

# 101 MESMERIZING OPENINGS

*BY BEST-SELLING AUTHORS*

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# INTRODUCTION

If you're a reader, and you need to be if you want to be a writer, you've done it, too.

You're browsing in the bookstore, and a title catches your eye. Let's say it's *Tomorrow Never Comes*. You read the quotes from familiar authors, then turn the book over and read the back cover copy. It sounds interesting, so you open it to the first page. You read a few lines and they strike you as flat and uninteresting, so you put the book back on the shelf and continue browsing.

This happens thousands of times a day all over the world.

We live in a time of short attention spans and instant gratification. If the first few lines of a book don't capture the interest of a reader, chances are (certainly in the reader's mind) the rest of it won't interest him, either.

How often can you afford to have someone pick up your book, decide against it and place it back on the shelf? Not many, I imagine. And that's why I put together this book. Openings are rarely discussed in writing circles, yet they play an essential role in getting your book carried out of the bookstore in the hands of readers.

There's nothing fancy about this book, but I hope when you're done with it you'll have a much better appreciation for a good opening than when you started. And I hope you'll be inspired to work on your own openings ... strengthen them, give them some character, make them interesting.

I've broken this book into categories for two reasons: to breakup the text and make it easier to digest, and to help you understand the different approaches a writer can take when working on an opening. The bottom line, however, is this: an opening hooks the reader and doesn't allow him to put the book down again until he's convinced he has to know more.

I hope you enjoy what you find here. If you'd like to drop me a note with your comments, I'd love to hear from you. And if you have any suggestions for other ebooks you'd like to see in the future, I'd love to hear those as well. My e-mail address is: [dbsilva@thesuccessfulwriter.com](mailto:dbsilva@thesuccessfulwriter.com).

My best,

David B. Silva

<http://www.thesuccessfulwriter.com>

# CHARACTER

Every story at its core revolves around character. Some more than others, of course, though even the most exaggerated plot-driven stories contain an essential element of character if they are to succeed.

So what better place to start?

An effective **character** opening offers the reader a quick, insightful glance at an important character. It's like meeting someone for the first time. Your mind takes in a little of everything (appearance, mannerisms, circumstances of the meeting) and decides what kind of a person this is and if you want to spend time with him or not.

It only takes a moment to react to someone you've never known before, and it only takes a moment to hook the interest of the reader.

Here's how some of the most successful writers have used this effective opening ...

My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

**Charles Dickens**  
*Great Expectations*

Call me Junior. My six grown kids do. Three are adopted nephews, three are my own. They call me Junior behind my back. They think I don't know.

**Kurt Vonnegut**  
*Timequake*

For the better part of my childhood, my professional aspirations were simple---I wanted to be an intergalactic princess. I didn't care much about ruling hordes of space people. Mostly I wanted to wear the cape and the sexy boots and carry a cool weapon.

**Janet Evanovich**  
*Seven Up*

I am the vampire Lestat. I'm immortal. More or less. The light of the sun, the sustained heat of an intense fire---these things might destroy me. But then again, they might not.

**Anne Rice**  
*The Vampire Lestat*

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the papers---goggle-eyed headlines staring at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

**Sylvia Plath**

*The Bell Jar*

This is what his father always called him whenever he'd done something bad:  
"Where were *you* when this happened, *Boy*? What did you think you were doing, *Boy*?"

**Orson Scott Card**

*Lost Boys*

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're *nice* and all—I'm not saying that---but they're also touchy as hell. Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy. I mean that's all I told D.B. about, and he's my *brother* and all. He's in Hollywood. That isn't too far from this crummy place, and he comes over and visits me practically every weekend. He's going to drive me home when I go home next month maybe. He just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't *use* to. He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book of short stories, *The Secret Goldfish*, in case you never heard of him. The best one in it was "The Secret Goldfish." It was about this little kid that wouldn't let anybody look at his goldfish because he'd bought it with his own money. It killed me. Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me.

**J.D. Salinger**

*The Catcher In The Rye*

His address was his own body, and what a squalid place it was. Someone told me he cleaned up just before he died, and I now know it's true. But when I last saw him, the place was a mess.

