

ENIGMATIC ENTERTAINMENT

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DO FAMOUS FIRST LINES FUND FAME OR DO FAMOUS FINAL LINES FULFIL MORE?

We all think we know some famous first lines that we wished we had written ourselves. The clock striking thirteen at the opening of 1984, the last night of dreams from Daphne Du Maurier, *The Old Man And The Sea*. How have opening lines changed over the years? Do they have to grab the attention quite as dramatically as the “how to” books would suggest? Do they have to engage the reader more now than in the past, and if so why?

And what about the closing line of a story? Does it have to wrap it all up neatly, or can it be enigmatic? Can it be happy or sad, relevant to what has gone before, or can it suggest another possibly different avenue?

“I suppose you will be getting away pretty soon, now Full Term is over, Professor,” said a person not in the story...’ That ‘ a person not in the story’ is a wonderful way for a traditional ghost story like “Oh, Whistle, And I’ll Come To You, My Lad.” to begin, and the easy, seemingly casual, commencement of a story with dialogue, immediately puts us amongst the characters, thus giving such stories as the M R James classic its bedrock in characterisation, which, if given sufficient room to move and breathe, in other words a decent word length, allows this form of the genre to be so successful. Does it grab the attention, this first line, or was that perhaps not the intention in those days when Dr Johnson’s, “The public are the ultimate judges; if they are pleased, it is well; if not, it is no use to tell them why they ought to be have been pleased.” was, possibly rightly, regarded as the common critic.

‘His nerves, too, have suffered: he cannot even now see a surplice hanging on a door quite unmoved, and the spectacle of a scarecrow in a field late on a winter afternoon has cost him more than one sleepless night.’ The conclusion to Parkins’ tale is a fine summing up, as though we are truly listening to the words spoken whilst seated in a leather chair, in an oak panelled room, and with a fine Macanudo cigar and a vintage Port for company. The line encompasses what had gone before, and should we perversely have glanced at it before beginning the story, as we all do on occasion, we should have been more than tempted to read the story in full.

A fine modern exponent of the ghost story, Terry Lamsley, often favoured more direct openings that tempt the reader into his world by a statement. ‘Nathan was on the lookout for the woman most of the time now.’ This line from the story *Back In The Dunes* from his third collection *Dark Matters* from Ash Tree Press is a variant on the Hamlet opening. Without meeting her we want to know who the woman is and why Nathan is keeping watch for her. It draws us in through curiosity, making us want to read on to satisfy what killed the cat, but which itch we can only scratch be learning more about these characters.

Here the ending, ‘They sounded genuinely happy now, and were obviously eager to begin the anniversary celebration.’ will not mean much without the story having been read as a whole. It is an example of the explaining/summing up last line that acts as a full stop without adding further mystery to the piece. It works well because it serves to underline the story and bring down the final curtain neatly and effectively.

Our own ‘The silver helicopter flowed with insistent noise through the lazy tropical air.’ taken from *Ashushma*, the opening novella from our collection *Echoes Of Darkness*, Sarob Press May 2000, is an attempt at a descriptive opening that uses the language to paint a picture – here

of a tropical island and visitors approaching it – to set up an atmosphere from which the characters and action will develop. It is a long story, 19000 words, and the reader knows that before they start reading. That may make a difference with the opening line, as longer stories sometimes tell their tale at a slower pace, usually in a more complex manner as well. A short, punchy opening line may not always work. Although with novels we are told the opening line, and indeed the first page, must grab the attention.

‘It was difficult to see in the full darkness, with the sea struggling around and over the stones, but it seemed as if the shapes merged into one huge misshapen mass that swallowed Sybella, leaving the storm to rant in futile rage.’ The finale of our story continues the theme of using atmosphere as one of the characters in the story, and concludes the telling of the story by focussing on one of the main characters, Sybella, who has, hopefully, become sympathetic to the reader, so that her fate affects us as we learn of it.

Over the years opening lines have changed from the occasionally slow, deliberate preambles into the body of the story, to almost an art form of their own. The intention now must be to engage the readers (or editors/publishers/agents etc.) quickly so that the story is not cast aside and another selected instead. There is fierce competition for acceptance; there is a plethora of other preoccupations that divert attention away from the telling of a story. There are intense pressures in daily life, as everything gets faster, more instant, and much of our entertainment becomes increasingly visual. The luxury of starting a story in slow time, with the pace of a waltz rather than a frenetic break dance is becoming ever more dangerous.

