

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

Write or Die by Dr Wicked: Fictional biography

Exemplar

Plot

A murder mystery set in your nearest capital city in the 1950s, with you as either the culprit or the detective

Title

The Dame

Characters

- Nina Green (Me) a private detective from the 1950s
- A mysterious blonde, often known as 'The Dame'
- Professor Alan S., a mathematician and genius, suspected of murder
- Anna P., a mathematical origamist who is an assistant to Alan S., also suspected of murder
- George H. and Ingrid K., an engaged couple and the murder victims
- Detective M., who hires me to investigate the case

My role in the story

The murder of George H. and Ingrid K. is unsolved, and the case has gone cold. Under mounting pressure to move resources elsewhere, the Victoria Police stop actively investigating the case. The police detective in charge of the case, Detective M., who knew the victims, hires me, a private detective, to secretly investigate the murders.

Story arc (what will actually happen in the story)

- It's been one year since George H. and Ingrid K. were found dead in an alley outside the Blue Neon Bar, a jazz club. Both had been shot twice. The case has gone cold.
- Police suspect Alan S. and Anna P., patrons of the Blue Neon Bar and friends of the victims, are the murderers, but there is no evidence and no motive.
- A typed letter is sent to my office after I am hired to work the case – it provides key clues.
- A gun is also sent to my office – it is the murder weapon.
- Witnesses report seeing a mysterious blonde woman (Sarah B.) in the Blue Neon Bar that night, who left shortly before the shooting.
- I begin to investigate the blonde woman as a potential suspect, but she is very hard to track down.
- Alan S. and Anna P. seem to know more than they are saying, but seem afraid of the blonde woman.
- A possible motive is revealed: Alan S. and Anna P. may have murdered the victims to stop them revealing a secret to the blonde woman. But what is the secret?

Ideas for the beginning of the story

- Make reference to the title
- Start the story on the day that the letter arrives in my office
- Chase the Dame down the hallway, with no luck
- Make a Shakespeare reference (the play's the thing)

Ideas for the conclusion of the story

- I find out why the detective in charge of the case cares so much: it has to do with the blonde woman
- I find out the secret
- One of the other main characters dies

Any other notes and ideas

- Write in a film noir sort of style, very hardboiled, similar to *The Big Sleep* and other titles by Raymond Chandler
- Vocabulary should suit, e.g. dame rather than woman
- Use Twists, Slug and Roscoes: A glossary of hardboiled slang as a reference tool for vocabulary (<http://www.miskatonic.org/slang.html>).

600 words / 48 minutes

My father once told me that it's always about a dame. The moral of the story, the great big meaning of it, that didn't matter so much. The dame – not the play – is the thing. In my line of work, I learned that he was right. There were hand-wringing wives and husbands with ten o'clock shadows showing up in my office every day, secretly nursing pistols in their purses and briefcases and just itching to use them. But in this story, with this dame, things got a whole lot more complicated than that.

I heard the rat-tat-tat of her stilettos in the hall, and then saw the shadow at my door. She had a great set of pins, hair smooth and coiffed like a movie star, and I got stuck on this so I hardly noticed the note she was slipping under the door. By the time I reacted, her heels were machine-guns on their way out of the building. As I opened my door, a flash of blonde hair disappeared round the corner.

It'd been a year to the day since the couple met the big sleep outside the Blue Neon Bar. The gal, Ingrid K., took a slug to the shoulder and one to the heart. The guy, George H., took the same. Both dead before they hit the ground. No robbery, no rape. Just two kids from someplace else meeting their maker in a rainy alley on a Friday night.

The note in my hand was a letter, typed on a machine with a broken R, on blue paper. Her initials at the bottom a fluid scrawl, unreadable.

No wants to kill folks who know nothing, who've done nothing, unless they're plain crazy. And Blue Neon Bar? That tRigger man ain't crazy. So what'd they know? What'd they do? Didn't you ask youRself how a couple of Rubes found themselves at a place like Blue Neon that night?

