The First Two Pages of "Pieces of Everyone, Everywhere"
by Cynthia Swanson

From *Denver Noir*, edited by Cynthia Swanson (Akashic Books)

An Essay by Cynthia Swanson

When Brooklyn-based publisher Akashic Books asked me to edit the Denver edition of their celebrated *Noir* series and said they hoped I'd include a story of my own, I knew exactly what I wanted to write about. One of the hallmarks of the *Noir* series is that each story is set in a distinct neighborhood within a particular volume's city. Each of the other thirteen *Denver Noir* contributors identified the neighborhood in which they wanted to set their story, but I reserved one for myself: Cheesman Park.

I selected Cheesman because of its unnerving history. In the late 1800s, when Denver was sprouting as a city, the now-bucolic 80-acre patch called Cheesman Park was a cemetery. In 1893, the city decided to turn the area into a park. Denverites were advised that if they had family members buried there, they should immediately relocate their loved ones' remains to other cemeteries. When all had done so, the remaining bodies were those of paupers, criminals, and anyone else with no one to speak for them. At that point, laborers were hired to exhume the leftover gravesites (which numbered in the thousands) and place the bodies in plain wooden caskets for transport to an outlying cemetery.

I've long known about this peculiar history, and a *Denver Noir* story provided the perfect vehicle to bring it alive (so to speak). As a reader, history fascinates me—but all the more so in historical fiction, when I can feel all the feels alongside someone who was (or could have been) there.

Who better to tell this story, I decided, than one of those grave-exhuming laborers?

Because I wanted readers to immediately understand and sympathize with my main character, Sam, I began with Sam's opinion about the work to be undertaken (yes, another pun intended):

> Digging graves is straightforward labor, involving little more than brute strength and a sufficiently sharp blade. The job can be done with relative ease by even the most doltish of common workhands.
>
> But here's something many do not know: *exhuming* graves, by contrast, is art. One cannot simply thrust one's spade in the ground, hack around until one hits upon some solid object, then mercilessly subtract shovelful after shovelful of raw earth until the grave's remains, treasure-like, are exposed. Nor can one wrest such treasure from the ground, haphazardly tossing fragments to the surface and flinging them into any vessel conveniently nearby.
>
> No. Such practices would be immoral. Moreover, they would, as my Uncle August said, invite misfortune. August believed, as do I, that regardless of circumstances, the dead deserve to lie peacefully. They should be disturbed only in the most dire of situations. If a body *must* be moved, it should be done properly and with reverence.
>
> "There's no cause to uproot them, Sam," Uncle August told me. "If you have to do it, you better have a damn good reason. And you better treat them with respect."
>
> I had, and continue to have, no argument with that. All bodies, in my belief—both the dead and the living—should be treated with respect.

The last word in these paragraphs—*respect*—is significant. The word comes up seven times in the story, twice in the above passage. Respect (or lack thereof) is a thematic key to the story, which is why I repeat the word so frequently.

The passage above contains foreshadowing of the work Sam will perform in Denver, but I chose to put it into context with a flashback.

I know, I know—a flashback this early? An unpardonable sin—or so the creative writing professors tell us.

But is it? For me, it depends on: 1) how well it's done, 2) how brief it is, and 3) its significance to the overall story.

You decide! Here's the flashback that follows the above passage:

> Uncle August and I had this conversation last year while standing in an Iowa cornfield. Plowing a new field, we encountered a shallow grave under a meager scattering of stones. We found no coffin, no shroud, not even a scrap of clothing—just a full, adult human skeleton set into the thick Midwest soil, all flesh that once graced the bones returned entirely to the earth. That the grave was unviolated by an animal was nothing short of providence.
>
> No one besides our family had ever homesteaded that land, so the skeleton was either an Indian's or perhaps belonged to some white man who, decades earlier, had been making his way west and died en route. Uncle August said his money was on the latter, because Indians are smarter than that—they don't leave their dead lying about like so much rubbish. I suspect he's right.
>
> Either way, Uncle August said we were obliged to move the body appropriately. We returned to the barn and hammered together a solid though simple coffin. We lugged it to the field and eased the bones into place, carefully reassembling those separated from their neighbors. Then we moved the entire affair under a willow tree—where it should have been all along, as was obvious to both of us—

> and ensured the box was set accurately, buried deeply. The task cost us nearly a full day of plowing, but we accomplished it with respect.

Notice that word again? Chances are, you did.

Tone is important here, too. Because the story is set in 1893, I used a more formal tone than I'd likely choose for a present-day narrator. Additionally, Sam, it will turn out, is a voracious reader—which accounts for a rather striking vocabulary, especially for one who spends days plowing Iowa cornfields and exhuming graves.

Again in a nod to the story's time period, I intentionally used the word "Indian." Native peoples would have been referred to as such during that time, so the use of the term is deliberate. Uncle August's opinion that Native communities would have treated one of their own with more respect than white men trying to beat each other to lay claim to lands that were not theirs is also likely accurate.

The passage continues:

> Well. What would Uncle August say about my first job in my new city of Denver, Colorado? What would he say about the merciless, hack-job labor into which I had embroiled myself?
>
> I choose not to think about it. When such thoughts enter my mind, I hang my head in shame.

This passage ends with Sam's head "hung in shame." This sets up an irony that I hope becomes apparent to the reader as the story unfolds. Sam must figure out how to navigate this "town of speculators and shopkeepers, cowhands and

courtesans" (as I describe early Denver in the introduction to *Denver Noir*)—the place that now embodies the young laborer's world.

The story goes on to narrate Sam's macabre experience exhuming graves. I won't give away more, except to say that Sam turns out to be one of the few laborers who (as an onlooker whispers in Sam's ear) "possesses prudence" and "will do right by them" (meaning, of course, the pool souls whose rest is disturbed). This has been foreshadowed in the scene in the cornfield, where Uncle August teaches Sam what it means to treat the dead with respect.

Will Sam, by the conclusion of the story, find a way to not only give but also *gain* respect? I'll leave it to readers to find out.

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Cynthia Swanson writes literary suspense, often using historical settings. Her debut novel, *The Bookseller*, was a *New York Times* best seller, an Indie Next selection, and the winner of the 2016 WILLA Literary Award for Historical Fiction. Swanson's second novel, the *USA Today* best seller *The Glass Forest*, was noted in Forbes as being one of "Five Novels with a Remarkably Strong Sense of Place." She is the editor of the anthology *Denver Noir,* publishing May 3, 2022 from Akashic Books. She lives with her family in Denver. Connect with her on Instagram (cynswanauthor), Twitter (cynswanauthor), Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/CynthiaSwanson), and at cynthiaswansonauthor.com.