

I.

Opening Strategies

I ONCE SPOKE WITH A NEW YORK CITY FIREMAN WHOSE JOB included talking suicidal “jumpers” down from building edges and bridges. He told me something that has stayed with me ever since. He said that in every case, without exception, when the person jumped, the look on his or her face was always the same. It said, in essence, “Wrong decision.”

Forgive me for opening on such a grisly note. But every opening of a book or a story is a fateful plunge. The choices we make in those first few sentences, paragraphs, and pages determine not only how what we’ve written gets read, but whether it will be read at all.

Readers have no obligation to read what we’ve written. If we want them to spend their precious time with our words, we owe them every courtesy. They owe us nothing.

“Grab the reader by the throat,” so we’ve been told, suggesting that nothing short of bodily assault will gain a reader’s attention. I disagree.

Still, there’s something to be said for a throat-grabbing opening:

*Hale knew, before he’d been in Brighton three hours, that they meant to murder him.*¹

*They threw me off the hay truck about noon.*²

*A screaming comes across the sky.*³

*One morning, Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic beetle.*⁴

1 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938).

2 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1942).

3 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973).

4 Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis” (1915). Translation by the author.

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Those opening sentences do more than grab our throats. They pull us to the brink of a story and push us in.

To gain a reader's interest you needn't resort to assault or sensationalism. Imagine yourself a guest at a dinner party. To make an impression you can pull the tablecloth out from under the place settings; that will do the trick. Or you can tinkle your wine glass, lean into the ensuing silence, and—with commanding composure—say something like, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”⁵ No china broken, no necks bruised.

There are countless ways to, as Kafka might have put it, “crack open the frozen sea” of a novel, memoir, or short story. In her essay, “Beginnings at their Best,” Julie Pratt identifies seven types of “winning” opening strategies:

1. Ominous
2. Mysterious
3. Peculiar
4. Familiar
5. Sensory
6. Provocative
7. Humorous

These seven strategies may be combined, as in the opening to António Lobo Antunes's *The Land at the End of the World*:

The thing I liked best about the zoo was the roller-skating rink under the trees and the very upright black instructor describing slow ellipses as he glided effortlessly backward over the concrete surface, surrounded by girls in short skirts and white boots, who, if they spoke, doubtless did so in the same gauzy tones as those voices you hear at airports announcing the departure of planes, cotton syllables that dissolve in the ear just as the remnants of a piece of candy do on the curled shell of the tongue.

This opening is sensory (“cotton syllables that dissolve in the ear,” “candy ... on the curled shell of a tongue”) as well as familiar (“the same ... tones as those voices you hear at airports announcing the departure of planes”). And isn't there something faintly ominous about those “slow ellipses”? As you read on, you'll see that these strategies can be combined.

5 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

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1. Who Speaks? Choosing Narrators

One question that our openings must answer: Who speaks to us? From where, when, and with what attitude and perspective, through what set of sensibilities?

Every piece of writing has a narrator, a persona distinct from the author especially chosen to serve the material, to select and filter its ingredients and make a particular impression, and who functions, largely by way of constraints, as an organizing principle.⁶

In writing this essay, do I want my narrating persona to be coy, clever, cranky, cute? Breezy or hardboiled? I have many personas in my authorial kit bag. Should I deploy the self-deprecating buffoon, or the professorial pedant? Do I plunge directly into my topic or scene, or wade in slowly, as my father used to wade into the swim-hole where he took me and my brother, inch by inch, making wincing sounds as though he were stepping into a vat of boiling oil?

Here is how Marilyn Robinson wades into *Housekeeping*, her first novel:

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband, Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. It was he who put us down in this unlikely place.

A few sentences later:

Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step. The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched

6 Except in the case of some metafictional, postmodern, or otherwise experimental works in which author and narrator are supposedly one and the same, and even in those cases I would argue that a narrator has been created.

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grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands.

Here, setting is character. The character of the grandfather is subsumed by that of the house in which he grew up, and in which most of the action of the novel will occur.

Like most great openings, the opening of *Housekeeping* melds all seven “winning” strategies: ominous, mysterious, peculiar, familiar, sensory, provocative, and humorous. Forthright but gentle, with her narrator’s voice barely raised above a whisper, Robinson seduces without force, effortlessly, by means of sensual summary exposition. Were this a painting, it would be all background: the foreground figures have yet to emerge.

2. Dramatic Openings

In her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, Jeanette Walls takes a more headlong, Burt-Lancaster-plunging-into-the-surf approach:

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the steam coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.

