

**The First Two Pages of “The Adventure of the Castle Thief” by Art Taylor**  
From *The Adventure of the Castle Thief and Other Expeditions and Indiscretions*  
by Art Taylor (Crippen & Landru)

An Essay by Art Taylor

I’ve written elsewhere (often) about how I’m a slow writer, but I’m going to use a different tag today: *tinkerer* . . . which may not be entirely unrelated, of course.

In fact, while my slowness is often the result of trying to figure things out on the level of story—What’s next for a character? Where’s the plot ultimately headed? What am I missing in terms of character development? Who are these people anyway?—I also find myself constantly rewriting lines and phrases, rearranging words and paragraphs, restructuring full scenes, the order of scenes in relation to one another, or even bigger aspects of a story’s architecture. (As I mentioned recently in an interview with the radio show *House of Mystery*, airing later this week, my story “Mrs. Marple and the Hit & Run” began as a 10,000-word story and was revised to a little over 2,500 words—perhaps an extreme case.)

Some of this might explain why the first two pages of the original draft of “The Adventure of the Castle Thief” looks very little like the final version—now the title novella of my new collection from Crippen & Landru. Many of the elements are still there and the characters and situation: a professor and students on a study abroad trip to Ireland. But the presentation has shifted considerably.

Here's the original draft of the opening, from 2017:

The university's global education office had designed a beautiful brochure for "Creative Writing in Ireland," with seductive prose about the itinerary and photographs of a busy pub in Dublin's Temple Bar area, of the picturesque Galway seaside and the dramatic Cliffs of Moher (a half-day trip to the latter), and then of the fairy-tale castle where the students would spend the final four days of the course. Professor Erwin Conroy had done his own part in no less than three information sessions (advertisements, really), summoning up the images of Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett—and for gender balance, Edna O'Brien as well—literally clicking them into view as part of a PowerPoint pitch that all but promised the great Irish writers of the past as ever-present muses for the three-week winter session. Erwin himself had been lured in, not only by the significant bonus income (which he and his wife could sorely use) but by hopes that the shift in scenery from his tiny department cubicle might inspire him as well, jump start his own writing.

But from the start, the trip had experienced problems. Only seven students had signed up—four women, three men—far less than the eighteen the global education had wanted and just barely meeting the minimum enrollment for the course to proceed. Winter in Ireland had proven cold and dreary, and the students had increasingly groaned and griped about the food: immediate revulsion about even the phrase *blood sausage* much less having it as a regular breakfast option, and did every meal need to have smoked salmon? Several students had begun joking about the program trying to turn them into *pescatarians*, increasingly twisting those first two syllables into *pesky* and ignoring in a different way the blood sausage on the buffet line.

Romantic entanglements had introduced considerable drama. Two of the students, Sarah and Baxter, had move quickly from fast friendship to flirting to undying devotion—with a brief pause along the way for Sarah to break up via email with her boyfriend back home. It was a necessary move, she stressed to Baxter, for her to feel good about the direction of their new romance—but a move which immediately embroiled her in an email battle with that ex and left her alternately enraged at his lack of understanding and engulfed in guilt about her own responsibilities to the relationship. Poor Baxter, thought Erwin through it all, and then poor Mathilda too, another student who'd been blindsided by an email from her own boyfriend—

now ex-boyfriend—on a different study abroad in Spain and declaring his own sudden enthusiasm for a beautiful student he'd met in Barcelona, a heartbreak that left Mathilda in a constant haze during several long days of workshop, at least until another of the men, David, began paying her some attention—whether through actual interest or just sensing an easy rebound conquest, Erwin wasn't sure.

More than once, several of the students had spent their own days in a different kind of haze—and with a side of nausea and worse—after rousing nights in various pubs, emboldened by the lower drinking age. One of the more regular of the party crowd, Walker, had fallen in love with a Galway barmaid—intense enough that Erwin had emailed back to the global education office to ask the administration's advice about such fraternization with the locals—"not forbidden but hardly encouraged," was the reply, leaving Erwin still to wonder what he was supposed to do about it. Fortunately, no elopement ensued before the entire team moved on to the castle with the return to the U.S. suddenly in sight—much welcome, to Erwin's mind, since he himself had spent most of the trip navigating one small crisis or another, getting no writing done, and missing his wife terribly—as his own emails home regularly proclaimed.

It's not . . . bad . . . is it? And yet . . . too much a bit too much telling perhaps? Were there better to dramatize some of the romantic entanglements that dominate the story? And did this scene start in the right place, with a brochure and PowerPoints before the trip instead of on the trip itself? Or maybe I was *thinking* that the story was on the trip, since I have those past-perfect verbs "had designed" and "had done" immediately pointing back to some *before* of the story, so . . . where *did* the story begin?

