

useful passage from Saint Augustine about, as Beha puts it, "the beauty to be found in a well-made whole."

Much of what any writer needs to know is contained in this helpful book. Andrea Barrett muses on the pleasures of research, the challenges and rewards of incorporating history into one's work. Benjamin Percy considers the importance of work itself—the jobs that people do: "Writing is an act of empathy. You are occupying and understanding a point of view that might be alien to your own—and work is often the keyhole through which you peer." Adam Braver describes the experience of editing a manuscript with the aid of a pair of scissors and a roll of Scotch tape. Antonya Nelson comes as close as anyone ever has to describing how she—or anyone—writes as she tells us about a class in which she asked her students to "undertake the process of writing that I myself undertake."

In her essay "On the Making of Orchards," Aimee Bender quotes a line from Dante suggesting that art is God's grandchild. After finishing the last of these essays, we may all feel a little closer to being the distant relatives of art or nature or God. Reading *The Writer's Notebook II* is like spending a couple of hours or days or weeks in the company of writers whose voices you want in your head, whose words you want to keep beside your desk. Go ahead, they seem to be saying. Here is how writing has been for me, and this is what I've learned. Consider this, think about that, read the books that have inspired me. I'm going to tell you what I know, but the rest is up to you. All you have to do now is just sit down—and begin.

## BEGINNINGS

ANN HOOD

I CANNOT WRITE an essay, a short story, or even a novel until I know my first line. At night, I put myself to sleep rearranging words, inserting a comma and then taking it out again. I edit and revise that one sentence while I cook dinner, wait in the car for my kids to walk out of school, do the laundry. The pressure of getting that sentence right is enormous. In fact, not just that sentence, but the opening paragraph—no, the opening page—has to do so much that in some ways it is the most important thing to write.

The beginning introduces the protagonist and his or her conflict. It creates tone, point of view, setting, voice. It introduces themes. Or, as Ted Kooser explains in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, the opening is the hand you extend to your reader. When the writer John Irving told me that he always knew his first line before he began writing, because by knowing his first line he then knew his last line, I understood yet another burden of the beginning: it puts into motion the events that will drive the story to its resolution. And that resolution is often the inverse of the opening.

No wonder I spend so much time on getting the beginning right.

Yet, after I've finished a story and started the revision process, I almost always find myself right back at the beginning, reworking it again. While I was writing, characters changed, new ideas intruded, mistakes in the original plan revealed themselves, and sometimes a different story altogether has taken over. In his book *The Triggering Town*, the poet Richard Hugo says that there are actually two beginnings: the one that comes from your initiating or triggering subject and the one that is generated as you write and discover your real subject. Your challenge is to let go of your triggering beginning and find your real one. This is why in writing workshops a common comment is "Your story actually begins on page five (or three or ten)."

Once I've found my true subject, I have to redetermine the best way to begin. That perfect sentence I spent so much time crafting isn't necessarily gone; sometimes it appears later in the scene or the chapter, or becomes the beginning of chapter two. Kooser warns about those "perfect" openings. We polish them so much, he says, that they become the best part, with everything else weak in comparison. It is almost a relief to let it go and turn my attention to all the different options for how to begin now that I know where I'm headed.

Probably the best way to consider these options is to go to your bookshelf and open your favorite books to see how they start. What is the opening line? What literary device does the writer use to get started? How does the opening line lead into the ones that follow? What is the overall effect of the beginning? For the purpose of illustrating the options for beginnings,

I did just that. I went to my bookshelf and read beginnings, considering these questions as I mentally categorized them. As evidence to the effect of a good beginning, I began this exercise when the sun was shining so brightly that I had to adjust the blinds. The next time I looked up, it was late afternoon and the sun had dipped in the sky. Hours lost in the promise those beginnings set forth.

The options I've landed on fall into these categories: Introduction, An Old Saw, Character Description, A Setting, In Media Res, Facts, A Truism or Philosophical Idea, Dialogue, Overture, and Otherworld. You will see as you read examples of each of these that, in fact, they overlap. For example, the first line of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* could easily fit into three or four. So the point isn't to pigeonhole beginnings, or to set rules for what constitutes the ones I've chosen here. Rather, these examples will hopefully get you thinking about how you can begin your stories. They are meant to inspire and clarify, not to serve as strict definitions.

