

Trial at Grand Marais *

By

Gene Andereck

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Reviewed

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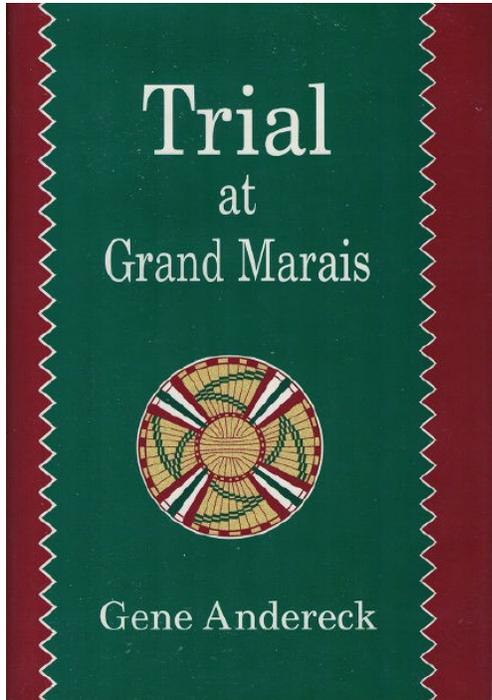
Gary Weissman

Two pieces of advice that published authors invariably pass on to wannabes at Writers' Conferences are (1) "Write what you know"; and (2) "use the active voice."

The first is important because inexperienced authors, particularly novelists, often succumb to the temptation to plunge into the unknown in hopes of scoring points on imaginativeness. Writing in the active voice {*Alvin smashed the table...*} maintains the readers' interest, whereas passive voice constructions {*the meeting was called to discuss what had been said earlier that day*} not only conceal the subject[s] of the action but are also as boring as the government documents and legal prose in which they unfortunately flourish.

* Rock Creek Press, Shawnee Mission, Kansas, 270 pages (1997)

The late Gene Andereck was an experienced trial lawyer in southern Missouri, someone who canoed in Minnesota's Boundary Waters for 50 years,



and a member of the Ozark Writers League. Accordingly, it is clear from his elegant prose (invariably written in the active voice) that he was a skilled craftsman of the English language and that in detailed descriptions both of the Iron Range waterways that hug the Canadian-American border and of the bench trial that comprises 15 of the novel's 40 chapters that he knew his subject matters

very well.

His novel, *Trial at Grand Marais*, comfortably combines a court drama with a wilderness adventure: Unhappy with a court order granting temporary custody of her two young daughters to her husband, the wife, Kristen McLean, snatches the children from her in-laws' home and sets out in a canoe across the B.W.C.A. to the Objibwa reservation of her childhood on the Canadian side.

Meanwhile, without the mother being available to testify, the judge holds a trial in Grand Marais on the husband's motion to convert the

temporary order into a permanent grant of custody. The central character of the novel is the mother's attorney, a sole practitioner named Errol Joyce, who has to persuade the court that the mother should have custody without his client available to explain why she spirited the children away in defiance of the court order.

Additionally, he is aware that both the judge and the *Guardian-ad-Litem* formerly worked at the law firm of which the opposing counsel is a named partner. That the protagonist has a more than professional relationship with the *Guardian-ad-Litem* may not come as a surprise to practitioners in small towns any more than that the judge does not recuse herself merely because she formerly worked in the firm of one of the attorneys who is appearing before her.

The novel darts back and forth among the trial in the Cook County Courthouse, the attempted escape in the Boundary Waters, the tribulations of the girls lost in the woods along Lake Saganaga when their mother goes missing, a search and rescue operations by helicopter and motor boat, and back stories about the protagonist-lawyer for the mother, the *Guardian-ad-Litem*, and the father and paternal grandparents of the girls.

The author has also thrown in a forest fire; a raging storm; a tornado; a wandering derelict; a 300-pound, man-eating bear; an almost fatal trip over

Horseshoe Falls; a hair-raising ride in a truck on the Gunflint Trail; a brief and very understated sex scene; and the conflicts arising from the differences among Ojibwa, Greek, and Minnesotan child-rearing practices.

Andereck refrains from lecturing to his readers; instead, he deftly shows, rather than tells, in the dialogue in court, in chambers, and in witness preparation. When he does lapse into descriptions — usually of the back country he obviously loved, you don't mind because his adroit use of metaphor and synesthetic imagery enable you to experience his command of place.

“At that moment, a lightning bolt struck in the woods above the water’s edge. Their first sensation was the icy ripple on the edges of their teeth. The bolt was so close it left an acrid taste in their mouths and a prickling sensation in their eyes and nostrils.” (Page 10).

“As she began to load their gear back into the canoe, Kristen’s mind drifted back to the day when the fragile weave of her life began to snarl into tangled knots.” (Pp. 12-13).

To be sure, the author’s forays into linguistic high notes occasionally wander into the bat range of purple prose: *“The setting sun splashed a flaxen glow across the bottom side of the pall of smoke that hung over the Iron Range. Waters in the Grand Marais harbor reflected the sky’s tint.”* (P. 105).

Nevertheless, Andereck artfully constructs the plot and does so with language that pleases both the eye and the ear. Each chapter is short, and readers will find it difficult to insouciantly insert a bookmark in order to return to read more later. The desire to keep reading is a salutary feature because otherwise the reader can easily become confused: Sometimes even the short chapters subsume widely divergent scenes; and if you pick up the book after a long interval, your memory has to work overtime to sort out the story's various strands. The pattern becomes clear by the end, but it requires the reader's close attention to keep track of all the sub-plots.

Those who find pleasure in the B.W.C.A. will appreciate the wilderness adventure facet of the book, and attorneys – even those who avoid family law as if it were a contagious disease – will enjoy the lawyerly maneuverings of the courtroom proceedings.

Trial at Grand Marais turns out to have been the first of what Andereck termed his “Arrowhead Trilogy.” He published the second novel in the series, *Grand Portage Incident*, in 2000; and the third, *Stealing Gunflint Trail*, came out in 2001. After his death (in 2004), Missouri State University began to offer the Gene Andereck Creative Writing Scholarship.

The book is sufficiently entertaining that most readers will resolve to sample the other two novels in the trilogy.

Reviewer

GARY WEISSMAN was a lawyer, mediator, arbitrator, trainer, and adjunct law professor in the Twin Cities from 1977-2008, as well as having been a columnist (“Legal Esoterica”) for three decades for *The Hennepin Lawyer*. He is now retired and living in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he is, *inter alia*, a walking tour guide for the Jackson Hole Historical Society, a Spanish Instructor for the local Community College, the Chief Lyricist for the Citizens Mounted Patrol, and the author of five published novels (using the pen name, Garibaldi Sabio).

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