

**The First Two Pages: “Deep Time” by Lawrence Maddox**  
From *Murder, Neat: A SleuthSayers Anthology*,  
edited by Michael Bracken and Barb Goffman (Level Short Books)

An Essay by Lawrence Maddox

I love a good con.

Who doesn't?

As a kid, my intro to con artists came via W.C. Fields and Groucho Marx. They were quick-witted and made lies and scams fun. You could root for them because they were pitted against humorless and inflexible upper-crusters. I took my kids to see Frank Ferrante's brilliant one-man show “Groucho,” and I watched my hapless offspring get drawn into Groucho's gift of gab. There's no defense against it. And no one has summed up the conman's creed better than Fields' “Never give a sucker an even break.”

It was easy for me to segue from being charmed by big-screen hustlers into a fascination with the real thing. Every time Anna Sorokin (the bank swindler who mooched off NYC socialites by pretending to be an heiress) pops into the news, I feel compelled to stop and read what she's up to now. If you're wondering, she's banned from social media and prefers jail to being under house arrest.

As you get into the real world of cons, you see there are real-life victims. Crooks cause damage, and big cons hurt a lot of people. The infamous Charles

Ponzi wiped out the savings of a largely working-class set of marks to the tune \$220 million dollars (in today's money). Still, that's a drop in the bucket compared the \$18 billion Bernie Madoff made off with, using a similar Ponzi scheme.

Wouldn't it be nice to con a con artist, especially one who was wreaking a lot of havoc?

My latest crime fiction is "Deep Time," a short story appearing in *Murder Neat*, edited by Michael Bracken and Barb Goffman. In "Deep Time" I get to con a con. There's a small con, a big con, and hopefully the reader will wonder if he, too, is being conned. It all starts with the first two pages.

The stories in *Murder Neat* are geographically regulated to drinking establishments. Having the location proscribed helped me put my story together. I've found working with an already existing set of rules really frees me up. My last tale about con artists, *The Down and Out*, was an installment in Frank Zafiro's excellent crime series *A Grifter's Song*. He set up the world and the characters, and he invited authors to come inside and play. Since Frank had already figured everything out, I just needed to tell my story.

"Deep Time" begins in a fictional upscale pub, The Burke, located in Yorba Linda, California. It's important to note that Yorba Linda is the most conservative city in California, according to the *Sacramento Bee*. The Burke is open illegally during the darkest days of the Covid pandemic.

Unless you're the George Thorogood-type and you want to drink alone, patter, braggadocio, small-talk, and propositions are the electricity that makes bars go. I wanted dialogue to carry my story, and a bar is the perfect location. It's the magic of words, and how they weave and manipulate, that draws the suckers (and hopefully the readers) in.

The banter begins as two strangers meet. To make it hard on myself, I chose The Burke's men's room as the kick-off point of "Deep Time." Most people want to finish up their business in a bathroom and get the heck out of there. Any stranger who tries to talk you up in the bathroom is suspect. It would take a powerful pitch to stop you in your tracks and engage. It's the perfect location, though. My players are trapped. What first appears as a hurdle will be vital to the con's success.

This initial section is in third person. We can never really know the interior world of these two strangers we're meeting. That would expose everything, especially since this tale not only has a con but a deeper mystery that is up to the reader to solve. Like in a Howard Hawks movie, we'll only know these characters by what actions they take. Like in an Alfred Hitchcock movie, we certainly can't trust what these two strangers say.

I should note that just after my first two pages, we switch to outside the restroom and meet Rhonda (clearly not her real name). We also switch to first person, and Rhonda's narration makes it clear that she is up to no good. I've

always enjoyed how Robert Crais switches narrative POV in his Elvis Cole novels as he toggles between chapters. I broke my story up into segments to achieve the same effect.

Back to the bathroom. Here's our opening salvo.

“Enjoying the show?” Youngman Fennel finally said.

Though he was a heavy man who'd been imbibing nonstop for the last two hours, extra time standing at the wiz box wasn't his main source of discomfort. That honor went to the headphone-wearing man leaning against the sink, watching him. “If you stick around, I've been told my hand washing is a sight to behold.”

