

# Beginning a novel

In *emagazine* 41, Barbara Bleiman analysed the first chapter of *The Kite Runner*, exploring the 'contract' it establishes with the reader and the expectations it sets up. Included here are the openings to five more novels:

- Great Expectations
- The Great Gatsby
- Enduring Love
- The God of Small Things
- The Curious Incident

To annotate the extracts with your ideas, you will need a print out of pages 2-5 of this pdf. If you haven't got access to a print out, use the questions to focus your discussion of the extracts before clicking on the 'Annotations' link.

- Read each extract and annotate it with your ideas about how it works as the opening to a narrative. What 'contract' does it establish with the reader? What expectations does it raise? Use the prompts below to focus your thinking.
  - The type of narrative it seems to be from
  - The narrator and narrative voice
  - The relationship with reader or implied listener
  - The 'contract' it establishes with the reader
  - What, if anything, can you tell about the kind of narrative this is going to be? Are there any indications of what is going to be important?
  - Structure (does it seem to begin at the start of the story? at the end? does it begin with a frame in which the story is introduced?)
  - The way it is written (style and narrative techniques such as word groups, imagery, sentence type and length, balance of description, narration, dialogue)
  - Do you think it is a good opening? Does it draw you in and make you want to read on?
- When you have talked about and annotated a print out of each extract, click on the link 'Annotations' to compare your ideas with another reader's thoughts about the opening.

**Go to Great Expectations**

**Go to The Great Gatsby**

**Go to Enduring Love**

**Go to The God of Small Things**

**Go to The Curious Incident**

## **Great Expectations**

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

‘Hold your noise!’ cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. ‘Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!’

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

***Return to prompts***

***Annotations***

## **The Great Gatsby**

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understand that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought – frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realised by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

***Return to prompts***

***Annotations***

## **Enduring Love**

The beginning is simple to mark. We were in sunlight under a turkey oak, partly protected from a strong, gusty wind. I was kneeling on the grass with a corkscrew in my hand, and Clarissa was passing me the bottle – a 1987 Daumas Gassac. This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map: I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and black foil touched my palm, we heard a man's shout. We turned to look across the field and saw the danger. Next thing, I was running towards it. The transformation was absolute: I don't recall dropping the corkscrew, or getting to my feet, or making a decision, or hearing the caution Clarissa called after me. What idiocy to be racing into this story and its labyrinths, sprinting away from our happiness among the fresh spring grasses by the oak. There was the shout again, and a child's cry, enfeebled by the wind that roared in the tall trees along the hedgerows. I ran faster. And there, suddenly, from different points around the field four other men were converging on the scene, running like me.

I see us from three hundred feet up, through the eyes of the buzzard we watched earlier, soaring, circling and dipping in the tumult of currents: five hundred men running silently towards the centre of a hundred-acre field.

***Return to prompts***

***Annotations***

## **The God of Small Things**

Paradise Pickles & Preserves

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives.

*Return to prompts*

*Annotations*

## **The Curious Incident**

It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs Shears' house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side, the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this.

I went through Mrs Shears' gate, closing it behind me. I walked onto her lawn and knelt beside the dog. I put my hand on the muzzle of the dog. It was still warm.

The dog was called Wellington. It belonged to Mrs Shears who was our friend. She lived on the opposite side of the road, two houses to the left.

Wellington was a poodle. Not one of the small poodles that have hairstyles, but a big poodle. It had curly black fur, but when you got close you could see that the skin underneath the fur was a very pale yellow, like chicken.

I stroked Wellington and wondered who had killed him, and why.

***Return to prompts***

***Annotations***

It does everything you could possibly want from an opening: setting, character, establishing voice, then and now, exciting mystery and adventure.

Does this connect to individual identity? Combined with focus on ancestry and family, suggests identity and nature of things will be important

1st person narrator – but immediately aligning himself to others – family? community?

## Great Expectations

Lexical group paints vivid picture of the bleak setting – also suggests the overall mood.

**Ours** was the **marsh** country, down by the **river**, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the **identity of things**, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable **raw** afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this **bleak** place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, **late of this parish**, and also Georgiana **wife of the above**, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, **infant children of the aforesaid**, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the **marshes**; and that the **low leaden line** beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was **Pip**.

Direct quotation from the gravestone (although not signalled as such) – v formalic, ritualised vocab and sentence structure gives it an almost child-like flavour. Adult would announce quotation or re-word??

V adult vocabulary – suggests to reader that the narrator is the adult looking back on himself as a child. Suggests knows the end of the story – opening has a strong narrative drive.

Establishes setting: emotive, visually vivid lexis, combined with alliteration.

Is this a further character or 'I'? If 'I' then it is as though the narrator is looking back at himself as a separate character. Will this be the point of view of the whole narrative showing how the narrator became the man he is today?

Dramatic use of dialogue to grab the reader's attention and lead them into the story. Contrast with para 1.

'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!'

**A fearful man**, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. **A man** with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. **A man** who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who **limped, and shivered, and glared and growled**; and whose **teeth chattered** in his head as he seized me by the chin.

Vocab much more child-like here.

Almost like snapshot scenes.

Sentence structure (repetition of 'A man' for example).

**Return to prompts**

**Return to Great Expectations – blank**

**To The Great Gatsby – blank**

Introduction of narrator – suggests writing from a more reflective position.

1st person narrator – stories told at college ('secret griefs of wild, unknown men' – suggests male? Could be female, but doesn't give that impression.