Mom stood fifteen feet away. She had tied rags around her shoulders to keep out the spring chill and was picking through the trash while her dog, a black-and-white terrier mix, played at her feet. Mom’s gestures were all familiar—the way she tilted her head and thrust out her lower lip when studying items of potential value that she’d hoisted out of the Dumpster, the way her eyes widened with childish glee when she found something she liked. Her long hair was streaked with gray, tangled and matted, and her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, but still she reminded me of the mom she’d been when I was a kid, swan-diving off cliffs and painting in the desert and reading Shakespeare aloud. Her cheekbones were still high and strong, but the skin was parched and ruddy from all those winters and summers exposed to the elements. To the people walking by, she probably looked like any of the thousands of homeless people in New York City.

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In starting her memoir with scene rather than summary, Walls commits herself to a narrative strategy that puts the emphasis on drama and suggests more than it tells or states. Background is subordinated, if not entirely suppressed; description and action dominate.

As do most successful openings, this one answers as many questions as it raises; it gives us everything we need to inhabit the moment at hand while inviting us to wonder how such a moment came to be. How does a well-off New Yorker have homeless, dumpster-rutting parents? Ominous, peculiar, sensory, familiar (“the mom she’d been when I was a kid”). Setting aside that the glib irony of this coincidental encounter makes it read more as fiction than nonfiction, still, we feel that we know this woman, despite never having really known anyone in her situation. We get to know her through a specific event (Mom rooting through dumpster) and through her reaction to that event (how she describes it to us).

3. Colluding with Readers / Second Person

In opening his novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Michael Faber eschews drama as well as vivid or sensual scene painting. Instead, with his first words he breaks the so-called “fourth wall,” buttonholing us, daring us to enter his fictional world:

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you’ve read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

Defying readers in the first paragraph takes guts; it may not be a winning strategy, but it is certainly provocative and peculiar, and it settles, decidedly and immediately, the question of who is telling the story, establishing beyond any doubt the disposition of the narrator, namely “in your face.”

In rare cases, collusion takes the extreme form of pressing the reader into service as the protagonist, as Jay McInerney does in his novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*:

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You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time in the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy.

Depending on the reader's disposition, this approach may or may not work. With second person address especially there's the risk of the reader folding her arms and refusing to play along, saying to herself, "You're right: I am not that kind of guy."

4. Character Narrator

In the right hands, the matter of who speaks to us can be settled in as few as three words: "Call me Ishmael."

With first-person narrators, the answer to the question "who is speaking to us?" tends to be straightforward, but with an unnamed, third-person narrator things get complicated, with the line between narrator and author often so thin and porous it seems nonexistent, to where even authors can't be sure where they stand in relation to their material. Often, with fictional works in progress especially, but with memoir, too, occasionally, it comes to pass that there is no narrator at all, really, no mitigating persona, no point-of-view, no unique set of sensibilities—apart from the author's—through which events are filtered for the reader. In that case, I call the result *default omniscience*, something I discuss at the start of Chapter II and throughout the first-page analyses in this book.

5. Where to Start?

Biblical Openers

Even once we've settled the question of who is telling our stories, we face another big question. Namely: *where* to start. At what point should we enter our stories? Even as I write these words, I face the dilemma. Speaking of beginnings, where to begin?

Why not with the most famous beginning of all?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

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And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.⁷

Unlike most mere mortals, God has no trouble getting His story off the ground. Then again, He has a distinct advantage, since unlike our stories His truly begins at the beginning, so there's no question of going back any further—say, to the day *before* God created the heavens.

“All sensation,” philosopher Henri Bergson declared in *Matter and Memory*, “is already memory.” What we call “consciousness” is mainly a product of the past. In telling human stories, we can hardly overlook the thing that most shapes our humanity, our histories, what we remember, and even things we may not remember but that have shaped us nevertheless. Every human story has its “back story,” one that goes back and back and back, presumably, to the very beginning of time: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*.

Fortunately, theory and practice differ, otherwise all stories would have the Bible, or an equivalent, as prologue, as does James A. Michener's *Hawaii*. It opens:

Millions upon millions of years ago, when the continents were already formed and the principal features of the earth had been decided, there existed, then as now, one aspect of the world that dwarfed all others. It was a mighty ocean, resting uneasily to the east of the largest continent, a restless ever-changing, gigantic body of water that would later be described as pacific.

Unlike God, who in his prolificacy he resembled, Michener didn't feel compelled to create the earth first before flooding it. Still, in reaching so far back for this opening, he suggests the epic scope of what follows.

