

The First Two Pages of “Disco is Dead” by Jeffrey Marks  
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An Essay by Jeffrey Marks

In the midst of the pandemic, I turned sixty, and I retired from teaching. The trips to continue research for my various projects dried up since the university libraries closed.

I had one project that didn’t need the library, a series of mystery short stories which would be semi-autobiographical. Not because my life was utterly fantastic or fascinating but because my generation was lost. Tens of thousands of gay men died during the 1980s, leaving a fraction of a full generation. With so few witnesses to speak out, I’ve seen my memories scrubbed and sanitized over the years, like hearing head-banger rock turned into mall store Muzak.

Since I was retiring, my first job came to mind. I worked one summer at a roller disco. The juxtaposition of a naïve mystery lover thrown into a rather rough situation would have been funny—if it hadn’t been me. So I started the story with my rationale for getting a job: “My lust for Agatha Christie drove me to a summer job at Norman’s Skateland.”

After discovering mystery fiction at the age of fifteen, I started buying all the books I could get my hands on. For some reason I don’t recall, I started buying first editions, which were slightly more expensive than paperbacks. Still, while

working, I could afford them. If you were to read the second story in this series, you would find an Ellery Queen clue. The third story will include homage to John Dickson Carr, a locked room, and a unique murder weapon. These themes and mystery authors were planned out before I started writing. I'd love to write a Craig Rice-related story, but I haven't come up with a theme for her works yet.

The first conflict revolves around the crime, which is introduced later in the story. I actually encountered a similar crime at the Skateland; however, it occurred after I quit, and I never learned the resolution.

That left me with the secondary conflict of the story. In the fourth paragraph, I wrote:

“What would you rather be reading?” he asked, turning so that he stopped in front of me. The girls came up to stand next to Jimmy, but he kept his eyes on me.

This other conflict would be the main character, dealing with being gay, spending more time with Jimmy, a patron at the roller disco and a popular guy from school. In these early scenes, the main character struggles to determine if Jimmy is actually interested or if he has an ulterior motive. Jimmy asks the main character for a review of *The Clocks* after talking to him. Granted that Jimmy doesn't mention the book by name, he shows an interest in the book and looks forward to the main character's review. The attraction goes beyond the romantic to finding someone who wants to talk about what the main character loves.

The second sentence brings up the other issue that was a problem then as now. If you're not out, how do you determine if another person is friendly or interested? There are girls following Jimmy throughout the evening. We never get a clear indication if Jimmy is interested in return. Even if Jimmy's not interested in these girls, is he interested in the main character? I have excellent gaydar, and one of the main clues is always an extended glance, just as Jimmy "kept his eyes on me" That clue is enough to make the main character think he has a chance.

By the end of the second page, the main character has his answer. Jimmy is doing something wrong and wants silence in exchange for his friendship—or perhaps more than friendship. This becomes a mounting conflict in that the main character has relied on books to be his friends, and a human friend, who might relate to him both romantically and intellectually, asks for a big favor.

I often say that the lyrics to a half-dozen disco songs were burned into my brain that summer. I strongly feel that you can set a time and place with music, so I mentioned two of those infamous six songs in the first two pages. The first is more obscure. You can find "Shame" on a few satellite stations, but it's not immediately recognized by most people. I felt a certain verisimilitude to the story using a song that hadn't hit the Top 10 for the year. Donna Summer's "Last Dance," the second song, is more easily recognized by the reader. She and her more popular songs are

widely known, having won a Grammy and landing in the top five songs for the year.

When my mother was cleaning out her desk not too long ago, she found that first W2 of mine. I earned a total of \$221 that summer, most of which went to mystery first editions.

### **The First Two Pages of “Disco is Dead”**

My lust for Agatha Christie drove me to a summer job at Norman’s Skateland,

Agatha Christie had died two years before, and I was snapping up her books as fast as I could with the miserable salary of \$2.10 an hour. I never understood how the rink could ignore the minimum wage, but the skaters told me that the father and son who ran the place had Mob connections, maybe with some drug dealing on the side.

So, the summer I was 16, instead of reading the latest mystery, I stood behind the counter at the skate rental and listened to Evelyn “Champagne” King sing “Shame” for the sixth time that evening. The rental counter had a rush when the doors opened and a half-hour before the rink closed. The rest of the time, we were expected to clean or wait for the skaters’ demands.

That Friday night, as I was trading out a pair of shoes with a sticky wheel Jimmy Clark flew by like a winged Mercury. Three girls trailed in his wake. He did a seamless turn and cruised by the rental counter again, giving me a broad smile. “What would you rather be reading?” he asked, turning so that he stopped in front of me. The girls came up to stand next to Jimmy, but he kept his eyes on me.

Jimmy was that good-looking guy all the girls wanted to date and all the boys wanted to be. He had broad shoulders, muscular arms, and wavy hair over deep blue eyes.

“I just got a first edition of *The Clocks*,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “This place must pay better than what I’ve heard,” he said as he turned to go. He looked back over his shoulder, and said, “Let me know if you like it.”

My eyes widened. Jimmy Clark had never expressed any interest in books, much less mysteries, and now he wanted my opinion on a lesser-known Christie novel?

By 9 pm only a few skaters remained. They were older, had later curfews – if they had them at all– and they were looking for things that the elementary-aged students would not understand. I’d learned to recognize the smell of weed that summer, even though I’d never been officially introduced to it.

“Last Dance” by Donna Summer came on, suggesting the rink had finished for the night – at least for the last dozen skaters. The staff had another hour of cleaning the skates, putting them back in the rack by size, and wiping down the concession area and restrooms.

I was the only guy working that night, which meant I had to scrub the boys’ restroom. The Normans had the archaic mindset that restrooms had to be cleaned by the appropriate gender, even when no customers remained.

I pushed open the door, carrying a dripping wet mop, leaving a trail like a hygienic Hansel. But, it wasn’t empty.

The smell of that unfamiliar, but easily identified, smoke hit me in the face. I sneezed. Jimmy Clark looked up at me. “Don’t make any noise,” he said. “Please don’t say a thing.” His blue eyes were wide and pleading. I didn’t say a word.

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Jeffrey Marks is the publisher of Crippen & Landru Publishers. He is also the author of *Who Was That Lady?* (a biography of Craig Rice), *Atomic Renaissance*, and *Anthony Boucher*. His work has been nominated for an Edgar (MWA), three Agathas (Malice Domestic), two Macavity Awards, and three Anthony Awards (Bouchercon). Today, he writes from his home in Cincinnati, which he shares with his spouse and three dogs.