

University of Wollongong

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One page and counting – beginnings and narrative construction

Abstract:

The submission requirements for Manhattan-based agent Jeff Kleinman at Folio Literary Management read:

Please email your cover letter and paste in the first page or so of your material at the bottom of the letter (no attachments, please). Let's repeat that again: first page of your manuscript. Not a synopsis. First page. Please.

Julie Barer, another prominent agent who founded The Book Group, allows authors to submit ten pages. These examples are typical of the industry, underlining the point that beginnings are critical for authors within the commercial environment. Interestingly, despite this industry focus on beginnings, the subject area hasn't attracted much theoretical attention. Key texts in the field include Edward Said's *Beginnings* (1975) and A.D. Nuttall's *Openings* (1992) as well as edited collections such as Brian Richardson's *Narrative Dynamics* (2002) and *Narrative Beginnings* (2008). However in the larger field of novels and narratology relatively little attention has been paid to something that is determining much of our literary industry. As narratologist James Phelan states (2007): 'Previous narrative theory, for the most part, has emphasized the textual rather than the readerly side of narrative beginnings' (15/6). This paper will explore beginnings from both a critical and writerly perspective, arguing they are important to consider, not only for commercial reasons but because, as in Said's words, '[b]eginnings ... inspire anticipation. A beginning 'is already a project under way'. That is, beginnings set up the stories we can tell. After this exploration, I will analyse early and later drafts of the first paragraph of my novel-in-progress 'Freefall' to see how these discussions have influenced my craft.

Biographical note:

Shady Cosgrove is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at University of Wollongong. Her books include *What the Ground Can't Hold* (Picador, 2013) and *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009), which was shortlisted for the Australian Vogel Prize. Her shorter works have appeared in *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Antipodes* and *Best Australian Stories*.

Key words:

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Jeff Kleinman is one of the top literary agents in New York. Julie Barer, another prominent agent who founded The Book Group, will give a submission ten pages. Even so, that is not much space for an author to establish the parameters of their world within a manuscript. From this, one concludes that beginnings are essential for an author looking for representation (and publication) within a commercial environment. Interestingly, despite this industry focus on beginnings, the subject area hasn't attracted much theoretical attention. Of course there are key texts in the field such as Edward Said's *Beginnings* (1975) and A.D. Nuttall's *Openings* (1992) that complicate Aristotle's early reading of beginnings. As well, edited collections such as Brian Richardson's *Narrative Dynamics* (2002) and *Narrative Beginnings* (2008) bring together valuable surveys of the field. James Phelan's essays 'The Beginning of Beloved: A Rhetorical Approach' (2008) and 'Beginnings and Endings: Theories and Typologies of How Novels Open and Close' (1998) have also provided key insights on the topic of beginnings. However in the larger field of novels and narratology I would argue this is relatively little attention dedicated to something that is determining so much of the American (and sadly by proxy Australian) literary industry.

Before I begin, it is important to acknowledge the considerable debate about where, in fact, a text begins – such as those outlined in Gérard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* – but I would argue these discussions are less useful for writers who are trying to determine at what point a manuscript should begin than for theorists engaged with debates about the text as artefact. As narratologist James Phelan states (2007): 'Previous narrative theory, for the most part, has emphasized the textual rather than the readerly side of narrative beginnings' (15/6). This paper will explore beginnings from a critical and readerly/writerly perspective, arguing they are important to consider, not only for commercial reasons but because, as in Said's words, '[b]eginnings ... inspire anticipation'. A beginning 'is already a project under way'. That is, beginnings set up the stories we can tell. And further, I argue it is important to consider beginnings from both the perspective of the critic and the writer because writers are bound to a creative industry that places immense pressure on beginnings. That is, the contemporary published beginnings that critics consider are subject to rules and regulations of the current industry. While established authors may have more creative leeway than those seeking agent representation, there is still the pressure of the market – will it sell? – that drives the industry.

