

## Book Notes by Janice Daquila-Pardo

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### HOOKED: WRITE FICTION THAT GRABS READERS AT PAGE ONE AND NEVER LETS THEM GO

Les Edgerton

- This single biggest reason manuscripts get rejected is because the writer begins in the wrong place (modern story structure).
- Writing evolves, and what's accepted today is different than what was acceptable even a few short years ago. Much different.
- Great beginnings buy the writer a lot of leeway further on in the story.
- A good, quality story beginning is a microcosm of the work entire. If you capture the right beginning, you've written a small version of the whole.
- Stability + **Inciting Incident (II)** = Instability + Struggle to Resolve Instability = New Stability
- The first stability has been shortened significantly—or completely omitted (period of former stability only implied)
  - Beginning with II
- Modern story structure:
  - Inciting incident
  - Struggle to resolve the surface and **story-worthy problems (SWP)**
  - The resolution of the story. Tidy endings that represent a clear-cut victory or loss just aren't very good endings. Must be a bit of both.
- A scene is a unit of dramatic action (conflict).
- A **protagonist (P)** should gain nothing easily.
- Each scene in a story is a battle, and the story entire is a war.
- Structure of most scenes (but not opening scenes)
  - The P enters the scene with a goal.
  - The **antagonist (A)** also enters the scene with a goal.
  - The scene ends in disaster for the P.
  - The story continues after the scene ends.
    - Scene > Sequel > Scene (cycle)
- The **opening scene (OS)** is different because there's no problem to resolve yet—it's the dramatization of the II.
- Opening scene is virtually the only time the P gets to be reactionary. After this scene he has to quickly become proactive to resolve problems.
- A scene is usually followed by a sequel, in which you can get inside your P's head to show the readers his reaction to what's just happened. When the OS ends (in disaster), the sequel begins with the **character's (C)** emotional reaction, going from that emotion to the intellectual portion of the mind, where a new action is formulated. A new scene begins as soon as the C begins to implement that action.
- "Telling" via exposition (summary) just can't do the job of opening a story nearly as powerfully as "showing" through a dramatic scene can.
- Summary doesn't convince anyone of anything.
- Your goal is to evoke an emotional response that hooks the reader. The reader must live through that opening scene along with the P.
- Components of an opening scene:
  - Primary components:

- The inciting incident
    - The story-worthy problem
    - The initial **surface problem (SP)**
    - The setup
  - Secondary components:
    - Backstory
    - The opening line
    - Language
    - Character introduction
    - Setting
    - Foreshadowing
- Goals of openings:
  - Introduce the SWP – most important goal – heart and soul of the story
  - Hook the reader – something that intrigues – draws reader in
    - Strong II that plunges the P immediately into trouble
  - Establish the story rules – consistent voice, tone, narration
  - Forecast the ending
    - The beginnings of the best stories very often contain at least a hint of the ending.
- Trust a reader’s intelligence
- Stories always have to be about trouble > So a story shouldn’t really begin until the trouble begins. The story simply doesn’t exist before that point.
  - SWP and SP must be solidly linked for story to work.
  - SWP is paramount – what story is really about – associated with inner self
  - SP merely symptomatic, derivative of that larger problem
- The II must be written as a dramatic scene so that readers grasp P’s emotion.
  - Everything important in a story must be written as a scene (unit of drama = conflict)
  - The moment the P becomes aware of the initial SP is one of the most important aspects of a story – must be a scene
  - Melodrama (usually physical conflict) is almost always about the external and superficial; drama reaches into the heart, soul, and psyche of the individual
- The intensity of the P’s wanting something introduces an element of danger.
- “If the character cries on the page...the reader won’t.” Toni Morrison
  - Flatten the emotional language rather than elevating it – more powerful
- Think smaller (Thelma & Louise starts with Thelma deciding not to ask husband for permission to go on trip with Louise) not bigger.
  - Begin with a small moment of intense realization that affects your P on an internal psychological level, and you have room to allow the problem to grow (if you start with a big explosion, do you go to bigger ones?)
- II is the event that upsets the *situation* (ongoing) and pushes it to its breaking point.
  - Thelma & Louise: Thelma’s bad marriage (situation) > Thelma’s act of defiance (II)
- The II triggers the initial SP and starts to slowly expose the P’s SWP.
  - P won’t fully realize the extent of his SWP in opening scene, so the initial SP has to be so compelling that it forces him to take immediate action.
  - SWP grows clearer to him as he goes through his journey to resolve it.
- Each attempt to solve SPs must fail (some partial wins are OK).