⁷ Genesis 1:1–3. In *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, Book II of Douglas Adams's five-book Hitchhiker's “Trilogy,” he gives us this version of that beginning: “In the beginning, the universe was created. This made a lot of people very angry, and has been widely regarded as a bad idea.”

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6. Setting the Scene: *The Wide-Angle Establishing Shot*

Charles Dickens opens *A Tale of Two Cities* with the rhetorical equivalent of what, in a movie, would be a wide-angle establishing shot:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Rather than plunge us into the heart of the story, such an opening serves as a sort of *framing device*, an imposing ornate gate through which we pass to get to the story. Call it the red-carpet treatment. But gate and carpeting are there not merely to flatter but to orient us. Along with all the pomp and paradox, Dickens lays out the period in which his story is set, a time when plain-faced queens and large-jawed kings (and vice versa) occupied the thrones of England and France.

7. Beginning at the End

Some stories begin at the beginning, while others end where they start. Madison Smartt Bell's *Ten Indians* starts: "Don't know I can say how it all started, but I tell you how it almost finished up." When Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name Is Red* begins, his protagonist is already dead. His corpse speaks to us from the bottom of the well where his murderer has deposited it/him.

Trading beginnings for endings is an old trick, but not a bad one. As unsure as we are as to where to begin our stories, we tend to know how they'll end.

Martin Amis knew:

This is the story of a murder. It hasn't happened yet. But it will. (It had better.) I know the murderer, I know the murderee. I know the

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time, I know the place. I know the motive (*her* motive) and I know the means. I know who will be the foil, the fool, the poor foal, also utterly destroyed. And I couldn't stop them, I don't think, even if I wanted to. The girl will die. It's what she always wanted. You can't stop people, once they *start creating*.⁸

In cases like this, who can say that the beginning isn't the end, and vice versa? We're reminded of a Möbius strip, or the Ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its own tail to form a circle, though the fictional "tale" isn't being ingested so much as being born ass-first.

Such is the case with *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's last, most ambitious, and least-read (also least readable) novel. Joyce's novel begins (and ends):

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay,
brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle
and Environs.

The same novel ends (and begins):

Whish! A gull. Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then. Finn,
again! Take. Bussoftlhee, mememormee! Till thous-endsthee. Lps. The
keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a loved a long the

Joyce solves the problem of beginnings and endings by having neither and both. Like the universe that it tries to encompass, *Finnegans Wake* has no center or edges. It never starts and it never ends.

8. Literary Births

Though most writers prefer to plunge straight into the middle of their stories, beginning at the beginning has advantages. For one thing, it lets readers experience events "in real time," as they unfold, without having to make temporal adjustments as they go. Superficially, real life happens this way. Why not life on the page? In fact, many stories (usually longer ones or novels) begin at the beginning of their protagonist's life, with their birth.

8 *London Fields* (1989).

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I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade, lived afterwards at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a good family in that country, and after whom I was called Robinson Kreutznear; but by the usual corruption of words in England we are now called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name, Crusoe; and so my companions always called me.

Since 1719, when Defoe used the technique in *Robinson Crusoe*, countless authors have given birth to their protagonists on page 1, including Dickens, who titles Chapter 1 of *David Copperfield* “I am born,” then opens with his narrator wondering whether he’ll turn out to be the hero of the book we hold—a doubt not shared by canny readers who’ve seen the words “David Copperfield” stamped across the book’s spine and title page. As opening gambits go, it’s not all that sincere, so we can’t entirely blame Holden Caulfield when, a hundred and one years later, he calls it crap:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.⁹

One obvious disadvantage of starting our stories with the birth of our hero is that the event isn’t likely to form part of the hero’s experience, since he can’t possibly remember it.

Well, most of us don’t remember being born. As with all things fictional, here too we find exceptions:

I was slapped and hurried along in the private applause of birth—I think I remember this. Well, I imagine it anyway—the blind boy’s rose-and-milk-and-gray-walled (and salty) aquarium, the aquarium overthrown, the uproar in the woman-barn ...

So Harold Brodkey’s *The Runaway Soul* (which itself runs away to 833 pages) squares up to us, with a narrator who dares to tell us what colors he saw in the

9 J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

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womb. Thus we are prepared for—or forewarned about—the coming performance. “Performance” is the word: Brodkey’s protagonist has yet to breathe his first and already the world applauds. Or at least his creator imagines that it will.

