

From Eureka Literary Magazine

A Literary Agent Reads the Reviews **Nat Sobel**

Editor's Note: *The opening paragraph of a short story is crucial to the writer's success in connecting to a reader. The first paragraph is the writer's chance to make a happy connection to the reader, to hook the reader, and to reel the reader into the world of the story. It takes just the right touch to extend the perfect invitation to the reader. Like the right handshake, neither too limp nor too hearty, the opening paragraph must extend a warm and encouraging hand to the reader.*

In the essay that follows, Nat Sobel, who has worked successfully for many years as a writer's agent, gives us insights into the crucial importance of the first paragraph. As a professional agent, Sobel needs to assess hundreds of stories-quickly. Further, Sobel gives us an interesting and helpful account of how and why he finds certain paragraphs compelling. Sobel's essay, then, is a useful reminder of the social and emotional contract that the writer of a short fiction must construct with the reader.

Sobel's essay should alert the teacher that he or she almost certainly employs a similar procedure for assessing the suitability of a story for classroom use. Moreover, by alerting us to the first paragraph's dynamics of engagement, Sobel reinforces the emphasis that Stephen Tietz placed on the beginning of a story in his essay on teachable fiction in the Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 2001) issue of ESTSF. Sobel and Tietz remind us to help our students give special attention to the opening paragraph. The essay that follows is a useful admonition to the teacher to begin at the beginning when guiding students through a work of fiction.

When I first became an agent, I didn't know any writers. Because I had the time, in the beginning, I read omnivorously. But even in those days I had to find my way to a system of reading the literary reviews and little magazines. I had to find short cuts in order to stay on top of the growing mountain of magazines that was building in my office.

In talking to editors of the reviews and of the major magazines, I learned that everyone skims. They read the first page or sometimes only the first paragraph of a story, before rejecting the work, so the writer had to engage the editor very early on in the process. I began to read that way, too. I had to.

Many of the younger editors I deal with at publishing houses seem to be overwhelmed with submissions. The salesmen for the large publishing conglomerates no longer have time to actually read most of the books they sell. The publisher's rep is a dying breed and may soon be extinct. Once one large publisher is acquired by another, the big saving, at least initially, is in the firing of one of the two sales forces. Now each remaining rep has double the number of titles to sell, and fewer buyers to sell them to, as the big chains force out the independents. The bookstore that gave me my start on the Upper West Side of Manhattan has long been gone, forced out of business by a giant book chain, eight blocks South.

The result of all these cutbacks in staff is that the survivors, be they agents, editors, salesmen, or booksellers, have less and less time to read. The writer must capture their interest early on. For this reason, I ask writers to send me only the opening chapters of their novels or a few of their short stories.

When the editor of this journal asked me to write an article on how I read the literary reviews and little magazines, I had to give the idea some thought. What was I looking for in a short story? What

grabbed me? What made me write to the editor and ask for the writer's address?

I decided to backtrack to the earliest stories I had read by some of the writers I represent whom I had found in the reviews. I wanted to take another look at the opening paragraph or two of each of the stories that had first attracted me to their work. Would I still be drawn to their material? Have my tastes changed over the years?

Looking at the earliest story in the group, I re-read Richard Russo's story "The Top of the Tree," published seventeen years ago in the *Mid-America Review*.

The Lilacs usually bloomed early. The tree in our yard always had the purple kind, and they were nice enough, but I preferred the white lilacs because they smelled prettier. Not thick and perfumy like roses, but light and airy, the way running water smells in the spring when the snow is melting. Probably I just liked the white kind because they grew on a tree on our next door neighbor's property. My mother wouldn't let me climb in it.

This one breaks all of my preconceived rules. For one, it has a youthful narrator. On the surface it doesn't seem very grabby. I wonder what made me keep reading and can only think that the metaphor "running water smells in the spring when the snow is melting" as a description for the way white lilacs smell was unusual. I'm not sure whether today I would have kept reading, but I am glad I did, for I regard Rick as one of our best writers. His latest novel, *Empire Falls*, received great reviews.

A couple of years later I came across Jack O'Connell's story "Nevada" in the *New England Review*.

Now things are calm. The barking has stopped. The dog, most likely, has fallen asleep out in the garage. It's cooler there. The rain that was forecast never arrived. Jenny watches Barry. His body takes up all of the couch. She wonders how he can stay so rigid, his arms straight down by his side, still wearing his watch and rings. The color has gone from his face and though she tries to see some form of breathing, there isn't any. He looks cramped with both his head and bare feet pressing into the couch. She thinks this must be how a person looks laid out for an autopsy.