**Jan Burke**

*Remember Me, Irene*

If Jim Quillaran had read his horoscope in the daily paper on that particular morning, perhaps none of this would have happened. But astrology had never been one of his interests.

**Lillian Jackson Braun**

*The Cat Who Went Underground*

I was arrested in Eno's Diner. At twelve o'clock. I was eating eggs and drinking coffee. A late breakfast, not lunch. I was wet and tired after a long walk in heavy rain. All the way from the highway to the edge of town.

**Lee Child**

*Killing Floor*

Saltines and sardines. Staples of his diet. Add a chunk of rat cheese and a Kosher dill spear and you had yourself the four basic food groups. There simply wasn't any finer fare.

**Sandra Brown**

*Envy*

She came here to lay flowers at the place where the boy died and the girl was kidnapped.

She came here because she was a heavy girl and had a pocked face and not many friends.

She came because she was expected to.

She came because she wanted to.

**Jeffery Deaver**

*The Empty Chair*

I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice---not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany. I make no claims to have a life in Christ, or with Christ---and certainly not *for* Christ, which I've heard some zealots claim. I'm not very sophisticated in my knowledge of the Old Testament, and I've not read the New Testament since my Sunday school days, except for those passages that I hear read aloud to me when I go to church. I'm somewhat more familiar with the passages from the Bible that appear in The Book of Common Prayer; I read my prayer book often, and my Bible only on holy days---the prayer book is so much more orderly.

**John Irving**

*A Prayer For Owen Meany*

He stared down into the open coffin. What surprised him most was that his father looked so small. The old man had always been a giant to Edward. Now, stiffly cushioned in satin, he seemed small. It was because the air of life had gone out of him, Edward realized. Ezra J. Armstead, the greatest and most autocratic press lord of modern times, had always been full of life, a force of energy, overwhelming. Now he was small and still. Otherwise, everything was in order. Maybe not the cheeks. E. J.'s cheeks were unnaturally red. The undertaker had applied too much rouge, as they always did.

**Irving Wallace**  
*The Almighty*

I am a robot. My name is Cal. I have a registration number. It is CL-123X, but my master calls me Cal.

**Isaac Asimov**  
*Gold*

# ONE LINERS

I love **one-liners**.

A few short words and the author has his claws in you. There's no closing the book. You've got to know more.

That's the whole purpose of a one-liner ... to dramatically hook the reader. You aren't meant to learn about the characters or gain a sense of time and place; you're meant to be instantly wanting more.

Take a close look at these and see how powerful a few opening words can be ...

I was a child murderer.

**Joyce Carol Oates**  
*Expensive People*

Bad things come in threes.

**Nelson DeMille**  
*Up Country*

It was a pleasure to burn.

**Ray Bradbury**  
*Fahrenheit 451*

For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other's existence.

**Chaim Potok**  
*The Chosen*

It was to have been a quiet evening at home.

**John D. MacDonald**  
*The Deep Blue Goodbye*

Winter came in like an anarchist with a bomb.

**Ed McBain**  
*The Pusher*

The operating room was silent except for the deep, regular breathing of the gaunt young woman who lay on the table, the immense bulge of her stomach laid bare.

**Anne Perry**  
*Funeral In Blue*

"Gloves of blood."

**Dean Koontz**  
*The Vision*

"Time to die, birthday bitch."

**Tami Hoag**  
*Guilty As Sin*

Jack Torrance thought: *Officious little prick.*

**Stephen King**  
*The Shining*

For three weeks, the young killer actually lived *inside the walls* of an extraordinary fifteen-room beach house.

**James Patterson**  
*Kiss The Girls*

The ghost was her father's parting gift, present by a black-clad secretary in a departure lounge at Narita.

**William Gibson**  
*Mona Lisa Overdrive*

If there was one place in this world Edith never expected trouble, it was Bloomingdale's.

**William Goldman**  
*Control*

When I am in one of my philosophical moods, I am inclined to wonder whether all families are as difficult as mine.

