

**The First Two Pages of *The Mimicking of Known Successes*
by Malka Older (Tor Publishing Group)**

An Essay by Malka Older

When I wrote what are now the first two pages of *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, I had already written one beginning, in which the first-person narrator arrives back at her university after a holiday and unexpectedly encounters an old friend. It was evocative and worked well, but I wanted to get the reader into the mystery aspect of the book immediately. I decided to do this with a prologue that, unlike the rest of the book, would be told in third person and would focus on the old friend that the narrator meets shortly after.

As I thought about writing this prologue, I had in the back of the mind the opening of Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*, which opens with a body lying on the ground. It's something of a deceptive beginning, since the book is not strictly speaking a mystery, the body is not a murder victim, and, as we learn almost immediately, not even dead. But it's an engaging opening and I wanted to do something similar.

The man had disappeared from an isolated platform; the furthest platform eastward, in fact, on the 4°63' line, never a very popular ring.

In addition to starting the mystery, this sentence offers some hints about the setting: that it is not immediately familiar, and that it includes platforms and rings.

I could have kept this opening impersonal and omniscient—I considered showing the man climbing over the edge of the platform—but after the mystery, the

next important element in the book is the relationship between the two characters, so instead I followed the old friend, the investigator learning about the mystery.

It took Mossa five hours on the railcar to get there, alone because none of her Investigator colleagues were available, or eager, to take such a long trip for what would almost certainly be confirmation of a suicide.

This gives us more of a sense for the remoteness, situates the character, hints at her solitariness, and while it offers a less sinister possibility for the disappearance—suicide—the suggestion of an easy solution at this point in a book will probably make readers think that something different happened (as indeed it did bwahahaha).

The final critical element of the book that needs to be conveyed quickly and effectively is the setting. The book takes place on a gas giant planet, and so the worldbuilding requires getting readers accommodated in an unusual context; more than that, I want the setting to contribute to the feelings of mystery on the one hand and coziness on the other. The next couple paragraphs both add to what we know and feel about the setting and emphasize Mossa's somewhat introverted, contemplative character:

The platform appeared out of the swirling red fog, and moments later the railcar settled to a halt at what could barely be called a station. Mossa, who had not been looking forward to the long trip herself, had nonetheless passed it in a benevolent daze, looking out at the gaseous horizon that seemed abstractly static as it moved in constant strange patterns. Once disembarked, she found the rhythm of talking to people on the platform only with difficulty. 'And you say he was standing here?' Mossa asked.

'That's right,' the settler confirmed. 'Staring out into the eastern fog. People do that sometimes, no harm in it.'

Mossa grunted, not quite in agreement. She was aware that just because she didn't understand the appeal—you couldn't see a meter out into the muck anyway, what did it matter how far the ring had to curve before the next platform?—didn't mean that others wouldn't. But if you *were* emotionally inclined to find significance in that sort of thing, doing so on this platform seemed fairly likely to deepen any gloom you were feeling. The beaten metal was largely bare, the single ring crossing along it lonely, and it might have been a psychological effect of the sparse construction and distance from anywhere else on the planet, but the gasses seemed to flow high here, writhing around them as if the platform had sunk lower than the standard height.

Maybe it had. The maintenance team didn't make it out here very often, judging from the streaks of oxidation on the ledge.”

As a side note, I found the prologue in a different perspective and voice so effective that I'm continuing that structure for the sequels.

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Malka Older is a writer, aid worker, and sociologist. Her science-fiction political thriller *Infomocracy* was named one of the best books of 2016 by *Kirkus*, *Book Riot*, and the *Washington Post*. She created the serial *Ninth Step Station* on Realm, and her acclaimed short story collection *And Other Disasters* came out in November 2019. Her novella *The Mimicking of Known Successes*, a murder mystery set on a gas giant planet, came out in March 2023. She has a doctorate in the sociology of organizations from Sciences Po and is a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University, where she teaches on humanitarian aid and predictive fictions, and hosts the Science Fiction Sparkle Salon. Her opinions can be found in *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *Foreign Policy*, and NBC THINK, among other places.