### Introduction

"CALL ME ISHMAEL."

"I am an invisible man."

"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter."

"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."

Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Salinger in *The Catcher in the Rye* all begin their novels with the protagonist introducing himself. And the way in which Ishmael, Ellison's nameless protagonist, Huck, and Holden introduce themselves sets the tone for the rest of the novel. It also creates a storytelling voice that reveals character. Ishmael's order, Huck's socioeconomic class and education, Holden's sassiness are immediately apparent from the first line. In this type of beginning, it is even possible to reveal the work's themes, as Richard Ford does in *The Sportswriter*. The opening lines, "My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter," are followed by what on the surface appears to be unimportant information: Frank Bascombe tells us his address and how long he's lived there, that he bought the house with money he received when his book was made into a movie, that he and his wife and children are set up to live "the good life." But these seemingly minor details tell the reader everything that Bascombe values—being a man, his work, his home and sense of place, his relationship with his family, and his expectation of "the good life." By using an introduction as the beginning, Ford intimates that these very values will be challenged in the novel.

### An Old Saw

THINK OF CLASSIC opening lines and "Once upon a time . . ." almost immediately comes to mind. Fans of the *Peanuts* comic strip may also remember Snoopy beginning his novel again and again, always starting with the line "It was a dark and stormy night." Our instincts may warn us to stay away from such cliché beginnings, and for the most part those instincts are correct. In fact, since 1982, San Jose State University has run a writing contest inspired by "It was a dark and stormy night." The contest, named for Sir Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, who began his 1830 novel, *Paul Clifford*, with those lines, calls for the worst opening lines for the worst of all possible novels.

Yet Charles Dickens opens stave one of *A Christmas Carol* with "Once upon a time . . . old Scrooge sat busy in his counting house" to set the magical tone and actions of the story. Similarly, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* begins: "Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo." Contemporary writers have also returned to these old saws as openings: the first line in Anne Tyler's *Back When We Were Grownups* is "Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person," and Madeleine L'Engle begins *A Wrinkle in Time* with the very words "It was a dark and stormy night." By using what we might consider clichés, writers can immediately set the tone of the work, allude to those older stories, and make something fresh out of a time-worn beginning.

### Character Description

WHEN A STORY opens with a character description, the writer is sending a signal to readers that this person is going to be important, forcing us to take notice. The writer wants us to pay attention to the character's actions, the way he or she looks or talks or thinks, as Chekhov does when he opens his short story "The Birthday Party" with a detailed description of Olga Mikhailovna's perspective of her husband's birthday party. These details—"The obligation to smile and talk continuously, the stupidity of the servants, the clatter of dishes, the long intervals between courses, and the corset she had put on to conceal her pregnancy from her guests"—delay the action of the story but give great insight into the character of Olga.

In her novel *Inventing the Abbotts*, Sue Miller uses this description of Lloyd Abbot to introduce not only his character but also the novel's themes: "Lloyd Abbot wasn't the richest man in our town, but he had, in his daughters, a vehicle for displaying his wealth that some of the richer men didn't have."

Jane Gardam uses two different techniques of character description in her novel *Old Filth*. The book opens with a two-page scene, written in play form, in which characters discuss a man—Old Filth—who has just left the room. They reveal Old Filth's age ("He must be a hundred."), his former occupation ("Great advocate, judge and—bit of a wit."), and a description ("Magnificent looks, though. And still sharp."). Then Gardam moves on to a traditional chapter, which begins: "He was spectacularly clean. You might say ostentatiously clean." She continues with physical details—"His shoes shone like conkers," "He had the elegance of the 1920s," "Always yellow cotton or silk socks from Harrods"—

and then describes his personality, his career path, and finally his marriage. These opening pages give the reader both a description of Old Filth as he seems to others and a third-person omniscient view of him before the action begins. This not only creates a thorough character description, but it also makes the reader curious to read on and discover why Old Filth is so important.

