

**The First Two Pages: “The Black and White Cookie” by Jeff Markowitz**

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An essay by Jeff Markowitz

“The Black and White Cookie” is a story about the sacrifices that a man is willing to make to stand up for what is right. It’s a story about how that sacrifice nearly destroys his family. The narrator is an older man, coming to grips with a profound loss that occurred when he was a boy of thirteen. In the first two pages, we meet that thirteen-year-old boy, his mother and father, all of them nameless.

Writers typically devote a fair amount of time and thought to selecting the names for our characters. Some authors will browse through baby-naming books and telephone directories. A quick internet search will advise you to take into account the story’s genre, setting, and era as well as the character’s age, gender, lineage, occupation, and personality. Names have to fit the character and the character’s circumstances. It can be hard sometimes to find their names, but we do find them.

As a writer, I don’t fully know the characters until I can call them by their name. So why did I leave the characters in “The Black and White Cookie”

nameless? Can the absence of a name establish their identity in the same way that a name does? Let's take a closer look at the narrator's father.

He was a city boy, born and bred, but when his wife told him that he was going to be a father, he made a decision. His son would grow up in the suburbs. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for, a three-bedroom, one-bath ranch house, one of a thousand identical ranch houses sprouting in the fertile soil that had until recently been a potato farm.

In the post-World War Two migration of young families from cities to suburbs, our narrator's father is an everyman, going to his job in the city and making his way home every night.

He didn't mind the commute. It was, he knew, a small price to pay so that his son could grow up with a back yard. Well, not so small a price, he decided, when he thought about the toll. You see, there were thousands of men just like this man, tens of thousands, with their job in the city and their home in the suburb. The tollbooth went up at mile marker 1.

Until a day came, when the father didn't come home.

That night was the worst night of my short life, until the next night and the night after that and every night that summer. I grilled my mother. It was cruel, but I had learned in school about the five w's and I was determined to make good use of my education. I knew the who, but the what, where, when and why were a mystery to me. "Where's Dad?"

There is something familiar, and at the same time, quite strange about these nameless characters. We feel an odd intimacy. Writing to his wife, the father opens his letter *My dearest wife* and he closes with *Your loving husband*. Shed of their

names, we feel a powerful connection. We are them. Or we could be if we had the courage to make the same decisions they made. If we had the courage to pay the same price.

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Jeff Markowitz (<http://www.jeffmarkowitz.com/>) is the author of five mysteries, including the award-winning dark comedy *Death and White Diamonds*. Jeff spent more than forty years creating community-based programs and services in New Jersey for children and adults with autism, including twenty-five years as President and Executive Director of the Life Skills Resource Center, before retiring in 2018 to devote more time to writing. In October 2021, a puzzle hunt based on Jeff's novella *Motive for Murder* raised more than \$1 million for at-risk children in NYC. His short story "The Black and White Cookie" can be found in the anthology *Jewish Noir II*. Jeff is a past President of the New York Chapter of Mystery Writers of America. He lives in Monmouth Junction NJ with his wife Carol and two cats, Virgil and Aeneas.