Oh, and aren't the names Baxter and Walker too close together? And wait, weren't there two more women on the trip? How come they didn't get any screen time here?

Here's the revised version—beginning with our characters in motion (literally), using more of the elements of scene-building, including dialogue, and subordinating the background exposition. The names are distinguished a little better, and there's one extra student as well, a twin in fact, not only complicating the dynamic but (perhaps against common sense) making it *easier* to distinguish them precisely *because* Erwin can't keep their names straight.

*First-Class Coach*, Erwin Conroy thought, thrown once more against the armrest, *Luxury Seating*, as the bus shimmied and shook along another winding stretch of their trek from Galway toward Sligo.

Toward the castle *south* of Sligo, Erwin corrected, hopefully fewer miles to travel, and the promotional materials had promised a treasure at the end of the journey: “Grand accommodations on a majestic 14<sup>th</sup>-century estate south of Sligo”—remembering those lines because he'd quoted them himself each time he'd pitched the program to prospective students. Winter Study Abroad: Creative Writing in Ireland. Three credits in just three weeks, a winter getaway, adventure—that's what the Global Education Office sold. “Around the World with GEO!” And Professor Erwin Conroy of the English Department as spokesman, salesman, emissary, escort, and educator.

“I wonder if there'll be a moat,” Baxter said.

“It'll be magical, I know.” Sarah's voice glowed.

Baxter and Sarah—blond and blue-eyed both of them, like something out of a J. Crew catalogue. They were the fiction writers on the trip, both of them writing short stories about college parties, impossibly idealistic relationships, unexpected infidelities, and lots of angst. Baxter had already proven the better writer of the two—a sharp, even Fitzgeraldian wit about class, society, and ethics—but his focus seemed regularly derailed by Sarah, whose own writing rarely rose above sophomoric jokes. Like something out of their stories, their own romance had moved whiplash-quickly from not knowing one another to fast friendship to flirting to undying devotion—with Sarah having to ditch a boyfriend back home to pursue this new one.

Lots of relationship drama, and Baxter and Sarah's was one of *two* romances that had started on the trip. What were the odds with only eight students in all?

Erwin glanced back toward Baxter and Sarah, but they were directly behind him—out of view unless he peered awkwardly around the seat. Instead, the twins across the aisle caught his eye, sorting through photos, letters, newspapers, and maps in the cardboard accordion file that Ainsley (or was it Carson?) had brought—“Organization is key,” she said—even though Carson (or Ainsley?) had complained it was “too fussy, too business-like.” They had family in Ireland and had spent most of their free time reconnecting with their roots, gathering research, and then funneling it into collaborative writing: part memoir, part personal essay, part reportage, part travelogue.

In the next row, Laurel's hiking boots crossed on an armrest, another massive novel in their hands—always a novel even though they themselves wrote flash nonfiction essays. (*They, them, their*, Erwin reminded himself each time, trying to get the personal pronouns to stick in his head.)

Further back, he could hear a low murmur from David, the words indistinguishable, and Mathilda's giggle—the other couple that had blossomed. David, tall and athletic, the only African American student on the trip, had been working on personal essays about race and sports. Mathilda was one of the two poets—a red-haired wisp of a girl who always seemed to be fighting a series of blushes. Her work was prose poems mostly, short lyrical pieces about teenage girls struggling to find love, to find themselves. The opposite of Sarah, Mathilda had been on the receiving end of a break-up just days into the trip, leaving her despondent until David turned his attentions her way.

Pierce, the eighth of the crew and the other poet, was quiet in the farthest seat back—brooding in some direction, Erwin felt sure.

To fall back on the words that I often use about short fiction, I hope that the new opening is economical, efficient, and focused in ways that the original draft was not. I'll admit I was proud to get all eight students introduced in the first two

pages—hopefully with enough detail to distinguish them from one another—and to slip in some key background information on the study abroad.

Part of the goal there to hit all the journalistic w's and the h too: who, what, where, when, why, and how. But I also wanted to build scene and drama, not just deliver information.

And a key point that I should stress: I didn't just *cut* the rest of the original. Bits and pieces of that were trimmed away—the Cliffs of Moher, for example, and the references to Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien—were reworked and reused elsewhere.

Tinkering all directions!

And I hope after all the tinkering that the story in its final form work well and that readers will be pleased.

Thanks for reading the two versions here and hope you track down the full story in the new collection.

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Art Taylor is the author of two collections—*The Adventure of the Castle Thief and Other Expeditions and Indiscretions* and *The Boy Detective & The Summer of '74 and Other Tales of Suspense*—and *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. His short fiction has won the Edgar Award, the Anthony Award, three additional Agatha Awards, four Macavity Awards, and four Derringer Awards. He is an associate professor of English at George Mason University. [www.arttaylorwriter.com](http://www.arttaylorwriter.com).