To contextualise, I was inspired to write this paper after struggling with where to begin my current work-in-progress, a novel entitled 'Freefall'. In the words of Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, Briscoe considers the canvas: 'Where to begin? that was the question; at what point to make the first mark?' (157-8), I found myself struggling with a similar question. When asked at a Wollongong Writers Festival event in Thirroul on advice about beginnings, award-winning Australian writer Charlotte Wood quoted Kurt Vonnegat (1999: 9-10): 'Start as close to the end as possible.' And indeed this proved valuable advice. I cut fifteen pages off the beginning of the manuscript, placing the protagonist closer to the driving conflict of

the novel. However, it seemed the idea of beginnings was something that could well inspire more thought, both critically and creatively, as so much rests on their success, not only in commercial terms but within the realm of the creative work. So here in this paper, I will explore critical and writerly discussions on the topic as a means of establishing a methodology to then examine early and subsequent drafts of my manuscript's first two hundred words, highlighting how these discussions have impacted my craft. These early paragraphs will be read as case studies. Of course a beginning is often more than two hundred words (Julie Barer, above, gives the beginning as the first ten pages of a book) but due to word limits here, I will confine my analysis.

Richardson argues (2008: 4-5) it's important to recognise that beginnings within the tradition of the realist novel are not static. Before modernism, authors often used discursive framing to situate the text, unafraid of sweeping, omniscient point-of-view schemas. With modernism, writers frequently dropped readers straight into action, but it was an action based on non-action, where submerged meaning proved critical. Richardson provides the example of Mrs Dalloway deciding to buy flowers. And postmodern texts, he reminds us, frequently offer paradoxical beginnings, such as Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds* where the narrator states: 'One beginning and one ending was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author' (9). And of course there is Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night, A Traveller* told entirely in first chapters.

As well, narratology that focuses on intertextuality must also be acknowledged, for as Bennett and Royle state: 'No journey, no life, no narrative ever really begins: all have in some sense already begun before they begin' (3). And, 'No text makes sense without other texts' (6). They go on to question whether the beginning exists in the writer's first mark on the page or the first idea of the story or even so far back as the childhood of the reader. 'Or does the text only begin as the reader picks up the book? Does the text begin with its title, or with the first word of the so-called 'body' of the text?' (1). I understand the practical and theoretical importance of the paratext – as does any author who has struggled with publishers to agree on a cover or title for their creative work. And indeed, as Rabinowitz reminds us, titles 'not only guide our reading process by telling us where to concentrate; they also provide a core around which to organize an interpretation' (302). However this paper is concerned with the issues novelists face in crafting an enticing beginning that will (hopefully) inspire readers to continue engaging with the text.

One of the reasons beginnings matter is because they occupy positions of privilege, and these are bound up in processes of reading. Rabinowitz also reminds us that broad rules exist among nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American prose narratives regarding the privilege certain positions such as titles, beginnings and endings have:

... such placement affects both concentration and scaffolding: our attention during the act of reading will, in part, be concentrated on what we have found in these positions, and our sense of the text's meaning will be influenced by our assumption that the author expected us to end up with an interpretation that could account more fully for these details than for details elsewhere (300).

That is, writer and reader enter a pact that implicitly scaffolds the text – what information is imparted, and where it is placed, will affect the text's meaning. In my textual analysis of

‘Freefall’, this will be the first thing to assess: how does the first paragraph scaffold textual meaning? That is, what appears in the first paragraph and does the text’s overall meaning depend on this information being placed there? This idea of scaffolding is linked to Edward Said’s comment that:

Every sort of writing establishes explicit and implicit rules of pertinence for itself: certain things are admissible, certain others not. I call these rules of pertinence *authority*—both in the sense of explicit law and guiding force (what we usually mean by the term) and in the sense of that implicit power to generate another word that will belong to the writing as a whole (259).