They held hands to the last, you know. In death, as in life, they weRe in it togetheR.

But aRe you eveR going to find out what they weRe up to, gumshoe?

My breath caught: *they held hands to the last*. I started down the hall, my own stilettos clicking down the way. The dame. The dame was there. The dame was a witness, maybe the even the shooter. I got to the street and it was already dark out; the rain was starting to pour. She was gone.

When I got back to my office, square on my desk, between the ink blotter and my date book, was a gun: a Colt .38 special. The murder weapon.

After unlocking my desk drawer I slipped my shoulder holster on, folded my hair into a tight chignon and made the day's notes, ready for Nancy's dictation in the morning. Then I made a phone call.

'Progress.'

'Well, spill.'

'A witness – or the doer – just left me a note and the murder weapon.'

'No kidding. Well, kid, who was he?'

'She. It's a dame.'

'It's always a dame.'

'So I've heard.'

'Well?'

'Blonde. A set of pins on her men and women would kill for. Broken typewriter. A Colt .38 special, wrapped in a handkerchief. And, well, I gotta ask myself: why'd a couple rubes end up at Blue Neon? It ain't exactly a popular destination.'

'Maybe they were sampling some local colour.'

'Or they were up to something.'

'Kid, everyone's always up to something.'

'Even you?'

‘Especially me.’

‘Well, Dad, it’s been real nice chatting with you, but I got a shooter to catch.’

‘I remember. It’s on my dime.’

800 words / 1 hour

I was always suspicious of Anna P. and Alan S. This latest visit was doing little to quell my concerns. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but those two could rescue kittens from burning buildings and still seem unwholesome. We sat in the professor’s crowded office at the university, and he stared deadpan at me across his desk, while Anna sat at her own, smaller desk in the corner, poring over folded blue paper.

‘Origami is of great interest to mathematicians,’ she said suddenly. ‘Can you imagine the practical applications?’

‘Sorry, dollface. Academics ain’t my area of expertise.’ I felt for my holster. ‘Tell me again how you knew the victims.’

She lifted her head and her black hair fell away from her face like a shimmering curtain. ‘Through the professor, of course.’ She tilted her head back toward the paper, and the curtain of hair closed around it.

‘George was a student of mine years ago. Ingrid was an assistant of mine; that’s how they met.’

‘But they weren’t from around here.’

Alan smiled. ‘Not lately they weren’t.’

I felt for the blue paper in my briefcase. ‘What do you know about a witness, a blonde, at Blue Neon?’

Anna looked up sharply. ‘A blonde?’

‘Nothing,’ said the professor. ‘Nothing about a blonde.’

‘And the four of you made a night of it – seeing Dizzy and the Button Men?’

The professor looked bored. ‘Like we’ve told you before.’

‘But you left before they did?’

‘Like we’ve told you before.’

‘And no one remembers seeing either of you after you left Blue Neon until you turned up here the next day?’

‘Like we’ve told you before.’

I pulled the paper from the briefcase. ‘Is it possible the victims were up to no good?’

‘They were good kids, Miss Green. Came back here to make a go of it. How they ran into trouble I’ll never know.’

‘Detective Green. Detective Nina Green.’

‘I reserve that title for actual policemen, Miss Green,’ said the professor. He opened his pocket watch and let out a deliberate yawn. ‘Not lady private eyes.’

I felt Anna tensing at her desk. I started to unfold the note in my hand. For the first time, I realised that it wasn’t just folded like any old note. The fold was intricate, by design.

I looked over at Anna. The blue paper. ‘Say... that’s the same paper as this note.’

She stopped.

‘My wife uses many types of paper in her research, Ms Green.’

‘Origami has practical applications, you say? Surely that’d include the basics. Notes. Letters. Say, do you happen to have a typewriter in here?’

The professor nodded toward a third, even smaller desk in the opposite corner. I moved to examine it. It was loaded with blue paper, and had a broken R key. I could hear Anna breathing slowly at her desk. She had stopped working.