**Elizabeth Peters**  
*The Golden One*

There was a master come unto the earth, born in the holy land of Indiana, raised in the mystical hills east of Fort Wayne.

**Richard Bach**

*Illusions*

In the beginning was the nightmare, and the knife was with Saint Paul, and the circumcision was a Jewish notion and definitely not mine.

**Gore Vidal**

*Live From goLgotha*

The guards in the new camp were kinder.

**Stephen Hunter**

*The Master Sniper*

Ethan Decker welcomed the pain.

**Patricia Lewin**

*Blind Run*

Almost everyone thought the man and the boy were father and son.

**Stephen King**

*Salem's Lot*

# DIALOGUE

**Dialogue** can do it all. It can create time and place. It can reveal character, inject emotion, add a sense of urgency. It can do all of these at once, in any combination, or focus on any of them individually.

Which makes it such a powerful choice for opening a story.

Notice the immediacy, how quickly the reader is drawn into the fictional world. Notice the curiosity that's instantly created. Notice the sense of now.

"Any thoughts that you'd like to start with?"  
"Thoughts on what?"  
"Well, on anything. On the incident."  
"On the incident? Yes, I have some thoughts."

**Michael Connelly**  
*The Last Coyote*

"Kiss, kiss." Melina Lloyd kissed the air in the general direction of her twin sister's cheeks. "I've ordered an Italian white wine. Crisp, light, and not too fruity, according to the waiter who *was*. Fruity, that is. Speaking of, here he comes."

**Sandra Brown**  
*The Switch*

"You ever killed anything?" Roy asked.

**Dean Koontz**  
*The Voice of The Night*

"Somebody please help me! Somebody please! Can anybody hear me?"

**James Patterson**  
*When the Wind Blows*

"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."

"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. Too willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"

"If we have to."

"I thought you said you liked this kid."

"If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle."

"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."

**Orson Scott Card**

*Ender's Game*

# ACTION

Like character, all stories contain an element of **action**. This does not necessarily mean bombs are going off or shots are being fired or someone's life is in danger. Action is simply movement.

Something is happening.

It can be a decision or an emotional break. It can be a brisk afternoon walk interrupted by an angry dog. Action encompasses a wide range of possibilities.

For our examination of openings, however, I've primarily used examples that entail some sort of **physical** action. This can be a very powerful way to open a novel because it plugs the reader right into the middle of things. There's no time to worry about the who or the why to any meaningful degree. Instead, the reader just wants to know what's happening.

The flutter of movement was so slight that had Decker not been a pro, he would have missed it. He yanked the wheel to the left and braked. The brown unmarked screeched, bucked, then rebelliously reversed directions in the middle of the empty intersection. Decker began to cruise down the vacant street, hoping for a second look at what had attracted his attention.

**Faye Kellerman**  
*Milk And Honey*

Nimbly "Flash" Moran parried a jab and went in fast with a left to the wind. Stepping back, he let Breen get a breath. Then he flicked out a couple of lefts, put over an inside right, and as Breen bobbed into a crouch and tried to get in close, he clinched and tried him up.

**Louis L'Amour**  
*With These Hands*

The infecting bacteria came in a swift gush as if flushed from a sewer. In an instant, several million slender, rod-shaped microorganisms filled the lumen of the fallopian tubes. Most were grouped in small, tight clumps. They settled against the velvety convolutions of the mucosa, nestling in the warm, fertile valleys, absorbing the abundant nutrients and expelling their own foul excretions.

**Robin Cook**  
*Vital Signs*

# ANTICIPATION

One of the general rules you'll read about when discussing suspense fiction is the use of the ticking bomb. The idea is simple: the hero is rushing against time to overcome the antagonist. The ticking bomb turns up the heat. It places the reader in the situation of anticipating what will happen if the hero fails.

This category is similar in the sense that as the book opens, the reader is immediately placed in a situation in which outcome has not been clearly determined. As a result, there is a degree of anticipation about what will come next. Who will the explosion kill? Will the character survive the rough waters? How did the Archbishop die and was there malice involved?