I take this to mean that how you begin determines what can come next. The beginning is where explicit and implicit rules are established, and these set in place – or scaffold – what words can manifest in the writing as a whole. As Brian Richardson states (2008): ‘The beginning is a foundational element of any narrative, fictional or nonfictional, public or private, official or subversive’ (1). Beginnings set up events in the novel and sometimes by changing this structure, the writer can dramatically affect a work. At the start of *Elizabeth Costello*, JM Coetzee writes: ‘There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge’ (1).

A bridge seems like an apt metaphor – in the sense of the internal workings of our narrative worlds – getting our protagonist from the beginning to the end. But a bridge is also an apt metaphor because as writers we must pull readers from lives ‘outside’ our texts across the bridge and into the worlds within our texts. A structurally sound bridge in this metaphor should inspire anticipation, as a beginning ‘is already a project under way’ (Said, 257). David Lodge states: ‘However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, “draw us in”’ (4-5) This idea of ‘drawing in’ the reader is bound up in the very definition of beginnings, as seen in Gerald Prince’s *Dictionary of Narratology*:

Beginning. The incident initiating the process of change in a PLOT or ACTION. This incident does not necessarily follow but is necessarily followed by other incidents ... It gives rise to a certain number of possibilities, *and reading (processing) a narrative is, among other things, wondering which will and which will not be realized and finding out* (10) (my italics).

However, as editor Robert Gottlieb tells us, crafting beginnings is not a straight-forward matter: ‘It’s often the case that the most strained moments in books are the very beginning and the very end—the getting in and the getting out’ (1). There is no set way to begin a novel so that readers will wonder what will and will not be realised within the text just as there’s no set way to begin that novel. As Lodge reminds,

A novel may begin with a set-piece description of a landscape or townscape that is to be the primary setting of the story ... A novel may begin in the middle of a conversation ... It may begin with an arresting self-introduction by the narrator ... A novelist may begin with a philosophical reflection ... or pitch a character into extreme jeopardy with the very first sentence ... (7).

However, for writers there is still the imperative to consider hook, or to put it another way: with millions of books in the world, why should a reader commit to this story? Why should

they be interested? This will be the second question I ask of my 'Freefall' case studies: what is David Lodge's hook? Why should the reader care?

The beginning must also establish the parameters of the world. As Phelan (2007) reminds us:

Indeed, beginnings do more than initiate the action ... Elements of exposition matter because they influence our understanding of the narrative world, which in turn influences our understanding of the meaning and consequences of the action, including our initial generic identification of the narrative and the expectations that follow from that identification (16).

That is, beginnings influence how we perceive the represented world, which then affect how the reader understands meaning and the consequences of action within that world. Reader expectations for the text are directly linked to what is established in the beginning. My third question will be: does the beginning accurately establish the narrative world for the reader? Implicit in this idea of world-building is setting – is it clear where will this novel be taking place?

Novelists need more than hooks and inciting incidents to establish strong beginnings. In literary works, they also need compelling characters. Of course there are exceptions to this rule (think of Jeanette Winterson's short story 'Turn of the World') but, generally, successful novels have characters that engage their readers. I would also argue that central to this, novels must establish voice straight away. It may be that I've found the right place to start a novel, perhaps I have 'hooking' plot points and characters with interesting attributes, but that doesn't mean I've found a successful beginning – voice is an often underrated but essential factor in writing successful beginnings. Markus Zusak has said in interviews that finding the voice of his narrator for his best-selling novel *The Book Thief* was critical to nailing the book: 'Once I started with that idea as the voice of Death, I went back to the beginning and started again, and I wrote all the way to the end' (1). My fourth and final question will be: is a strong sense of voice established? Implicit in the question of voice is that of a point-of-view schema. This needs to be clearly outlined so readers understand how information is being accessed within the narrative. And, while there are exceptions to this rule, it usually needs to be consistent.

