bother, and turned to follow her.

The color and cut of the cardigan is always an important consideration to our narrator, and that's where the musings that became "Cardigans" began. You will need to read the rest of the story to find out how she manages to acquire the perfect Aegean blue cardigan. And the gorgeous red one with the silk thread, and the unusual adobe one, and so on.

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An NPR interviewer aptly described Edgar Award-winning author Wendy Hornsby as "a genteel college professor by day, and by night a purveyor of murder most foul." Now Professor of History, *emerita*, she has abandoned all pretense of gentility in order to purvey foul murder full time. That is, murder on the printed page. Wendy is the author of fifteen novels and a collection of short stories, *Nine Sons*, that includes the Edgar Award-winning story of the same title. Several of her short stories have been selected for inclusion in annual best story collections. Her story, "Cardigans," can be found in the March/April 2022 issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Wendy lives with her husband in California's Gold Rush country. www.wendyhornsby.com