**Anticipation** creates questions in the reader's mind. And questions, without clear answers, keep the pages turning.

One minute before the explosion, the square at Sainte-Cécile was at peace. The evening was warm, and a layer of still air covered the town like a blanket. The church bell tolled a lazy beat, calling worshippers to the service with little enthusiasm. To Felicity Clairet it sounded like a countdown.

**Ken Follett**

*Jackdaws*

The small jib was taut and straining in the northerly wind, the weather turned the sky azure in the evening sun but for the near purple of the approaching dark clouds. To the east lay Tribune Inlet, a long fjord bounded by steep mountains and creating a great funnel that ended in a narrow, rock-walled passage called Devil's Gate, where wind and water rushed, making dangerous work for sailors.

**David Dunn**

*Overfall*

When Archbishop Richard Rushman, known to Catholic, Protestant and Jew alike as "the Saint of Lakeview Drive" because of his great charitable works, stepped out of the shower, he had less than ten minutes to live. Death stood in the doorway.

**William Diehl**

*Primal Fear*

Terror held thirteen-year-old Harlow Anastasia Grail in a death grip. She huddled in the corner of the dimly lit, windowless room, Timmy cowering beside her, weeping.

**Erica Spindler**

*Bone Cold*

She didn't know which was worse, the nausea or the terror. One threatened to choke her, while the other was a cold ache deeper than her bones.

**Kay Hooper**  
*Whisper of Evil*

# INTRIGUE

If I told you that I knew the winning numbers in next week's Super Lotto, guaranteed, can't miss, bet the farm on it, you probably wouldn't believe me. But I bet (pun intended) you'd like to know more. Maybe you'd wonder how I came up with the numbers or what made me think they'd be the winning numbers, or if I'd be willing to bet my life on them.

You're hooked.

Lots of questions come to mind, and you're anxious to know the answers. You're **intrigued** with the possibilities.

Take a look and see if you aren't intrigued by these openings ...

Marguerite Rolfe was digging in her garden because of the secrets she'd found hidden in her husband's study. It was late to be working in the garden. Well past midnight by now. The spring thaw had left the earth soft and moist, and her spade split the soil with little effort, allowing her to progress with minimal noise. For this she was grateful. Her husband and daughter were asleep in the villa, and she didn't want to wake them.

**Daniel Silva**

*The English Assassin*

At first, the new owner pretends he never looked at the living room floor. Never really looked. Not the first time they toured the house. Not when the inspector showed them through it. They'd measured rooms and told the movers where to set the couch and piano, hauled in everything they owned, and never really stopped to look at the living room floor. They pretend.

Then on the first morning they come downstairs, there it is, scratched in the white-oak floor:

**GET OUT**

**Chuck Palahntuk**

*Lullaby*

It's the last Monday of the month, a brutally gorgeous morning brimming with blue air and the sweet scent of honeysuckle which grows wild in the woods beyond Front Street, when Ethan Ford fails to show up for work.

**Alice Hoffman**

*Blue Diary*

The child lay still; anyone observing it would have been certain it was sound asleep. But it was not, for along ago---so long ago that there was no memory of how it began---the child's mind had learned to defend itself from the agony that the body it inhabited was forced to beat. Someday---in a future so far away that the barely formed mind would not even begin to comprehend it---it might be able to defend the body, too.

**John Saul**  
*Nightshade*

The call was from the police. Not from Rina's lieutenant husband, but from the *police* police. She listened as the man spoke, and when she heard that it had nothing to do with Peter or the children she felt a "Thank you, God" wave of instant relief. After discovering the reason behind the contact, Rina wasn't as shocked as she might have been.

**Faye Kellerman**  
*The Forgotten*

The blaze of sun wrung pops of sweat from the old man's brow, yet he cupped his hands around the glass of hot sweet tea as if to warm them. He could not shake the premonition. It clung to his back like chill wet leaves.

**William Peter Blatty**  
*The Exorcist*

What was the worst thing you've ever done?

I won't tell you that, but I'll tell you the worst thing that ever happened to me ... the most dreadful thing ...