“I'm not watching,” Headphone Man said, turning away. “I'm waiting.”

Youngman, stewed as he was on single malts, counted two unmanned urinals besides the one he was using. There were also two stalls, one of which was occupied. “Plenty of empty slots.”

Headphone Man took a deep breath. “You don't get it. I don't expect anyone to get it. I haven't found a better way to launch into this, so here goes.” He quickly glanced at his wristwatch. “I'm from the future. Three years from now, to be exact. And I need your help.”

That's the first page. I tried to keep it moving. I love to be economical, trim the fat, kill my babies, and cut to the chase. We meet three of our main characters: Youngman Fennel, Headphone Man, and the yet-unnamed guy in the stall. He's going to pop out later. We also hear Headphone Man's opening pitch.

I wanted the (supposed) mark (Youngman) to speak first, not the (supposed) con artist (Headphone Man). It makes the con artist appear weak, the mark strong. The stronger and more confident a mark feels, the more vulnerable he is. In *The Sting*, grifter Johnny Hooker sets up Lonnegan by making Lonnegan think he has

an insurmountable edge. Lonnegan gets confident. Headphone Man puts the mark, Youngman Fennel, in a position where he must speak first.

This is all supposing that Headphone Man is perpetrating a scam. Maybe it's a prank, like Youngman suggests. Or maybe he's crazy. Headphone Man's pitch is just too bonkers. I mean, time travel? Who is going to buy into that?

Well, c'mon. Clones, aliens, and yes, time travel have all entered the parlance of a certain school of on-line political discourse. This is the discourse that Youngman's *Deep Time* dabbles in. To the relatives of those who've fallen down the rabbit hole of such politically fueled beliefs, it may seem like they've lost their loved ones forever. Are these on-line believers on the wrong end of a hurtful con?

And speaking of time, the clock is ticking. A ticking clock adds suspense. And since time travel is the subject matter, continually marking time and fighting time and discussing time hopefully makes time as palpable as our locations or even our characters.

The story continues on page two.

Youngman barked a laugh. As the founder of the alt-right conspiracy blog *Deep Time*, he was a self-proclaimed expert on "tracking the Deep State through time, space, and all dimensions in between." Time travel was his *métier*, even more than space aliens who'd been elected to political office in California.

"I love it. Who put you up to this? Was it Roger?"

"Nobody. It's not a joke. This is my last chance. You're everyone's last chance."

Youngman zipped his fly. "I'll play along. So, you traveled all the way from three years in the future to watch me drain the weasel?"

And what is it that I, a humble citizen, can do? And what am I saving the world from?"

"Nuclear annihilation."

"Boring."

"And I'll be asking for five hundred thousand dollars."

Youngman erupted into more sea lion-like laughter. "This is delicious. I like a good prank, but let's make it snappy. A lovely barmaid I just met is waiting to be invited to my yacht." Youngman looked him over. "Those headphones are a nice near-futuristic touch. Or should I say headphone. It only covers one ear."

"It's not a prop. It plays an enhanced ultrasound synapse-linking loop."

"I'm intrigued. Why don't you start by telling me about your time machine?"

Headphone Man checked his watch again. "I have to talk fast. It's 2:04. I've only got eighteen minutes. At 2:22 exactly I'll be jumped forward to my time. I'd have more time with you, but it took you two minutes to pee."

"It takes what it takes." Youngman snapped his fingers impatiently. "Get on with it. I can't keep my hot barmaid waiting forever."

One last thing. The tone here is light. I'd like the readers to think they can chuckle at these two. I want to disarm the readers' critical thinking so they will buy the set-up, and then wonder what it is exactly they bought.

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For more tales of marks and cons, check out *The Down and Out*, Lawrence's installment in the excellent series *A Grifter's Song*, from Down and Out Books. You can reach Lawrence at [madxbooks@gmail.com](mailto:madxbooks@gmail.com).