This always intrigues me. A male writer, writes in third person (nearly always my favorite mode) but from the viewpoint of a woman. Is Barry dead? Did Jenny kill him? I'm hooked. Jack has gone on to publish four very literary, very unusual thrillers set in his home town of Worcester, Mass. No one writes like Jack. He's a real original.

In 1991, I started to read James Carlos Blake's novella "I, Fierro," in *Quarterly West* on a subway train going uptown for a lunch meeting. I got so involved in this story that I missed my stop and almost didn't care.

The greatest tragedy that can befall a man is never to know who he really is. So I have heard. I have also heard that the greatest tragedy a man can meet is never to find something to love. It seems to me that these notions mean the same thing, but even if they don't, I cannot agree with either. Who has not known men who discovered the truth about themselves only to be tortured by it for the rest of their lives. Is man worse off when he doesn't know who he is or when he learns he is truly a coward? When he is ignorant of his true nature or when he knows he is a traitor at heart?

My point, I think, is clear. Not that I pity either cowards or traitors. To the contrary: in a just world they would all be made to face the hard truth about themselves before they died. In my fashion I made many of them do exactly that.

When I got to the last line of that paragraph, Blake had me. This tale, told in first person from the point of view of Rudolfo Fierro, the bodyguard of Pancho Villa, and one of the most notorious killers of the Mexican Revolution, would later be expanded into a novel. Blake's fifth novel, *A World of Thieves*, will be published by William Morrow in the spring.

FX Toole's story "The Monkey Look" was an instant grabber. Who could resist the speed and punch of these opening lines as they appeared in *Zyzyva*?

I stop blood.

I stop it between rounds for fighters so they can stay in the fight.

Blood ruins some boys. It was that way with Sonny Liston, God rest his soul. Bad as he was, he'd see his own blood and fall apart.

I found it hard to believe that this was Toole's first published story. He was nearly 70 years old and had spent the last twenty five years of his life training professional boxers and working as a cut man in the fighter's corner. Toole had a box full of unpublished stories that we turned into the prize-winning collection, *Rope Burns*. He's currently working on a boxing novel, *Pound for Pound*. It's never too late to start writing.

When I read the opening two paragraphs of Laura Hendrie's "Arroyo," in the *Missouri Review*, I found myself being pulled into this memorable story.

When I heard Dinah start crowing, I got up and dressed in the dark. Pa Jopa was snoring and my brother, Brice, was grinding his teeth, and from the kitchen it sounded like one person whistling and walking back and forth in the gravel outside. I cut two pieces of bread, wrapped them in a dish towel and put them in my pocket. The rest I left on the table where Brice and Pa Jopa could find it and then I went out to the barn.

The sky was beginning to turn but insides it was as dark as ink. Brice's horse, Jacob, nickered to me from the middle stall. I felt past him, put my hand out and Mattie breathed warmth there. Mattie's my horse. She's too old for work-Pa Jopa called her the knacker's gas money-but she has more common sense than all the horses we'd bought and sold put together. Pa Jopa's gray was in the farthest stall. When he smelled me, he shied so hard he slammed into the back wall.

The writer has set the stage here for the drama to come. When I contacted the magazine for Ms. Hendrie's address, I learned that this story was to be included in a collection called *STYGO* to be published by a small press out of Denver, Colorado. I bought a copy of the book and, once I'd read it, I wrote Laura a fan letter telling her how much I'd enjoyed every story in the collection. A few years later the writer sent me her first novel, *Remember Me*, a wonderful book which I later sold to Holt. Laura

is at work on her second novel.

Robert Young's story "Empire of Worlds" appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine*. It has one of the longest first paragraphs ever to capture me. Miles Derry is the most hapless, bummed out character to appear in a short story that I've ever read. He's running away from something that takes him to the farthest edge of the West coast where he works in a triple XXX video store as the night manager.

Possibility and willfulness intersected for Miles Derry, at long last, half a mile from the imaginary point where the U.S. border runs out of land and continues into the Pacific. For this was where, stopped by water and Mexican mountains, he had ceased moving west and south, so completely humbled that it required all of his hyperalertness, at three in the morning, closing time, to come out from behind the cash register and walk past the red neon entrance of the video arcade, up an aisle of shiny magazines, past the salmon colored dildoes, which stood variously on the shelves like up-pointed weaponry, until he arrived, unhappily at the mop closet of the Little Pink Bookstore. Kari, Kari, Kari, he was thinking as he rolled out the bucket on wheels, knowing this was easier if he concentrated on her name. He hadn't missed a support payment in all three years. The canceled checks came back monthly from Illinois, with Mary Lou's signature on their backs, the only evidence of his responsibility and fatherhood. Last Christmas, when he'd been working at the Laundromat in Salt Lake, there'd been a treat-pictures-and he had them in his wallet, which he kept in a front pocket of his pants because he didn't want those pictures anywhere near the latex gloves he carried in one rear pocket or the hardened sponge he carried in the other.