**Peter Straub**  
*Ghost Story*

Crazy Megan parks the car.

Doesn't want to do this. No way.

Doesn't get out, listens to the rain ...

**Jeffery Deaver**  
*Speaking In Tongues*

One evening, it was toward the end of October, Harry Arno said to the woman he'd been seeing on and off the past few years, "I've made a decision. I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone before in my life."

**Elmore Leonard**  
*Pronto*

The November sky over Manhattan was chain mail, raveling into steely rain. A black night with coughs of thunder, lightning stabs that made abrupt days. Dr. Simon Ellerbee, standing at his office window, peered out to look at life on the street below. He saw only the reflection of his own haunted face.

**Lawrence Sanders**  
*The Fourth Deadly Sin*

If Kelda James hadn't been wearing inch-and-a-half heels and the toilet paper roll hadn't been empty, Rosa Alija would probably be dead.

**Stephen White**  
*The Best Revenge*

Trust me for a while.

I understand that's *really* the line the spider hit the fly with, not "come into my parlor" as popular legend has it, and I also realize I am not always your most Walter Cronkite type fella, sturdy, staunch, etc. But in this particular instance, there is just no doubt in my you-should-pardon-the-expression mind that I know whereof I speak.

Corky thinks I'm crazy, natch.

Somebody sure is.

**William Goldman**  
*Magic*

A man with binoculars. That is how it began: with a man standing by the side of the road, on a crest overlooking a small Arizona town, on a winter night.

**Michael Crichton**  
*The Andromeda Strain*

Shortly before being knocked unconscious and bound to a chair, before being injected with an unknown substance against his will, and before discovering that the world was *deeply* mysterious in ways he'd never before imagined, Dylan O'Conner left his motel room and walked across the highway to a brightly lighted fast-food franchise to buy cheeseburgers, French fries, pocket pies with apple filling, and a vanilla milkshake.

**Dean Koontz**  
*By The Light of The Moon*

You think you know about pain?

Talk to my second wife. She does. Or she thinks she does.

**Jack Ketchum**  
*The Girl Next Door*

It is stunning how quickly it happens. How little time it takes to go from trouble to tragedy. Seconds. Mere seconds without air and the brain begins to shut down. No time to struggle. No time to panic even.

**Tami Hoag**  
*Dust To Dust*

The day I got the murder book, I was still thinking about Paris. Red wine, bare trees, gray river, city of love. Everything that happened there. Now, this.

**Jonathan Kellerman**  
*The Murder Book*

# IMMEDIACY

Most effective openings invoke a sense of **immediacy**. That's the purpose of a good opening ... to pull the reader out of his surroundings and plunk him down in the world of story.

As I've mentioned previously, you could easily take these same examples and place them in one of the other categories I've listed. However, it's important to study as many different types of openings as possible.

These that follow demonstrate just how powerful a role immediacy can play.

The shots that fired the bullets that entered Pumpkin's head were heard by no less than eight people. Three instinctively closed their windows, checked their door locks, and withdrew to the safety, or at least the seclusion, of their small apartments. Two others, each with experience in such matters, ran from the vicinity as fast if not faster than the gunman himself. Another, the neighborhood recycling fanatic, was digging through some garbage in search of aluminum cans when he heard the sharp sounds of the daily skirmish, very nearby. He jumped behind a pile of cardboard boxes until the shelling stopped, then eased into the alley where he saw what was left of Pumpkin.

**John Grisham**  
*The King of Torts*

The thought popped into her head as she lay in the soft-washed yellowed sheets in the hospital bed. The thought popped in between the gas pains and muscle spasms, through the pungent odor of alcohol swabs, and if she'd read the thought in a book, she might have smiled at it.

**John Sandford**  
*Mortal Prey*

There were three of them—a Viejo---an older man---and two younger ones---trudging up the sandy arroyo, each lugging two gallon-sized plastic containers of water. Mitch Johnson watched them through the gunsight on his rifle, wondering should he or shouldn't he? In the end, he did. He shot them for the same reason Edmund Hillary climbed Mount Everest---because they were there.

