The Power of the Prologue

by Shelley Costa

Early on, while A KILLER'S GUIDE TO GOOD WORKS (Henery Press, September 2016), was a WIP, the Prologue was sixteen pages long. *Sixteen*. Before I turned in the completed draft of the book to the editor, I thought better of a Prologue being that long and cut it in half. When the development report came back, among other tough suggestions to improve the work (including addressing what the publisher felt was the problem of eight separate points of view – imagine!) was their desire to have me ditch the Prologue. Altogether. In a mystery, it's a really hard thing to eliminate points of view because the writer has pretty much stuffed them with clues, right? But I was game: who was expendable, much as I loved every single one them? Whose clues could I turf to a point of view character I was keeping? At length, I managed to cut the points of view in half. But I held the line on not eliminating the Prologue altogether. I needed it. This friendly confrontation with the editors made me have to think pretty deeply about why that Franciscan friar in Veracruz, 1595, needed to stay.

I believe we writers have pet subjects, pet themes, that form the through-lines in our writing. These are the matters about which we have a lot to say – a patch we never tire of scratching, and who knows why. These pet places our creativity finds irresistible are rich for us in terms of meanings and images and the bare bones of story after story. One such source place for me is a family of secret Jews named the Carvajals, who lived in New Spain in the last years of the sixteenth century, until they were burned at the stake during the Mexican Inquisition. I've lectured about them, written a short story about them, a screenplay about them, and now, the oldest son – who became a Franciscan friar – finds his way into one of my Val Cameron Mysteries. No surprise the sixteen-page version of the Prologue, set in Veracruz four hundred years prior to Val's fictional present, describes the harbor, the friar's family, the horror of their lives. I love them. The Carvajals are my go-to for practically anything.

But the problem with a weighty, well-developed Prologue is that it can skew the reader's sense of the story to come. So, I had to figure out what I absolutely needed the friar to do and say. . .and what I did not. I decided I would keep only as much as necessary in order for the reader to understand that scene and receive information that might prove useful once s/he was farther along in the tale. *What did I keep?* The acacia wood box, the ancient Hebrew document secreted there, the satire easily discoverable in the main cavity of the box. . .it's here, in the Prologue, that you see the origins of these things that come to have extraordinary importance in the rest of the novel. In this only scene with the friar, the Prologue provides the book as a whole with an essential context that would otherwise have been missing.

Would the reader have still been able to solve the mysteries in this tale? Probably. But I strongly and happily believe that when you're writing a novel that begins centuries before the fictional present, we

need that context. As my Franciscan friar, Gaspar de Carvajal, makes his final preparations, he knows full well that "he had placed the ancient document that could topple cathedrals in both the Old and New Worlds, in the hands of the Inquisition, its enemy." I hope the reader experiences that particular realization as a compelling reason to keep reading. What on earth could be so explosive in that ancient document that it could "topple cathedrals"? The canvas is large, the stakes staggeringly high. And it's this little two-page Prologue that imparts that. It's my chance as the author to share my love for the beauty and richness of history, and history flows toward us across time and place, enlarging our own understanding of our lives as humans.

The Prologue stayed.

from A KILLER'S GUIDE TO GOOD WORKS

Prologue

Veracruz, 1595

The Franciscan friar lifted his eyes to the open window in the room he had rented by the harbor. Veracruz was a coastal town, more liberal in its ways, and just an outpost of the Inquisition. So it suited his purposes. After working in secret for the last two days, he set down the goose quill and stared impassively at the final page of his work, a satire about the Inquisition he titled "The Entertainment of Spain." Then he carefully set the pages inside the acacia wood box that used to hold family papers.

Even after all this time, his fingers trembled as he pressed the finely carved rosette in the lower right-hand corner of the box, which released the hidden spring. Out slid the small, shallow shelf, and with it the heart of his family's inheritance throughout the ages, from their Judean beginnings as Essenes. Ink on thin leather with ragged edges, the writing in a hurried Hebrew. That scribe, who was his family's earliest ancestor, recorded the mystical statement of the master, that night in Gethsemane. …*the Son of God in this night among the olive trees of Gat Smanim. For he says what binds his feet, what pierces his flesh, what crowns his head are the way to life everlasting among the world of living men.*

Tonight the weary friar would write a letter in the guise of an unimportant priest,attach it to the satire, and set the lid in place. In the morning, dressed humbly in a stolen cassock, he would deliver the box to the administrators at this outpost of the Inquisition. And he knew them all well enough, without ever having met them, that they would record the receipt of this heretical work. Ah, so much easier than cataloguing the official trials of the accused. This, this was just some, well, literature of dubious harm. Then they would put it in the archives where they would all quickly forget about it. And as the disguised friar would turn away, with their bored thanks, he would smile, knowing he had placed the ancient document that could topple cathedrals in both the Old and New Worlds, in the hands of the Inquisition, its enemy.

But it was a way of buying time and safety for the words of the master. Over centuries, possibly, the box and its contents would gather dust in a vault. He had to believe that somewhere away from this benighted place and time in human history, a new place across vast waters, where concertinas still made evenings sweet, someone would touch the little rosette, even accidentally, and the shallow drawer would appear. And with it the inscribed words. And perhaps by then they were no longer dangerous. Or perhaps—here, surprised, the friar's breath caught in his throat—they were no longer in the very least…important.

SHELLEY COSTA is a 2004 Edgar Award nominee for Best Short Story, and 2014 Agatha Award nominee for Best First Novel (*You Cannoli Die Once*, Simon and Schuster). She is the author *Basil Instinct* (Simon and Schuster, 2014), *Practical Sins for Cold Climates* (Henery Press, 2016) and *A Killer's Guide to Good Works* (Henery Press, 2016). Shelley's short stories have appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Blood on Their Hands*, and *The World's Finest Mystery and Crime Stories.* She teaches fiction writing at the Cleveland Institute of Art. Visit her at www.shelleycosta.com.