‘Care to explain how the blonde witness you know nothing about wrote me a letter on your typewriter?’

Alan’s face flushed with anger and he stood and strode to the door, opening it. ‘You should leave now, Miss Green.’

I dropped a business card in front of Anna. 'Any time. Day or night,' I said.
I looked at the professor. 'You too, dollface.'

The Blue Neon Bar hadn't changed in a year. Downstairs from a secret alley in a hidden lane off a quiet street in the middle of marvellous Melbourne, its regulars were either dedicated drunks or dedicated jazz lovers. I was neither, but I'd worn tracks on its sticky floor.

Ingrid and George met the suspects at Blue Neon just after 10 o'clock that night. It was raining out. Dizzy and the Button Men were playing. They sat in a booth in a corner. Ingrid, Anna and Alan drank martinis; George drank some cheap swill, and plenty of it. He told the bartender, 'I'm trying to work up a nerve. I need some courage.'

A little after 1am, Anna and Alan quit for the night, leaving Ingrid to deal with a drunken George. A little before 1.30am, just after Ingrid had dragged George up the stairs and out to the street, the patrons in the bar heard four gunshots. A barmaid and the bartender found the bodies. George and Ingrid were hand-in-hand, sprawled in the gutter as the rain poured over them.

The theory was that the suspects left early, then waited for the victims to follow suit, ambushing and killing them in the alley. But why?

By the time I'd sat in my regular stool at the bar, the barmaid, Daisy, was already mixing me a cocktail. 'I'm on the clock, Daisy. Just a Shirley Temple.'

'You coppers are all alike, P.I. or not. So busy detecting that you can't see the forest for the trees.'

1200 words / 2 hours

Daisy put the Shirley Temple down in front of me. 'Nina, you're always on the clock.'

'Maybe you should be the detective.'

'I wouldn't need polaroids to tell a man is cheating.'

On the leaderboard behind the bar, a list of musicians and dates was scrawled in chalk. *Dizzy and the Button Men*. The date was tonight.

'Dizzy and the Button Men haven't played here since the murders, have they?'

'They hardly play anywhere. Dizzy's family ain't exactly music fans. More into academics.'

I felt for the blue paper note that was back in my briefcase, and unfolded it carefully. 'And that matters to her?'

'From what I understand, the professor gets what the professor wants.'

'The professor?'

'Dizzy's daddy is a big shot at the university.'

'So how'd she end up with a name like Dizzy?'

'She says she's named for Dizzy Gillespie.'

'But how many professors would name their daughters for jazz musicians?'

Daisy shrugged and started polishing the bar with a rag. 'Didn't make sense to me either.'

'Daisy... how old's Dizzy?'

Daisy pointed. 'Ask her yourself.'

I turned to the stage, where Dizzy was helping her band set up. My heart started thumping hard. I hadn't seen her face when she came to my office but I'd recognise those pins anywhere; men and women alike would kill for them. She self-consciously ran her hands over her movie star blonde hair.

Dizzy couldn't be more than 19 or 20. But she didn't look anything like the professor.

'Daisy, can I use the phone? I'll leave you a real good tip tonight.'

'Knock yourself out.'

I dialled the station. 'Progress.'

'Yes?'

'The band in the bar that night. Dizzy and the Button Men. Did anyone think to investigate who they were?'

'Not especially.'

'Well, Dad, I'm at Blue Neon right now and the blonde from my office – the dame who dropped off the letter – is the singer in the band from that night. And I think she's the daughter of the suspects. Don't you think that should have come up?'

He groaned through the phone. 'Is she a bottle blonde?'

'How should I know?'

'You're a woman. I thought women knew things about other women.'

'Is this why you've been divorced five times?'

'Now's not the time, kid. Find out if she's a bottle blonde.'

'Why? What does it matter?'

'It matters. Just do it.'

