

POP PICK

Stories that invite us to the next sentence

By Jeremy N. Smith

Every student of creative writing knows that the most important sentence in a story is the last sentence. The second most important sentence is the first sentence. But what is the third most important sentence? Is it the second-to-last sentence? The second? Or...?

In such debates one may fritter away the duration of a Masters of Fine Arts program. Learn, then, from Joe Meno, professor of creative writing at Columbia College Chicago and author of the marvelous new story collection, "Demons in the Spring." Meno's Law: The most important sentence is whatever sentence the reader is reading next.

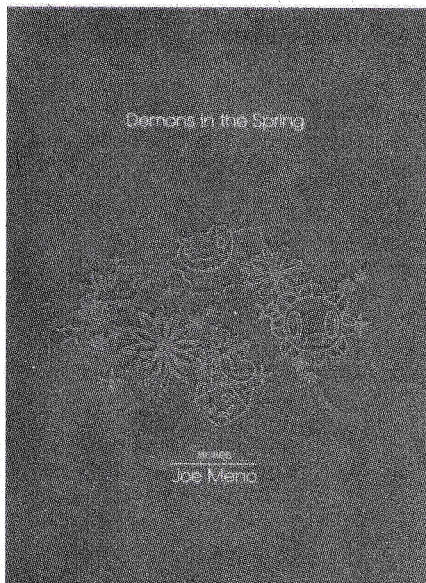
"Frances the ghost is going to school: She is dressed in a white sheet with two holes for her eyes and that makes the people who see her riding in the passenger seat of her mother's station wagon smirk. Of course, Frances becomes a ghost whenever her mother does not know what else to do. Today was too much already so her mother decided, fine, fine, if she was going to behave like this, fine."

"Out on parole, Jan Olsson walks into the Kreditbanken at Norrmalstorg, located within the central banking district of Stockholm, Sweden; he has a small pistol in the pocket of his jacket. He does not think the pistol actually works as it has been stolen out of the glove compartment of a stranger's car. Since the car was a rusted-out American model with a broken windshield, Jan instinctively believes the pistol will be unlucky. Jan has recently taken a large dose of amphetamines; because of this, he mistakenly thinks he can see things other people can't see."

"Apples are kissing other apples. Gray cats are kissing other gray cats. Trees are kissing trees. You and I are not kissing. We work in an office together. We are both married to other people."

So begin the first three of 20 stories. Notice how much has already happened. And in only one of these examples have we even exhausted the opening paragraph.

Soon enough, readers learn that the father of Frances the ghost is in Iraq; that her mother is considering an affair; that Frances suffers severe hearing impairment and refuses to speak. That Jan Olsson, cursed bank



Demons in the Spring

By Joe Meno

Akashic Books, 300 pages, \$24.95

robber, boasts a famously charming best friend. That the flirtatious office mates can make art, airplanes and cathedrals of their sexual tension. And how does it feel to be these characters in this situation?

For the near-deaf 1st grader, "When someone cries, it feels like you are waiting for the rain. When someone sings, it feels like the shape of a heart is being traced along the center of your chest." For the hopped-up bank robber, a yellow phone linked to the police puts in mind "a yellow hive full of bees, crashing together and stinging one another angrily." For the obsessed co-workers, teeth marks on a borrowed pen are "a letter, a warning, an invitation."

Take Meno's invitation. In the best of his stories, each new sentence adds something interesting and insightful, funny and sad, surprising and true.

Jeremy N. Smith reviews books and other subjects at jeremynsmith.com.