- Outline shape of publishable story (p. 55):
  - The I creates the C's initial SP and introduces the first inklings of the SWP.
  - The P takes steps to resolve the initial SP.
  - The outcome of the major action the P takes to resolve the initial SP is revealed, triggering a new surface problem. The scope of the P's SWP continues to unfold.
  - The outcome of the major action the P takes to resolve the additional SP is revealed, and yet another SP is created. The SWP continues to become more apparent to the P, as well as to the reader.
  - Another outcome is revealed, and more SPs are created. The SWP continues to become clearer.
  - All lingering SPs are resolved, and the SWP is fully realized. The resolution of the SWP is represented by both a win and a loss for the P.
- SWP - Relates more to the inner psychology of the P and has to be big enough, dramatic enough, to change the P's world and force him on a journey of changes.
- SP - More like bad situations that reflect the actual SWP but that aren't sufficient on their own to sustain an entire story.
- Author must have firm understanding of SWP before beginning to write.
  - SWP won't be completely understood by P or reader until the end – but you must know so all the story's problems are linked.
- Every problem—SWP and SP—has its own corresponding resolution or goal, so the resolution of a SP shouldn't also be the resolution to the SWP (should contribute to it, though).
- Once the SWP is introduced, nothing can take precedence over it.
- Tip: To distinguish between your SP goals and SWP goals, you should be able to photograph the resolutions of a SP.
  - Surface goals are particular.
  - SW goals are all-encompassing and more general (world peace, self respect).
- A P's problems—both SP and SWP—must lead directly to the establishment of corresponding goals.
  - P begins to take action, problems worsen and are more difficult.
- Make sure that your initial SP arises from the SWP. It has to be organic and not just come out of nowhere.
- The SP provides the vehicle that will carry the SWP along and keep the reader interested and involved.
- Give the A an equally relevant goal—has to conflict with the P's goal.
- Try not to make the A's goals evil.
  - P's and A's goals should be equally good and honorable.
- Novel should contain 1 SWP and innumerable SPs.
- SPs are the author's way of representing the SWP in a dramatic way. They represent the underlying, more intense, and psychological SWP that's at the core of every story. From that central problem a number of SPs can and should develop.
- Every new SP arises out of the last problem.
- P can't recognize his SWP until he struggles through numerous SPs.
  - The reader will realize it at the same time as the P.
- Without knowing how your initial SP supports the SWP, you can't come up with the right story opening.

- The SWP becomes clearer bit by bit, revelation by revelation.
- Since the real goal to return to the world that existed before the problem arrived is impossible, the next best goal is to return as close as possible to that world. Essentially, a world minus the problem. That's why many of a person's actions are designed to make the person he views as responsible for his predicament change his mind.
- Smaller and particular works; grandiose and immense doesn't work—bring the story down to individuals because big ideas/lofty themes are faceless and don't move readers.
- The most common wrong opening is including too much **setup (SU)** and **backstory (BS)**.
- Incorrect placement of BS stems from the mistaken belief that readers won't know what's going on unless we flesh out the characters or provide some of the P's history that led to this crucial place.
- Give only the amount of SU or BS that's absolutely necessary.
- The SU sets up the situation, or Cs, or both.
  - Most of the time, at least some BS is included in the SU.
  - Can also be employed with very little BS.
- In modern stories SU has to be minimal, brief, and written with skill.
- The best way to use SU is to incorporate it into the action of the II itself.
- BS is essentially a C's history.
- The key to BS is determining where and how much of it should appear—usually not in the opening—at least not at first.
- A bad situation isn't an II. Until the creation of the initial SP, until the first inklings of the SWP are revealed to the C, your story hasn't started.
  - A bad situation in real life may not be bad enough for fiction.
- Good novels incorporate BS seamlessly into the present of the scene rather than delivering it as a passive chunk.
  - Passive BS versus active BS
  - Look for ways to encapsulate a lengthy history into just a few telling words.
- "Mediocre writers borrow; great writers steal." T.S. Eliot
- Some stories do require a lengthier SU and some BS:
  - Exception 1: The calm-before-the-storm opening
  - Exception 2: The fish-out-of-water opening
  - Exception 3: The essential-context opening
  - Exception 4: Frame-story opening
- There's no such thing as a perfect opening—all stories are flawed in some way.
- Deconstructing an opening (from p. 123):
  - Title:
  - Opening backstory:
  - Setup:
  - Inciting incident:
  - Surface problem:
  - Surface goal:
  - Story-worthy problem:
  - Story-worthy goal:
- Entering a scene late and leaving early – don't know how P got there and leave before it's over
- A proper II starts to expose the SWP to the P.