**J.A. Jance**  
*Kiss of The Bees*

David Slate reached across the tiny table in Bistro Bis and handed an envelope to the graying man with the stiff burr haircut.

"You are now Carl Mankin," Slate said. "You are newly retired from the Central Intelligence Agency. You are currently employed as a consultant for Seamless Weld. Along with your new credit card, Carl, that envelope holds a lot of authentic-looking stuff from Seamless. Business cards, expense account forms -- that sort of material. But the credit card should cover any expenses."

**Tony Hillerman**  
*The Sinister Pig*

She was dead. What did it matter if icy needles of freezing rain flayed her skin raw. The young woman squinted into the wind, pulling her wolverine hood closer. Violent gusts whipped her bearskin wrap against her legs.

**Jean M. Auel**  
*The Valley of Horses*

One hundred fifty million dollars was nothing to sneeze at. No one in the vast, echoing library of Jolley's Folley would have dared. Except Pandora. She did so with more enthusiasm than delicacy into a tattered tissue. After blowing her nose, she sat back, wishing the antihistamine she had taken would live up to its promise of fast relief. She wished she'd never caught the wretched cold in the first place. More, she wished she were anywhere else in the world.

**Nora Roberts**  
*Engaging The Enemy*

The pistol, a Colt .45 semiautomatic, was capable of holding seven rounds in its magazine. But at the moment, it held only one, which Pittman fed into the firing chamber by pulling back the slide on top of the weapon. The well-oiled metal made a smooth snicking sound. Fourteen years earlier, when Pittman had written his first newspaper story, it had been about a retired policeman who had committed suicide. Pittman had never forgotten a conversation he had overheard, the respectful tones with which two patrolmen at a coffee machine in their precinct headquarters had referred to their former comrade's death.

**David Morrell**  
*Desperate Measures*

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned." Ronald Jeffreys' raspy monotone made the phrase a challenge rather than a confession.

**Alex Kava**  
*Perfect Evil*

# FAMILIARITY

We all like a certain sense of **familiarity** in the stories we read. It doesn't matter if the story is a science fiction saga about Mars or a Western about a gunfighter who's at the end of his life, we want to be able to grab onto something familiar.

Perhaps it's that strange sense of something not being right that we've all experienced. Perhaps it's the mysterious package that arrived in the mail that looks so much like the packages we've all received without knowing what's inside. Perhaps it's a fixture of the suburbs, the Welcome Wagon lady.

Take a close look at these and see if you don't immediately feel a sense of familiarity, that ... oh yeah, I've had that happen to me feeling.

You know how people are always saying "I knew it by the back of my neck" when they mean those occasional scalding splashes of intuition that later prove to be true? My mother was always saying it, though she was not always right. Nevertheless, in my half-Celt family, the back of one's neck is a hallowed harbinger of things to come.

**Anne Rivers Siddons**

*Up Island*

It came in a plain brown wrapper.

Padded envelope, book rate, book sized. I assumed it was an academic text I'd forgotten ordering.

**Jonathan Kellerman**

*Bad Love*

The Welcome Wagon lady, sixty if she was a day but working at youth and vivacity (ginger hair, red lips, a sunshine-yellow dress), twinkled her eyes and teeth at Joanna and said, "You're really going to like it here! It's a nice town with nice people! You couldn't have made a better choice!" Her brown leather shoulderbag was enormous, old and scuffed; from it she dealt Joanna packets of powdered drink and soup mix, a toy-sized box of non-polluting detergent, a booklet of discount slips good at twenty-two local shops, two cakes of soap, a folder of deodorant pads—

**Ira Levin**

*The Stepford Wives*

# PLACE AND TIME

All stories involve setting, the place and time in which events take place. Using the setting as the entrance into a story can be quite a challenge. Unless it's an exotic local, how do you make your opening interesting enough to capture the imagination of the reader and keep him reading?

Here are some rare and inspiring examples ...

