

On writing

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It is Tuesday, and on Friday I have to fly to Tampa in order to speak Saturday morning to teachers of writing. In a way, I feel as if *they* should be speaking to *me* because surely they know more about the craft than I do or ever will. But...since I will be the speaker...I am trying to put some thoughts together.

It's timely, because I am soon to start on a new book and I have been thinking a lot about it.

"Thinking a lot about it" is always, of course, the first and most important part of the process.

At least for me. I must keep reminding myself that everyone goes about this job differently, and what works well for some will not work at all for others.

I understand there are writers who make outlines and use index cards. In a way, I envy them. It sounds organized and disciplined and careful and meticulous. It also, alas, sounds (to me) boring. But maybe I say that out of envy, because I can't do it, the way a bad ice skater might yawn and say it *so boring* to do a quadruple jump.

I do assume, though, that even the organized, index-cardy person starts by thinking a lot.

Mostly I think about the main character. Who he is (in this case, I know it is a "he")..and how old, and what he looks like, and what sort of personality he has; but mostly: why his story is worth telling. What is he facing, exactly? What does his life lack, and how will he try to fill that need?

I think about where to begin.

Because I have book manuscripts from recent years saved on this computer, I can copy some beginnings:

GATHERING BLUE:

"Mother?"

There was no reply. She hadn't expected one. Her mother had been dead now for four days, and Kira could tell that the last of the spirit was drifting away.

"Mother." She said it again, quietly, to whatever was leaving. She thought that she could feel its leave-taking, the way one could feel a small whisper of breeze at night.

Now she was all alone. Kira felt the aloneness, the uncertainty, and a great sadness.

GOSSAMER:

An owl called, its shuddering hoots repeating mournfully in the distance. Somewhere nearby, heavy wings swooped and a young rabbit, captured by sharp talons, shrieked as he was lifted to his doom. Startled, a raccoon looked up with bright eyes from the place where he was foraging. Two deer moved in tandem through a meadow. A thin cloud slid across the moon.

The pair crept stealthily through the small house. Night was their time of work, the time when human conversation had ceased, when thoughts had drifted away, and even breathing and heartbeats had slowed. The outdoors was awake and stirring but the little house was dark and silent.

GOONEY BIRD GREENE:

There was a new student in the Watertower Elementary School. She arrived in October, after the first month of school had already passed. She opened the second grade classroom door at ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning and appeared there all alone, without even a mother to introduce her. She was wearing pajamas and cowboy boots and was holding a dictionary and a lunch box.

MESSENGER:

Matty was impatient to have the supper preparations over and done with. He wanted to cook, eat, and be gone. He wished he were grown so that he could decide when to eat, or whether to bother eating at all. There was something he needed to do, a thing that scared him. Waiting just made it worse.

Each of those—though they are different kinds of books—opens with a sense of, well, mystery. Gooney Bird? Well, of course it's not a deep mystery..but there's a sense of "Whaaa? What's this?" because a new student in a school arrives, on her first day, wearing pajamas and a cowboy hat. So you know something is unusual....and interesting.

The other three openings each present a specific cause for discomfort, alarm, or at the very least, curiosity.

A girl looks down at the dead body of her mother.

Someone—a *pair* of someones—creeps stealthily through a house at night.

A boy is scared by something he has to do.

All book beginnings should *intrigue* the reader.

Or should they? In contrast, my newest book.,.to be published in March 2008...begins with a fairly straightforward description:

Once upon a time there was a family named Willoughby: an old-fashioned type of family, with four children.

The eldest was a boy named Timothy; he was twelve. Barnaby and Barnaby were ten-year-old twins. No one could tell them apart, and it was even more confusing because they had the same name; so they were known as Barnaby A and Barnaby B. Most people, including their parents, shortened this to A and B, and many were unaware that the twins even had names.

Nothing ominous there: no dead body, no scary thing to be faced. Still: it's a little weird, isn't it, two brothers with the same name? A little like a girl arriving in a classroom wearing pajamas?

It makes the reader read the next paragraph, and the next, and then turn the page, and then another page. Of course, as writer, you have to keep doing it: keep intriguing the reader. All the way to the end.

It's hard. But it is such fun. Even the "thinking a lot about it" part is fun.

Tags: Untagged