Having laid these ideas out, I will analyse the first paragraph of 'Freefall' from my September 2015 draft, and compare it to the most recent (September 2016), paying particular attention to these questions:

1. As per Rabinowitz's ideas of scaffolding, does the text's overall meaning depend on the information in the beginning being placed there? What would change if this information was seeded later in the book?
2. As David Lodge asks: are we drawn in?
3. Is Phelan's sense of world-building apparent?
4. Is voice/point-of-view established, as per Zusak's observation?

It must be noted here that nothing is more embarrassing than explicitly sharing a first draft, certainly within a rigorous academic context. Even re-reading it now makes me cringe but the argument here is that deep engagement with critical texts can improve the craft of writing, and specifically that considering these four questions can improve the beginnings in my prose work. I have no doubt that my subsequent draft is much better than my first. It could be

argued that that progression would have happened without this critical intervention but my hunch is that even if it would have, it would have taken considerably more time. It must also be noted that I'm not analysing my prologue, which some might deem the 'true' beginning. However, the prologue operates independently to the main body of the novel, following different characters to show the novel's inciting incident (which does not involve the protagonist), with a different point-of-view schema. Because of this, I've focused on the first two hundred words of chapter one. To contextualise this passage, it is important to know the prologue shows a man named Patrick being killed in an elevator, and his sister Hannah hearing the news via telephone. Okay. First draft, paragraph one:

And so a week later, after finishing the set for a cat food commercial and letting out her flat in Bondi, Hannah arrived in Minneapolis for the funeral. Maggie and her dad were a wreck – after the service, he'd opened a bottle of Maker's Mark and challenged God to a drinking contest while Maggie sat unmoving in front of the flat screen, watching back-to-back episodes of *The Good Wife*. It was too much grief to share with a four-year-old so Hannah packed her kid up early and now they were touching down at Newark airport, the plane shattering onto the tarmac. Hannah wanted to see where Patrick had lived, the house she'd heard so much about. And she had her suspicions – something didn't seem right, of course it didn't. She told her agent she'd be away for a month but she'd take as much time as she needed – she wanted to understand her brother's death and in order to do that she needed to understand his life. So here she was, seat-back raised on an economy flight, with her son Finn revelling in the glory of a duty-free Lego caravan. He was pouring over the open box, exclaiming about the red canoe, the block figures, their life preservers.

1. As per Rabinowitz's ideas of scaffolding, does the text's overall meaning depend on the information in the beginning being placed there? What would change if this information was seeded later in the book?

I would argue that in this draft, we are given too much information at once, and it is not scaffolded. Before we know who is speaking, we are placed with cat food commercials, and the renting out of flats in Bondi. We only understand that we are following Hannah after this clause. 'Hannah' is the subject of the first sentence and the predicate is 'arrived'. However, Hannah is arriving in Minneapolis for a funeral that is part of her backstory. The novel actually takes place in Brooklyn, after the funeral. The second sentence tells us that Maggie (Hannah's stepmother) and her father haven't taken the news of Patrick's death well, but again, this is not a novel about Hannah's family, and it is certainly not a novel about Hannah's father's drinking problems or Maggie's coping strategies. The novel follows Hannah as she moves into the squat her (dead) brother established with freegan-anarchists (people who try to live 'outside' of money and don't believe in the state), and the central question of the novel is: where do we find a sense of security – from money or from community? Also, the 'four-year-old' is introduced before we understand the narrator is talking about Hannah's child. This first paragraph does not scaffold information in a clear way for the reader. It is not clear what or whom the novel is about.

2. As David Lodge asks: are we drawn in?

There is too much exposition – blatant telling that could be scaffolded later in the story – and not enough action. The reader isn't allowed to come to their own conclusions. Everything is dictated and the reader is not given space to bear witness to the story. Because they are

bombarded with so much information it is impossible to be drawn in. The reader is too busy trying to figure out what matters and who is who to relax into the story.

