

## Great Beginnings

(Presented at the Kentucky Writers Conference in Bowling Green, KY, April 18, 2008, as part of a workshop on revision.)

One of the final steps to take when preparing a manuscript for submission is to take a good look at the beginning. Whichever approach you choose, keep in mind the basic elements of successful fiction, and see how much you can convey in the first chapter, page, even line: character, plot/problem, setting, voice. You might:

### 1. Open with an immediate attention grabber.

- a. "After killing the red-haired man, I took myself off to Quinn's for an oyster supper." (*The Meaning of Night: A Confession*, Michael Cox)
- b. "Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened." (*The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver)
- c. "In the car lot of life, Amanda Sheridan decided, she was a Volvo station wagon with about eight thousand miles on it." (*Single in Suburbia*, Wendy Wax)
- d. "Standing amid the tan, excited post-Christmas crowd at the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, Rabbit Angstrom has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet, what's floating in unseen about to land, is not his son Nelson and daughter-in-law Pru and their two children but something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an airplane." (*Rabbit at Rest*, John Updike)
- e. "The bear had been their undoing, though at the time they had all laughed." (*Lyddie*, Katherine Paterson)
- f. "You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body." (*A Long Way from Chicago*, Richard Peck)

### 2. Drop the reader into the middle of the action.

- a. "My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor." (*The Liar's Club: A Memoir*, Mary Karr)
- b. "He had followed a dream, and it had brought him here to die. Half conscious, he lay on the rocks and thin moss of the mountain crevasse, and in his dazed state it seemed to him that the girl he had seen in that earlier dream stood before him. You ought to be laughing, Andrew Carr said to her imagined face. If it weren't for you I'd be halfway across the galaxy by now." (*The Spell Sword*, Marion Zimmer Bradley)
- c. "The freezing wind howls despair into my ears, rips through my meager clothing, cuts like knives against my flesh. In the bleak distance I hear the rumble of falling ice, the groan of gigantic glaciers grinding one against the other like the bones of titans. The pained screams of the damned rise above the noise and soak the air. 'Welcome to Cania,' my father says." (*Shadowstorm*, Paul S. Kemp)

- d. “Sometimes the flames reached the top of the sky.” (*Jake’s Orphan*, Peggy Brooke)
- e. “The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help.” (*Monster*, Walter Dean Myers)
- f. “Keith, the boy in the rumpled shorts and shirt, did not know he was being watched as he entered room 215 of Mountain View Inn.” (*The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, Beverly Cleary)

**3. Drop the reader into the middle of a revealing conversation.**

- a. “‘Where’s Papa going with that axe?’ said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.” (*Charlotte’s Web*, E. B. White)
- b. “‘We’re doomed,’ Jacob Hansen said in sepulchral tones. (*Dakota Born*, Debby Macomber)
- c. “‘Massie, wipe that confused look off your face,’ Massie’s mom, Kendra, said. ‘It’s really very simple—you’re not going.’” (*The Clique*, Lisi Hanson)

**4. Begin high above your protagonist, with an omniscient passage that sets the stage.**

- a. “There is no stopping it; the bullet rips through the hot summer haze, missing trees, houses, unsuspecting birds, coming to roost, finally, like an old homing pigeon. Jenna Ward’s hand hangs above her brow, a visor blotting out the sun. Above her, on the roof, her father squeezes the steel staple gun, aiming for the shingle beneath his fingers... Somewhere on the other side of Briarwood, over a mile away, in the woods behind his house, Michael MacKenzie gently strokes the silky stock of his .45-70 Winchester rifle while he holds it out for Joe Sadowski’s admiration. ...It is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Michael’s seventeenth birthday, and the rifle was a gift from his grandfather.” (*Swallowing Stones*, Joyce McDonald)
- b. “The room held a small refrigerator stocked with apple juice and soft drinks, a two-burner hot plate, a phonograph, a circle of worn, comfortable chairs and a smeared green chalkboard that said, GRIEF GROUP, 2:00-3:00.” (*BitterSweet*, LaVyrle Spencer)

**5. Create a beginning that mirrors the ending (circular structure.)**

- a. *A Step from Heaven* (An Na) – character is at same emotional place
- b. *Fever, 1793* (Laurie Halse Anderson) – character is at different emotional place, but the action circles nicely (being scolded to get out of bed vs. being up early)

**6. Simply state the main character’s problem, which immediately takes your reader to the emotional heart of the story.**

- a. “Pa ripped our family apart just as spring began whispering sweet promises up on Cumberland Mountain.” (*Hearts of Stone*, Kathleen Ernst)
- b. “My father is gone. I’m slouched in a cast-aluminum chair across from two men, one the manager of the hotel where we’re staying and the other a policeman. They’re both waiting for me to explain what’s become of him, my father.” (*The Dew Breaker*, Edwidge Danticat)