Yet, “‘He had heart trouble,” the woman was telling Carella.’ Is how Ed McBain chose to begin *The Last Dance*, the fiftieth novel in the 87th Precinct series of crime novels that began in 1956. The books have consistently featured several city cops who, if one has read all the books, have grown and developed over the years. Because the books are so well established, and work so well, we know that Carella, the “main” character, and the one closest to the authors voice in the stories, is investigating a death; and because the suggestion is natural causes we know it will turn out to be murder, just as we know that the policemen will go through various stages to establish this, and they will be slightly changed by events as they unfold. Just as with a familiar friend we can relax and forgo certain formalities, so with an author we know and respect we can accept some leniency.

The ending displays this even more than the beginning, with its, ‘At last, Kling said, “Wanna dance?”’ So casual, so informal, we feel privileged to be amongst people so comfortable with themselves. They have just been through so much, in which we have shared, and the last line allows us a small smile with them.

‘During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House Of Usher.’ Who else could it be? Atmosphere, menace, some action, the introduction of the main character (well, two main characters – the man and the house), and an all-pervading sense of dread. Already we don’t want to enter the house, but then again of course we do, but we know we’ll be scared every step of the way. As potent now as when first written, here is respectable pace yet attention grabbing of the highest order.

The ending is equally fierce. ‘While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tern at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of The House Of Usher.’ Fantastic stuff that completes a circle

from the opening line, and rounds off the intervening story with an atmospheric and chilling conclusion.

There could be the argument that the opening and ending of any story are the two defining moments that dictate whether it will find favour with the reader or pass into obscurity in their memory. Certainly when writing stories these are often the two lines most thought about; the two lines most revised. We often find, speaking as writers now, we write a story, and upon revision lose the original beginning (sometimes the opening paragraphs), as its purpose has been served; it has got us into the meat of the tale and overcome our initial shyness at meeting the new characters. Occasionally we start a story with only the opening line, a thread of an idea that has insinuated itself in our sub-conscious and from which the rest follows. Rarely do we revise the last line, because by that stage we know our characters, know what they will do – not always, as they can be independent little beggars – and the ending evolves from the plot. Always, though, the ending has to match the beginning, so that there is symmetry to the story telling, a roundness that acts as a final farewell.

‘Outside the walls of the Crimson Cabaret was a world of rain and darkness.’ Instantly we want to be inside those walls, out of the rain and the dark, somewhere that sounds safe. Gas Station Carnivals from *The Nightmare Factory* by Thomas Ligotti won’t be safe, and somehow we know that even as we enter, but still the words used, and their context, entice us in. By the time the last line, ‘Perhaps then I will discover what it was I did – what any of us did – to deserve this fate.’ we know, like the character Quisser, that safety was the least appealing aspect of that opening, and again the ending brings us neatly and very effectively to that conclusion, although we were well aware of it throughout our journey.

Which is more important – a good opening or a good finale? Starter or dessert? Well, can we have one without the other? Each performs a very different function. An opening can set up mystery, atmosphere, action, characters, mood. It can hook, grab, entice, cajole, bully sometimes – ‘So you think you know pain?’ from Jack Ketchum is fairly provocative – anything it needs to make one read on. What follows then must stand on its own two feet, but the opening line is like a parents guiding hands, showing the way, finally letting go of the bicycle before the child goes wobbling off on its own first solo ride.

Having survived the journey of the whole story, having read on from the first line, and enjoyed, to whatever degree, the intervening story we come to the last line. The final memory we will have of the story. Will it please or disappoint? Satisfy or frustrate? Without a superb last line a story is like sex without an orgasm – pleasing and exciting, but ultimately frustrating. The last line is like a comforting embrace in the dark of night, something we all need on occasion.

Before you go back to the top of this essay and check out our first line again – a quiz. Whose first lines, and a few last lines too, are these? Answers on a postcard (☺) although a clue – we have told you...

Here’s some firsts –

‘When a traveller in north central Massachusetts takes the wrong fork at the junction of the Aylesbury pike just beyond Dean’s Corners he comes upon a lonely and curious country.’
HPL – *The Dunwich Horror*

‘Just when the idea occurred to her that she was being murdered she could not tell.’
Ray Bradbury – *The Small Assassin*

‘Mr Baxter sauntered out of his office in the Dormy House at Duncaster Golf Club, just as the sun was setting one perfect evening late in September, 19-, his meagre labours finished for the day.’ HRW – 17th Hole

‘You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.’ Frankenstein

And in conclusion –

“Merry Christmas,” he repeated softly.’ Hell House

‘In forgetting, they were trying to remember.’ The Exorcist.

‘The hammering and the voices and the barking dog grew fainter, and, “Oh, God,” he thought, “What a bloody silly way to die...”’ Don’t Look Now

‘In those previous seconds Gerald had become aware of something dividing them which neither of them would ever mention or ever forget.’ Ringing The Changes

‘Subsequently the body was again secretly dug up, and the coffin was found to be full of blood.’ The Room In The Tower.