- First figure out what your P's SWP is going to be—what can I do to create a scene that will introduce my C's *real* problem?
- Establishing C from the start—elements of C should always be present in your opening.
  - Physical description is usually the weakest method.
- Work to get your reader to empathize, sympathize, and identify with your C from the start.
- Have others in your story like your P or respond to her favorably, and you tip the scales in favor of readers liking her as well.
- Avoid standalone description or exposition of your C's personality and appearance; instead, show your C by putting her in action.
- C's physical description—unless abnormal— does little to draw the reader in; actions are more useful.
- Maybe start with \_\_\_\_\_ to establish character:
  - P's II revealed in action that is contrary to P's normal behavior and personality
  - P's philosophy – use sparingly and deliver what you promise.
  - Unusual characters
  - Normal C doing strange things
  - C thoughts – but not ruminating about some past dreadful event—or even the II after it's occurred.
- We need a scene we can live through with the P.
- Use your opening to **foreshadow (FS)** your story. At least a hint.
  - FSing strives to let the reader know that the issues to come are larger than the reader might assume.
  - The author who chooses this kind of opening wants the reader to clearly understand what's at stake.
- Economy of language – Every word needs to count and to represent more
  - Eschew flowery language – be clear and interesting
- Use specificity and details to help create strong openings.
  - Sentences built with strong verbs and concrete nouns enrich openings.
  - Pare down and rework your sentences until they come alive with energy and meaning, and most of all, until they deliver a complete image.
  - The end of the sentence is what the reader remembers, and placing the action at the end gives a sentence its biggest impact.
- Beware of clichés, adverbs, and adjectives.
- It's okay to open with place or setting *if* they are crucial to the II and SP.
  - When you treat the place or setting as an important C, it makes sense to allow that place to open the story, just as any other C would. But you must weave that seamlessly into the II scene.
  - Any description should illuminate the C in particular ways.
- Great opening lines presents a question that the reader will want to answer. No exposition.
  - Unreliable narrator – says one thing when his actions say another; good for comedy and irony
  - Create a mystery in your opening and the reader is yours.
  - If you give the reader an unexpected response to an event, you've got them
  - Give the reader a C who's obviously cut out of different cloth than Everyman and you create a compelling opening.

- Have unique things happen to your C in ordinary situations, and you've intrigued the reader.
- A single, incongruent word can make the difference between a ho-hum opening and an intriguing one: *When I got there they were burying the lion in the back yard again.*
- Start with a tense situation.
- Put us smack in the middle of trouble.
- Create a beginning sentence or two describing something pleasurable, and then drop the forbidden apple into your Garden of Eden.
- Employ metaphors that not only are original but fit the P and the story.
- Give your readers an opening that flatly states that somewhere in the text a secret will be revealed, a mystery unfolded.
- Create a P who implies the universal by the particular.
- If you opt to begin with dialogue, make sure it's clear from the git-go who's speaking and in what context.
- Open with the promise of trouble, and then deliver trouble.
- All good openings...
  - Are about trouble
  - Raise questions and provoke the reader's curiosity
- Red flag openers to avoid:
  - Opening with a dream
  - Opening with an alarm clock buzzing
  - Being unintentionally funny
  - Too little dialogue
  - Opening with dialogue
- Opening scene length – short
  - Deliver the II scene and then get right into the struggle to resolve the problem that incident created.
  - Get your P in trouble right away.
  - Proper length is as short as you can make it.
- Create seamless transitions from opening scene on...
- Transitions no longer really needed – readers get it when you jump
- Nielsen BookScan – stats about sales/genres
- Stories today had better be wound tight and delivered quickly.
- What we refer to as mainstream or literary fiction represents a rapidly shrinking market. The fiction market today is being driven by genres.
- Novels are about people, the human condition.
- Nothing is more important than the voice of the P. Never start with the A.
- Great first paragraphs:
  - A Tale of Two Cities
  - Offshore by Penelope Fitzgerald
  - Pride & Prejudice
  - Madame Bovary
- Create a viewpoint C with a fascinating approach to life.
- It has been shown that the more modest the writer, the better the writing. That's because good writers know how much they still have to learn.