Two lean men, weathered and intractable as bois d'arc fence posts, pretended to idle against the wall of the hospital corridor. They might have been taken for dutiful sons, resting, perhaps, from the ordeal of watching a stubborn father slip away. After ten days in place, they had become part of the landscape. They smoked ready-mades and rarely spoke and mainly squinted down at their boots, the prideful anchors of Texans, boots that gleamed like copperheads drowsing in the Big Bend sun.

**Thomas Thompson**  
*Celebrity*

Theodore is in the ground.

The words as I write them make as little sense as did the sight of his coffin descending into a patch of sandy soil near Sagamore Hill, the place he loved more than any other on earth. As I stood there this afternoon, in the cold January wind that blew off Long Island Sound, I thought to myself: Of course it's a joke. Of course he'll burst the lid open, blind us all with that ridiculous grin and split our ears with a high-pitched bark of laughter. Then he'll exclaim that there's work to do---"action to get!"---and we'll all be martialed to the task of protecting some obscure species of newt from the ravages of a predatory industrial giant bent on planting a fetid factory on the little reptile's breeding ground. I was not alone in such fantasies; everyone at the funeral expected something of the kind, it was plain on their faces. All reports indicate that most of the country and much of the world feel the same way. The notion of Theodore Roosevelt being done is that---unacceptable.

**Caleb Carr**  
*The Alienist*

The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history---state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate, New York, as far away as Boston.

**Donna Tartt**  
*The Secret History*

On a very hot day in August of 1994, my wife told me she was going down to the Derry Rite Aid to pick up a refill on her sinus medication prescription---this is stuff you can buy over the counter these days, I believe. I'd finished my writing for the day and offered to pick it up for her. She said thanks, but she wanted to get a piece of fish at the supermarket next door anyway; two birds with one stone and all of that. She blew a kiss at me off the palm of her hand and went out. The next time I saw her, she was on TV. That's how you identify the dead here in Derry---no walking down a subterranean corridor with green tiles on the walls and long fluorescent bars overhead, no naked body rolling out of a chilly drawer on casters; you just go into an office marked PRIVATE and look at a TV screen and say yep or nope.

**Stephen King**  
*Bag of Bones*

No one had anticipated the need for security, so there wasn't any. Briefly, back in 1988, things had been different. After what happened to the two local girls that year, some of the ranchers began carrying loaded rifles and shotguns in their pickup trucks. A few went so far as to strap handguns to their hips while they did their chores. But that geyser of paranoia didn't endure, and four years later, in the spring of 1992, Colorado's Elk River Valley just didn't feel like a dangerous place.

**Stephen White**  
*Cold Case*

The tropical rain fell in drenching sheets, hammering the corrugated roof of the clinic building, roaring down the metal gutters, splashing on the ground in a torrent. Roberta Carter sighed, and stared out the window. From the clinic, she could hardly see the beach or the ocean beyond, cloaked in low fog. This wasn't what she had expected when she had come to the fishing village of Bahia Anasco, on the west coast of Costa Rica, to spend two months as a visiting physician. Bobbie Carter had expected sun and relaxation, after two grueling years of residency in emergency medicine at Michael Reese In Chicago.

**Michael Crichton**  
*Jurassic Park*

# CONTEXTUAL

This is another one of my favorite openings. A strong **contextual** opening adds a sense of reality to the work that's hard to resist. It says ... hey, pay attention, this really happened and it was important enough that I needed to write it down and share it with you.

This is not only the author talking directly to the reader, it's often the main character or one of the main characters. As a result, the story takes on an autobiographical flavor. This is an especially effective opening if you work in a genre that asks the reader to suspend disbelief. Horror, for example. Or perhaps science fiction.

See if these openings don't immediately lend a sense of credibility to the story ...

Where does a story truly begin? In life, there are seldom clear-cut beginnings, those moments when we can, in looking back, say that everything started. Yet there are moments when fate intersects with our daily lives, setting in motion a sequence of events whose outcome we could never have foreseen.

**Nicholas Sparks**

*A Bend In The Road*

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.

**Kurt Vonnegut**

*Slaughterhouse-Five*

In retrospect, it would seem an odd way to start a war. Only one of the participants knew what was really happening, and even that was a coincidence. The property settlement had been moved up on the calendar due to a death in the attorney's family, and so the attorney was scheduled for a red-eye flight, two hours from now, to Hawaii.