### Setting

I HAVE ALWAYS loved the way John Steinbeck opens *Of Mice and Men*: "A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green." Steinbeck continues to describe the setting until we see the clearing by the stream where animals come to rest or drink. Two men then enter the scene, and their stories are revealed. There is something cinematic in beginning this way, as if we are watching through a panoramic lens that slowly focuses on the characters in the setting.

The first line of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* has a similar effect: "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting." As does Ernest Hemingway's opening line in *A Farewell to Arms*: "In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains."

Opening with setting can also allow for the introduction of metaphors and themes used in the book to be presented immediately, as Edith Wharton does in *Ethan Frome*. The first chapter begins with the description of a cold, bleak New England landscape: "The village lay under two feet of snow, with drifts at the

windy corners. In a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires. The moon had set, but the night was so transparent that the white house-fronts between the elms looked gray against the snow, clumps of bushes made black stains on it, and the basement windows of the church sent shafts of yellow light far across the endless undulations." Into this setting walks young Ethan Frome. The novel's plot revolves around Frome's desire for a woman who is not his wife. At first, he appreciates the loveliness of winter. However, he eventually realizes that he is oppressed by the elements. These very themes and metaphors are suggested by the opening description of the setting. Wharton uses images of black and white, fire and ice, and the church to set up the moral and social conflicts Frome will face.

### In Media Res

WRITING WORKSHOPS OFTEN advise students to employ Horace's missive to begin in medias res, in the middle of things. Often, this advice is given to keep beginning writers from opening with too much backstory. But for all writers, opening in medias res is a good way to get the story moving. This technique for beginnings is so popular that it is difficult to choose which examples to use to illustrate it.

Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* opens with "It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me." Burgess does not begin with the eighty years that came

before. He does not begin with that morning. He begins at the moment the archbishop arrives, the moment when things are about to change. Hunter S. Thompson does something similar in the first line of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*: "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold." He doesn't begin with the characters preparing for a trip; he begins somewhere around Barstow, when the drugs take hold—the moment when things begin to change.

Arguably the most quoted first line in discussions of beginnings is the opening of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." The reason this line is so effective and memorable—in addition to the beautiful writing and the compelling setup—is that it manages to start the novel in medias res and to introduce backstory simultaneously. Buendía is facing the firing squad *and* remembering the distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

### Facts

TO BEGIN A piece by stating a fact might not sound very writerly, but, actually, this seemingly simple technique carries a great deal of weight. The fact that opens the work must be the most important detail of the story. It must inform the reader, reveal character or plot, suggest something large and vital. When Pat Conroy opens *The Lords of Discipline* with the fact "I wear the

ring," he is—in just four words—revealing everything you need to know about the plot, which revolves around the activities at a military school in the South and the issues of loyalty and betrayal signified by the importance of that ring. He accomplishes a similar feat in *The Prince of Tides*, which opens with this fact: "My wound is geography." Those four words contain the theme of the novel, which is discovering what it means to be a southern man and how to live with that burden.

Consider the facts that open *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis: "Elmer Gantry was drunk."; *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."; and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." Brief and declarative, these facts reveal everything we need to know about the novel and its protagonist.

### A Truism or Philosophical Idea

SIMILAR TO BEGINNING with a fact, stating a truism or philosophical idea is another way to open your story, such as the first line of *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Or *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Or even *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, which begins, "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."

Unlike beginning with a fact, when you begin with a truism or a philosophical idea you rely on generalities rather than specific details. The burden of such an opening is that the work must then prove the idea to be true. The theme is laid out at the start, and the promise the writer makes to the reader is that, by the story's end, it will be clear in what ways unhappy families are different from each other, that single wealthy men want wives, and why the times were so contradictory.

### Dialogue

BEGINNING WITH DIALOGUE is one of the most difficult ways to open a story successfully. The dialogue must be compelling enough to draw the reader in before he or she knows anything about the character(s) speaking or the context in which the dialogue is taking place. There exists the danger that the dialogue will feel disembodied or separate from what follows.

Difficult, but not impossible, as Salman Rushdie demonstrates in *The Satanic Verses*, which opens with this line of dialogue: "'To be born again,' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die.'" And Katherine Dunn in *Geek Love*: "'When your mama was the geek, my dreamlets,' Papa would say, 'she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned toward her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing.'"

