

Hunting Inspiration With a Club

Usually I write a short story and then try to find a market for it. By nature I'm more a pantzer than a plotter. I don't trust myself to spill a good tale unless it starts from the font of inspiration.

Many of these "inspired" stories eventually found homes. But waiting for a muse can be limiting. Jack London once remarked: "You can't wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club." Last year I got out my club. I tried writing to specific prompts and for specific markets. My success surprised me.

I wrote "Critical Mass" in response to Darkhouse Books' call for submissions for Destination: Mystery! "a collection of mystery and crime stories set in locations popular for vacations."

Since I live in Santa Cruz, a popular tourist town on the coast of California, I thought, "Hmmm. Maybe I can do that." The setting was established and offered a plethora of colorful details for the story. As we are often advised, write what you know. I followed that advice right into making my protagonist a woman of a certain age longing for a literary agent:

May Knight would do anything for Hedra Zabon. Hedra represented the long sought-after prize—a New York literary agent. So May said, "Of course! Come. You will love Santa Cruz. It's a tourist destination."

Writing to specific requirements, knowing what the editor wanted, and making the protagonist a bit like myself, meant the first paragraph of "Critical Mass" practically wrote itself, especially since short stories have to get right to it. The first short paragraph contains the two main characters, the setting, the inciting event, and the editor's desired theme.

But these things do not a short story make. One needs the all-important conflict. I'd already established what my main character May Knight wanted, so all I had to do was ask, "What stands in her way?"

"I know that, dear," Hedra rasped over the phone. "I'm thinking four days."

May swallowed. Guests, like fish, stank after three days, especially in a small condo. On the other hand, she would get to meet Hedra. She gazed at the morning

newspaper spread before her, the front-page photo of a breaching humpback. “We could go out on a whale watching tour.”

“I detest tours. And I don’t care for the open water.” Hedra coughed. “I get seasick. And I can’t swim.”

May sucked in her breath. Her body thrilled with tremolos. Was the woman coming just to see her? May had not told a soul the big news that she might be about to score an agent, waiting until they signed a contract. But this visit was a good omen—the woman must be traveling all the way to the West Coast so they could work out the “problematic areas” in May’s manuscript.

When Hedra announced the date of her trip, May glanced at the wall calendar and chewed her lip. She’d have to cancel two appointments and maybe call in sick to work.

“I trust that will be okay with you.” Hedra sniffed.

“It will be wonderful to meet you.” May pumped her fist in the air.

“Will you pick me up at the airport?” Hedra asked.

What a demanding woman. But May expected nothing less from a New York literary agent.

Initially May’s lack of spine appears to be the problem, but the bigger problem is the very object of her desire—Hedra Zabon, the literary agent herself.

Internal conflicts are good, but I’m a bigger fan of person vs. person conflict. Why not make Hedra Zabon a self-involved, mean-spirited person with ulterior motives?

The editor’s idea for the anthology as well as the relationship between the two women suggested the nature of their opening dialog, which not only introduces conflict, but also foreshadows a possible demise. Although that could be a red herring. Read to find out.



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A reading addict since childhood, Vinnie is now the author of the Carol Sabala mysteries. The seventh installment in the series, *Black Beans & Venom*, was a finalist for the Claymore Award. She's also written many published short stories including *Novel Solution* in the anthology, *Fish or Cut Bait*, and *Bad Connection*, the 2015 winner of the Golden Donut Award.

Still sane after 27 years of teaching high school English, Vinnie has retired and lives in Santa Cruz, California, with her husband and the requisite cat.