The trouble with starting stories at the beginning—not just with a character’s history, with their birth, but even with, say, a hypothetical heroine packing her hypothetical bags for a hypothetical trip to Italy—is that the story, if it has begun at all, has only just barely begun; there’s little drama greasing the wheels, only the vague anticipations of a voyage whose repercussions remain to be seen. Like a car engine started on a frozen day, you have to wait for it to warm up before bringing it up to speed.

9. *In Medias Res: The Inciting Incident*

This is why most stories start *in medias res* or “in the middle of things.” The term comes from the ancient Roman poet Horace, who advised aspiring epic poets to go straight to the heart instead of starting at the beginning. That “heart” may be near the end or close to the beginning of the string of events that form a narrative. In any event, the action of the story is well underway.

Katherine Shonk’s 2001 short story, “My Mother’s Garden,” about a woman trying to convince her mother to abandon her home in a Chernobyl suburb, begins *in medias res*:

Spring had come to my hometown. When I got off the bus at the entrance to the contamination zone, Oles was standing at the guard station in a lightweight uniform instead of his padded military jacket, his gun swung loosely over his back. The thaw seemed to have improved his unusually sullen mood; he nodded his appreciation of the flowered fabric I’d brought for his wife and let me pass through the gate without even looking at my documents.

Stories that start *in medias res* don’t actually start in the middle of the story being told. Rather they start with or close to an *inciting incident*: the event that propels the protagonist out of her status quo existence and into a novel circumstance or circumstances that put that status quo into relief or perspective. Most modern narratives are written this way, with the inciting incident occurring, or alluded to, within the first page or pages.

Often the inciting incident is conveyed by the first sentence:

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They threw me off the hay truck about noon.

None of them knew the color of the sky.

One August afternoon, when Ajay was ten years old, his elder brother, Aman, dove into a pool and struck his head on the cement bottom.

The first quoted sentence, from James M. Cain's, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, explains how Frank, a drifter, winds up at the diner where he falls for Cora, wife of Nick "the Greek" Papadakis, the owner, whom Frank and Cora ultimately plot to murder. Had Frank not been thrown off that hay truck, the most famous crime novel ever would lack an inciting incident.

In the second quote the reason none of the characters in Stephen Crane's short story know the color of the sky is because they're the exhausted survivors aboard "The Open Boat" (a lifeboat) that has delivered them from a shipwreck: the inciting incident.

The last quote is from Akhil Sharma's short story "Surrounded by Sleep," about a young Indian boy who believes himself marked by his brother's accident, and who—to comfort himself—conjure up a cardigan-wearing God that is half Clark Kent, half Mr. Rogers. The demarcation between Ajay's previous, status quo existence as happy child and that of the story's present circumstances (which have him appealing to God to fulfill his special fate so Aman's death won't be in vain) is clearly marked. Given the circumstances, to begin with the pool accident seems not only reasonable, but compulsory.

The precise location of an inciting incident isn't always obvious. In a story about an alcoholic man's downward spiral, is the inciting incident the alcoholic's first drink, or his hundred and first—the one that he swears will be his last? When does a drunk begin to be a drunk? When he thinks he's become one, or when his friends tell him he is? Or when he wakes up in a puddle of his own vomit, or in jail, or in the psychiatric ward of a hospital? Or when he gets fired from his job? Or when his wife and children leave him? Or when he finds himself begging coins and cigarettes on Skid Row?

Inciting incidents can be slippery things. So we're left with the same question: *where to begin?* In the end, where to start may have to be determined by the extent to which an event catapults a character out of his or her routine.

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10. The Covenant: *Taking the Leap*

There are, of course, an infinite number of possible opening strategies, possibly as many as there are stories, and each of those strategies comes in countless variations. These are just some examples.

The point is that in telling our stories we have to start somewhere, and where we start matters enough to shape everything that follows. No sooner do we set down the first words of a story than we create, or begin creating, a world—one with its own laws, its own language, its own possibilities and limitations. The covenants of that world are established word by word, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, for reader and writer—but especially for the writer, who'll be bound by them throughout the rest of the work.

Just as in the Bible God makes His covenant with Abraham, we make ours with our readers: we lay down the laws of the worlds they'll inhabit for as long as they keep reading. Or they'll reject that world and its laws and pick up someone else's book, or go about some other business, defrosting the fridge or doing laundry.

In beginning our stories we stand on the edge of a precipice or bridge, but with no fireman there to talk us down. We have to do it ourselves, word by word, but only after we've taken the plunge, hoping our readers will follow us.