Why do these openings work? First, the speakers—Gibreel Farishta and Papa—are identified by name. In this way, the reader is introduced to the character who is speaking, which prevents that disembodied feeling. But perhaps even more importantly, *what* they are saying and *how* they say it draws the reader in immediately. With *The Satanic Verses*, we wonder if the speaker is dead. And we are given the wonderful added detail that Gibreel is tumbling from heaven. Papa's dialogue is strange and charming at the same time. Mama was a geek? The nipping off of noggins? Hens yearned toward her? Both of these beginnings make the reader want to find out what will happen next.

### Overture

RON HANSEN DESCRIBES the type of beginning he uses in his novel *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* as an "overture opening." Hansen begins by writing everything he knows about Jesse James, including that James walked around the house with several newspapers, stuffed flat pencils in his pockets, flipped peanuts to squirrels, braided dandelions into his wife's yellow hair, sucked raw eggs out of their shells, and ate grass when he was sick.

An overture-style opening is also used by John Hawkes in *Second Skin* when the narrator tells us all of the things he loves: "the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped; lover of bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies bent to their sweet and infamous designs; lover of parasols made from the same puffy stuff

as a young girl's underdrawers; still lover of that small naval boat which somehow survived the distressing years of my life between her decks or in her pilothouse; and also lover of poor dear black Sonny, my mess boy, fellow victim and confidant, and of my wife and child. But most of all, lover of my harmless and sanguine self."

When I think of the word *overture*, two things come to mind. An overture is an introduction to something more substantial. An overture also connotes music. Beginning with an overture requires both. Hansen and Hawkes give us these overtures before they tell us what their stories are. And they do it lyrically. The writing is musical. If it wasn't, these opening paragraphs would read like two long lists.

### Otherworld

GREGOR SAMSA WAKES up and discovers he's a giant cockroach in the first line of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. On a cold day in April, the clocks strike thirteen in George Orwell's *1984*. These beginnings tell the reader right away that he or she is entering a world that is different than his or her own. By opening like this, the writer—and the world created—gain authority. Samsa is a cockroach. The clocks are striking thirteen.

Joseph Conrad said that writing is creating worlds. Kafka and Orwell are literally creating different worlds—worlds in which a man can wake up a cockroach or in which there is a thirteen o'clock. But really, every writer creates a new world every time he or she begins a new story, and from the very beginning, the writer needs to establish the rules of that world. In *Mrs.*

*Dalloway*, we enter a world in which Clarissa Dalloway decides to buy the flowers herself. In *Anna Karenina*, we enter a world in which unhappy families are all different in their own way. No matter how you decide to begin your novel, that beginning brings the reader into a world of your own making.

One of my favorite first lines in recent literature is the first line of *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." In this beginning, Eugenides creates an otherworld, one in which the protagonist is born twice. He gives us facts—dates, places. He uses setting—a remarkably smogless day, an emergency room near Petoskey. And the protagonist introduces himself by telling us, "I was born twice."

But most importantly, this beginning—like every one I've mentioned and every one in those books on your bookshelves—is so well written, so fresh and compelling that it makes me want to read more. Isn't that really all that a good beginning needs to do?

## DON'T WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON

EVERY WEDNESDAY, I teach an introductory fiction workshop at Harvard University, and on the first day of class I pass out a bulleted list of things the students should try hard to avoid. Don't start a story with an alarm clock going off. Don't end a story with the whole shebang having been a suicide note. Don't use flashy dialogue tags like *intoned* or *queried* or, God forbid, *ejaculated*. Twelve unbearably gifted students are sitting around the table, and they appreciate having such parameters established. With each variable the list isolates, their imaginations soar higher. They smile and nod. The mood in the room is congenial, almost festive with learning. I feel like a very effective teacher; I can practically hear my course-evaluation scores hitting the roof. Then, when the students reach the last point on the list, the mood shifts. Some of them squint at the words as if their vision has gone blurry; others ask their neighbors for clarification. The neighbor will shake her head, looking pale and dejected, as if the last point confirms that she should have opted