3. Is Phelan's sense of world-building apparent?

As discussed above, the world-building isn't working to set to the scope of the novel – the world-building is establishing back story. It is also confusing. One moment, the reader is in Minneapolis, the next they are in an airplane touching down at Newark. As well, details such as *The Good Wife* are too specific in pinning down the novel. We are not in any one place long enough to have a secure sense of setting.

4. Is voice/point-of-view established, as per Zusak's observation?

I don't think a firm voice has been established. To be fair, I changed the point-of-view schema throughout the writing of the novel. So now, in the current draft, we're close in on Hannah's point-of-view (third person), however in the excerpt above, the narrator refers to Hannah's son Finn in the first instance as 'a four-year-old' which creates unnecessary distance. Also, this voice is too expository. Thoughts such as 'Hannah wanted to see where Patrick had lived, the house she'd heard so much about' could easily be shown, as well as the fact that she is suspicious.

I could discuss the flaws with this first paragraph in much further detail, however due to space constraints, I will continue with my larger argument. Suffice to say, this first paragraph is obviously a first-draft. It has gone through four incarnations over the past year, and now we turn to the latest draft, from August 2016, which was re-written, taking these issues into account:

As the train pulled out, Hannah stood on the subway platform, hoping to God she was wrong. But her purse was sitting on that blue plastic seat, making its way down the L-line. Fuck. Only an idiot. She tried to breathe. If she lost her shit, Finn would have another tantrum and she'd follow, gleefully throwing both of them in front of the next train. Maybe he sensed this homicidal potential because his four-year-old frame stood beside her, thoughtful and still. She scanned the station for anyone to help but it was late; the ticket booth was boarded up. The few people who'd alighted had already disappeared.

Pressing against her pockets, she felt the thin outline of passports and folded directions. Small mercies. 'Okay. How do we get out of here?'

'Mama?' Finn tugged on her shirt.

'What?'

He didn't say anything and Hannah held onto his shoulder. 'We just need to get to Patrick's house. Mama left her purse on the train but Shisa's going to help us.'

He nodded and Hannah couldn't believe the faith kids placed in their parents. 'Hold it together and maybe we can ride another subway tomorrow.' She wasn't above bribing her kid with the ordinary – she'd been known to promise him a super-tall glass of tap water if he let her finish a phone call.

In this draft, the reader understands immediately that Hannah has lost her purse. This becomes an important plot point as she's staying in a house where the residents have banned the use of money and so she is unable to borrow funds. In the first version, the disappearance

of the purse took about ten pages to happen. Now, a pivotal plot point is scaffolded, setting up the rest of the novel. Also, all of the backstory has been relegated to later in the book and the reader is given a scene, straight away, that they can witness for themselves. There is also considerably less exposition. The hook, I'm hoping, rests in the humour and voice of Hannah – so in this sense David Lodge's concerns are aligned with Markus Zusak's. We also move much closer into Hannah's perspective with 'Fuck. Only an idiot' and 'Small mercies'. And her tone creeps into the narrative in places like, 'homicidal potential'. Phelan's sense of world-building here is much more subtle – instead of trying to set up the whole narrative (like signalling that something suspicious may have happened to Patrick) the isolation of the train station is given more space, as is the relationship between Hannah and her son. Because Hannah is a single mother, desperate for community, and she arrives in this grotty New York squat, surprised to find the community she's been longing for, the world-building is much more subtle, but also more accurate than the first draft.

To conclude, in my writing process critical reflection is critical to the craft of writing. I was struggling with how to begin this text and by exploring theoretical work on beginnings, I was able to craft a methodology for revision, which led to substantial changes in my manuscript 'Freefall'. While there are many narrative aspects one can consider in crafting beginnings, I think the most critical are: scaffolding information, hooking the reader, establishing setting and world, and introducing a strong voice. By considering established critics, the industry and writers together in one paper, I hope to highlight the unique position of beginnings.

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