A lot of time spent creating a sense of the narrator. Not a conventionally quick, engaging way into a novel. Relies on being welcomed by the narrative voice.

## The Great Gatsby

**In my younger and more vulnerable** years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and **I understand that he meant a great deal more than that**. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgements, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was ~~unjustly accused of being a~~ politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought – frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realised by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for **the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions**. Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope. I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parcelled out unequally at birth.

Features of this narrator's technique and this narrative. More meant than is ever explicitly said.

Indicates here the way in which the narrator has discovered the stories and secrets of others – key technique of the novel.

About the process of narrative and storytelling.

Contextualises class, era?

No sense of what or who this story will be about – might assume it is about the narrator – except for the emphasis on his role as listener, receiver of stories. Perhaps the story will be one the narrator was told in college.

Leisurely, laid back style – creates sense of character but also of the class to which he belongs. Reader is aware that this is not a long novel.

**Return to prompts**

**Return to The Great Gatsby – blank**

**To Enduring Love – blank**



Switching between intellectual reflection on the event – retrospective point of view – and immediacy of event.

Enticing the reader – the narrator knows what happens later?

Beginning of what? This story? Reader may not believe it is so simple.

Focus on a scene but very quickly something dramatic happens. Not an opening that spends time introducing character.

## Enduring Love

Obsession with the beginning – why so important? Time map – unusual.

**The beginning is simple to mark.** We were in sunlight under a turkey oak, partly protected from a strong, gusty wind. I was kneeling on the grass with a corkscrew in my hand, and Clarissa was passing me the bottle – a 1987 Daumas Gassac. **This was the moment, this was the pinprick on the time map:** I was stretching out my hand, and as the cool neck and black foil touched my palm, we heard a man's shout. We turned to look across the field and saw the danger. Next thing, I was running towards it. **The transformation was absolute:** I don't recall dropping the corkscrew, or getting to my feet, or making a decision, or hearing the caution Clarissa called after me. What idiocy to be **racing into this story and its labyrinths, sprinting away** from our happiness among the fresh spring grasses by the oak. There was the shout again, and a child's cry, enfeebled by the wind that roared in the tall trees along the hedgerows. I ran faster. And there, suddenly, from different points around the field four other men were converging on the scene, running like me.

Quickly contextualises type of person, class, time etc.

Retrospective – anticipating what is to come. This is going to be a complicated and unhappy story.

Very visual. Set up almost like a film.

Calls attention to writing/narrative but also gives it a sense of realism – narrator has lived through the whole experience and knows the moment of its effective beginning.

I see us from three hundred feet up, through the eyes of the buzzard we watched earlier, soaring, circling and dipping in the tumult of currents: five hundred men running silently towards the centre of a hundred-acre field.

**Return to prompts**

**Return to Enduring Love – blank**

**To The God of Small Things – blank**

Poetic techniques used to create an evocative, lyrical opening which engages the senses

Opening paragraphs establishing setting – like panning in film. Present tense used – timeless.

## God of Small Things

Paradise Pickles & Preserves

Omniscient 3rd person narrator – distanced, overview. Doesn't seem present in the writing.

Short sentences create a sense of heat, weariness and slowness.

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

Drawing on features of travelogue.

Repetition of the consonants 'f', 's', 'b' and 'w' help to create the sense of lethargy.

The nights are clear but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

Alliteration of harsher consonants to create an impression of energy and life. (Odd: letters 'w' and 's' can be used to create such different effects.)

But by early June the south-west monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

Single mention of character – then moves back to setting.

Shift into past tense with introduction of character – as though the story proper has begun.

It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives.

Beautiful image of rain – created through alliteration, assonance and connotation of words – contrasts with impact on landscape – 'gunfire'.

Sentence structure – sense of overview – as though the setting is being identified before being described. Point of view – like a camera moving round.

First mention of character 'came back' – provokes questions in the reader: where from? why? Common opening technique to intrigue the reader.

Return to prompts

Return to *The God of Small Things* – blank

To the *Curious Incident* – blank

Indications of genre? A 'killing' – a mystery but much of the start not told using the conventions of a thriller or detective story.

Seems like a 3rd person narrative

Precision of time.

## The Curious Incident

Gives impression of being told/recorded as experienced even though in past tense. Is it because it's one thing after another?

It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs Shears' house. Its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side, the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep.

Precision should mean reader feels clearly located BUT not so – if anything feel disorientated – no context to place the detail in.

Blunt: no emotional reaction – no shock.

**The dog was dead.** There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog and I do not think you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example, or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this.

Thought process – detailed, logical but here seem inappropriate.

Dramatic: information withheld to create tension? Doesn't feel like that – something odder?

I went through Mrs Shears' gate, closing it behind me. I walked onto her lawn and knelt beside the dog. I put my hand on the muzzle of the dog. It was still warm.

1st indication that it is 1st person narrative. V late after all descriptive detail.

**The dog was called Wellington.** It belonged to Mrs Shears who was our friend. She lived on the opposite side of the road, two houses to the left.

Apparently random pieces of information. Not linked and not prioritised.

**Wellington was a poodle.** Not one of the small poodles that have hairstyles, but a big poodle. It had curly black fur, but when you got close you could see that the skin underneath the fur was a very pale yellow, like chicken.

Catches reader's interest – we wonder too. What the story will be about?

I stroked Wellington and wondered who had killed him, and why.

Return to prompts

Return to Curious Incident – blank