I waited till Dizzy's back was turned and then marched over to the foot of the stage. I had no choice but to tap on the back of her knee to get her attention. 'It seems like we should be properly introduced. I'm a detective. Nina Green. And you are?'

Dizzy almost leapt out of her skin at the contact. 'Jeez Louise! You frightened the hell out of me!'

I climbed onto the stage and jabbed my hand out toward her. 'Nina Green. And you are?'

With reluctance she shook my hand. 'I'm Dizzy. Of Dizzy and the Button Men.'

'That much I know. And your last name is?'

She wrinkled her nose, but whether it was with amusement or annoyance, I couldn't tell. 'In my birth certificate.'

I smiled at her. 'That's okay, doll. You remind me a lot of your father just now.'

'You are the worst private detective ever, Miss Green.'

'Now now, let's stay friendly. If I were such a bad detective, I wouldn't be here.'

Dizzy started to walk backstage, but stopped. As she turned back to me the light hit her face, and I could see her eyebrows and eyelashes were blonde. Not a bottle blonde. But why did it matter?

'You're supposed to find out why they're dead. I need to know why they're dead.'

A deep, grumbling voice came out of the dark. 'I think I might know the answer to that.'

The three of us sat down at a table in the back. 'We start in 20 minutes,' said Dizzy.

'I'm aware,' said my father, taking off his fedora and putting it on the table in front of him. 'So let's not waste time. Dizzy, how long have you known that your parents shot George and Ingrid?'

'You saw them do it, didn't you?'

Dizzy stared down at the table, and began to absently fold and unfold a napkin. 'It all went wrong. They left early. They didn't even watch my whole set.'

'You invited them to come?'

'No, George and Ingrid did. I met them here a month before they died. They said they were friends. Said I had talent, said my folks would approve if they heard me sing...'

'Your parents didn't know?'

She shook her head. The napkin was rapidly becoming a rabbit.

'They were all arguing. George was drinking a lot and the professor was mad—'

'—You call your father the professor?'

My father glared. 'Nina! Focus!'

'—So they left. George and Ingrid stayed a while longer. George drank more. Ingrid cried. Then she looked at me as if to say goodbye, and started helping him up the stairs.'

'You went after them,' said my father.

'Yes. She kept saying something about how it wasn't meant to happen this way.' She stopped playing with the rabbit-napkin and looked at me. 'I still don't understand what she meant.'

My father started fishing around in his coat, and then pulled a photograph from a breast pocket. He placed it on the table between the three of us.

‘When Ingrid and George were found, they both had a copy of this photo on them. Ingrid in her purse; George in his wallet.’

I looked at the picture. ‘Dizzy, it’s you.’

The little girl in the photograph was small and fair-haired, with plump red cheeks and bright blue eyes. She seemed to be laughing at whoever was taking the photo. She couldn’t have been more than four years old. She flipped the photo over. *Sarah ‘Dizzy’ Stewart, 1951.*

Dizzy stared at the picture. ‘Why would they have a photograph of me?’

‘Because they were your birth parents. We adopted you because they were too young. They couldn’t look after you and study and work at once. We couldn’t have children.’ Anna stood at the table, her black hair tied back from her face. Black hair. With Alan’s brown hair, and Anna’s black hair, how could Dizzy be a natural blonde?

But Ingrid, Ingrid had been a blonde.

Anna stood fixed to the spot, her hands straight down her sides, fists clenched. ‘They were going to tell you.’

She looked at me, as if for understanding. ‘We couldn’t let them do that.’

Dizzy stood and looked at her mother. ‘You just shot them. Not the professor. You shot both of them. Just because they wanted to know me?’

‘The professor is an academic. He’s never understood the practicalities of a situation. He went home and sulked, like he always does.’

I heard the click of my father’s handcuffs before I saw them. ‘I’m sure murder has many practical applications. For instance, if you want to spend your life in jail, murder is an excellent application.’

‘And I’m sure you’ll have plenty of time to research the practical applications of origami now, dollface.’