This character caught my imagination; can anyone so low be sympathetic? Could we, somehow, want this guy to make it in life? Young answered the question by making this story the opening chapter of his novel, *One of the Guys* (Harper Collins), and finding an opportunity for Miles to become an unexpected hero.

Turning a short story into a novel has happened for me on other occasions as well. Sometimes the writer creates a character in a story that you don't want to let go. You want to hear more about him or her. This was the case with Julianna Baggott's story "Girl Talk," in the *New Delta Review*.

One month before my father died in the fall of 1999, Church Fiske appeared at my door. I hadn't seen him since the summer my father disappeared with a redheaded bank teller from Walpole when I was fifteen, the summer my mother decided to teach me the art of omission, how to tell the perfect lie, or more accurately, how you can choose the truth-with a little hard work and concentration-from the assortment of truths life had to offer. But for me to truly appreciate her art, my mother knew she would first have to give me the bare, naked truth so that I could see how she altered it. Like a gangster who has to tell his child he doesn't play violin, that the case is used for concealing a semi-automatic, my mother, Dotty Jablonski, spent the summer of my father's disappearance opening violin cases, showing me her guns.

This is a classic opening for a short story and yet it breaks several of the personal rules I have for

not reading further. It's first person, and we assume the narrator is a teenager, and the story will be about the break-up of a marriage. I usually stop right there. But Julianna grabbed me with the tone and sense of humor of her narrator. When she received a letter from me telling her how much I enjoyed the story and asking, as I frequently do, for the first fifty pages of any novel she might be working on, Julianna sat down and in two weeks turned her story into the first fifty pages of a novel. It worked.

I encouraged her to finish the novel, which was later sold at auction to Pocket Books. Julianna has just completed her third novel, *The Madam*.

Rarely has a single short story had the success of "Poachers," by Tom Franklin, first published in *The Texas Review*. After I read it I wanted to share it with every editor I knew.

At dawn of the first day of April the three Gates brothers backed their ten-foot aluminum boat in a narrow slough of dark water. They tied their hounds, strapped on their rifles and stepped out, ducking black magnolia branches heavy with rain and Spanish moss. The two thin younger brothers, denim overalls tucked into their boots, lugged between them a Styrofoam cooler of iced fish, coons and possums. The oldest brother-twenty, bearded, heavy set-carried a Sunbeam Bread sack of eels in his coat pocket. Hooked over his left shoulder was the pink body of a fawn they'd shot and skinned, and over the right, a stray dog to which they'd done the same. With the skins and heads gone and the dog's tail chopped off, they were difficult to tell apart.

The imagery of that last line was like a kick in the gut. This story would go on to appear in several anthologies of best fiction and would win an "Edgar" from the Mystery Writers of America for the best mystery story of the year. Working with Tom in putting together his collection of stories (with this as the title story) was a great pleasure for me. In order to interest book editors in the collection I sent out this story as a teaser. Every editor who read the story asked for the collection. It was later sold to William Morrow as part of a two-book deal. Later, Morrow reprinted 5000 copies of this story and sent it out to booksellers. The response was terrific. Tom is currently finishing up his novel, *Hell at the Breach*.

Looking back over the years, I realize that for every one of the stories that led to success there have been an almost overwhelming number of failures: writers who never responded to my fan letters (you'd be surprised how high a percentage that is), writers who could not engage me with their collections or novels or their non-fiction books. I have also been pleased to discover that many stories I do finish reading and admire turn out to be by writers who have already launched a publishing career. I never write to them, as I assume they are already agented, but what great pleasure I have taken all these years in being one of the first to enjoy and recognize real talent. For this I will always be grateful to the editors of literary reviews and little magazines.

Editor's Note: *Teachers of the short story have long understood that the beginning and ending are the most crucial parts of a short story, often determining whether a story works or doesn't work. Nat Sobel's essay is especially valuable for both teachers and writers in emphasizing that if the beginning does not work, the reader/agent may never read the ending. In fiction and in life itself, beginnings are so important and so difficult.*

