

## Beating the Sucker's Game

by Michele Lang

I have the basic elements of a story opener in my story “Sucker’s Game”—a character, in a setting, with a problem. But when I set out to write this dark little tale of 1970s suburban fear and loathing, I had some hurdles I had to address.

For one, the protagonist/narrator is going on nine years old. From her point of view, her problems are immediate and serious, but they are filtered through the perspective of a child, without the benefit of hindsight, memory, or patience for revenge. My opener must echo the deeper dilemmas to come, but given the limitations of my narrator I have to start with a thread of present, kid-sized trouble and keep pulling at it to unravel the bigger story.

The key to pulling it all together comes in the first sentence of the story.

Here are the first two pages of “Sucker’s Game”:

“You’re the people killed Christ. Right?”

I was already having a rotten time in third grade, and this gigantic, sweaty clown on my bus home from school wasn’t helping. He smelled like onions and coffee, a weird combo for a sixth grader. Way in the back, my more bohemian

comrades were smoking grass, obliterating the misery of the day. The bad kids, Mafia kids like Falcone and Gravano, but at least those guys left me alone.

I stared straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of me as the bus ground its gears and the giant kid sitting next to me shifted in his seat.

The metal back of the seat said Superior. I muttered SuperOR under my breath, like I could curse the guy away.

No dice. "Right?" he asked again, fake joviality oozing from his pores.

The kid was enormous. The size of Nebraska.

We went over a big bump down by Four Corners right then, and the boy reached out, grabbed my left shoulder, and slammed me back into my seat. I gritted my teeth. The bastard was escalating.

I stared straight ahead. SuperOR. Super OR.

"I'm gonna tell you something straight, you stuck-up little bitch. You talk so grown-up, like some fancy kike lawyer or something. I don't like you. You don't belong in this neighborhood. I'm not gonna let you forget it."

The bus swung sharply to the right. Hallelujah, it was the beefy kid's bus stop. Maybe there was a Supreme Deity after all.

We lurched to a stop. The kid smacked my left shoulder with the back of his hand, and then he spit on my bookbag.

“See you in the morning,” he whispered in my ear.

And then he lurched to his feet and swaggered off the bus. I watched him go, tears stinging the back of my eyes—no way was I ever going to cry in front of that jerk.

He was right. I was the only Jewish kid on the Catholic side of the lovely suburban town of Crestwood. And nobody was going to forget it, not him or any of the other nouveau riche, miserable kids who all had something to prove.

So what do we have here? On the surface, a kid who doesn't fit in, a Jewish girl in a sea of Catholic boys on a school bus, facing a bully who is gearing up to draw blood.

But the whole story is encapsulated in the first line. “You're the people killed Christ. Right?” At the beginning of the story, the narrator, Anna, thinks her problem is all about the bully, Alphonse. But by the end, her problems have mushroomed into a struggle for her life and identity. Who are her people, really? What if Alphonse is right...how can you win a game rigged against you from birth?

The answer to Anna's existential struggle lies hidden within the opener, somewhere within the setting, Anna's problem (Alphonse, and the larger problem of Anna's quest to survive in a hostile world), and Anna herself. Alphonse is a

symptom of a larger problem in Anna's world. Anna's obsessed with outrunning the Nazis of her daily life and in her family's past...to get past her enemies and start living her life on her own terms, she is going to have to embrace her inner Christ-killer and beat the sucker's game she was born to play.

My way of connecting the initial story problem to the larger issues Anna faces was to use the bully on the bus as a framing device. Alphonse rapidly goes from being Anna's biggest problem to a symptom of a much more life-threatening conflict, one that reaches from the past into Anna's future. By setting the opening in the immediate daily circumstances of the third-grade narrator, I hope to bring the bigger issues down to earth, into Anna's daily life. And, through the very first line, telescope through the details of the opener to the more profound problems that Anna faces.

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Michele Lang is the author of the apocalyptic SF adventure NETHERWOOD and other stories set in the Netherwood universe, as well as the LADY LAZARUS World War II supernatural thriller trilogy. "Deathmobile," a 1970s crime story set in the belly of the suburban beast, was published by WMG Publishing in the October 2014 Fiction River PAST CRIME anthology. "Sucker's Game" appears in *Jewish Noir*, edited by Kenneth Wishnia and published by PM Press.

A recovering attorney, Michele once practiced the unholy craft of litigation in Buffalo, New York City, and Connecticut. She moved back to her hometown in metro NYC right before 9/11, and lives with her family on Long Island. To find out more about Michele and her tales of redemption, visit her at [michelelang.com](http://michelelang.com)