**Tom Clancy**

*Debt of Honor*

Some killers are born. Some killers are made. And sometimes the origin of desire for a homicide is lost in the tangle of roots that make an ugly childhood and a dangerous youth, so that no one may ever know if the urge was inbred or induced.

**Tami Hoag**

*Ashes To Ashes*

I want to tell you some important things before we start out journey.

I lived through it all. That's one problem about relating events in first person. The reader knows the narrator didn't get killed. So whatever might happen to me---whatever *did* happen to me---you can be sure I lived through it all, though I might be a little better or worse for the experience, and you can make up your own mind which.

**Robert R. McCammon**  
*Boy's Life*

It is a sin to write this. It is a sin to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see. It is base and evil. It is as if we were speaking alone to no ears but our own. And we know well that there is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone. We have broken the laws. The laws say that men may not write unless the Council of Vocations bid them so. May we be forgiven!

**Ayn Rand**  
Anthem

I warn you that what you're starting to read is full of loose ends and unanswered questions. It will not be neatly tied up at the end, everything resolved and satisfactorily explained. Not by me it won't, anyway. Because I can't say I really know exactly what happened, or why, or just how it began, how it ended, or if it has ended; and I've been right in the thick of it. Now if you don't like that kind of story, I'm sorry, and you'd better not read it. All I can do is tell what I know.

**Jack Finney**  
*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

Nothing ever begins.

There is no first moment; no single word or place from which this or any other story springs.

The threads can always be traced back to some earlier tale, and to the tales that preceded that; though as the narrator's voice recedes the connections will seem to grow more tenuous, for each age will want the tale told as if it were of its own making.

Thus the pagan will be sanctified, the tragic becomes laughable; great lovers will stoop to sentiment, and demons dwindle to clockwork toys.

Nothing is fixed. In and out the shuttle goes, fact and fiction, mind and matter woven into patterns that may have only this in common: that hidden among them is a filigree that will with time become a world.

**Clive Barker**  
*Weaveworld*

This is how I always start:

"I am the prosecutor.

"I represent the state. I am here to present to you the evidence of a crime.

Together you will weight this evidence. You will deliberate upon it. You will decide if it proves the defendant's guilt

""This man---" And here I point.

**Scott Turow**

*Presumed Innocent*

First of all, it was October, a rare month for boys. Not that all months aren't rare. But there be bad and good, as the pirates say. Take September, a bad month: school begins. Consider August, a good month: school hasn't begun yet. July, well, July's really fine: there's no chance in the world for school. June, not doubting it, June's best of all, for the school doors spring wide and September's a billion years away.

**Ray Bradbury**

*Something Wicked This Way Comes*

An alcoholic homicide detective in my hometown of Millhaven, Illinois, William Damrosch, died to ensure, you might say, that this book would never be written. But you write what comes back to you, and then afterward it comes back to you all over again.

**Peter Straub**

*The Throat*

# LITERARY

What's that old cliché? I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I see it. You can probably include this category in that description. The dictionary states that **literary** means appropriate to literature rather than everyday speech or writing. That's as good an explanation as any.

Most successful fiction writers reach large audiences because their stories are written primarily to entertain. This does not mean that they can't be insightful or have great depth, it simply means that the first objective of the story is to keep the readers turning the pages ... to be entertaining.

The literary story strives for more meaning; that is its primary intent. These are generally much harder to find on the best-seller lists, but here are a couple of examples of how they might open ...

My wound is geography. It is also my anchorage, my port of call.

**Pat Conroy**  
*The Prince of Tides*

In the attic where the rain touched the roof softly on spring days and where you could feel the mantle of snow outside, a few inches away, on December nights, A Thousand Times Great Grandmère existed. She did not live, nor was she eternally dead, she ... existed.

**Ray Bradbury**  
*From The Dust Returned*

## LET'S HAVE SOME FUN IF YOU WERE TO CATEGORIZE THESE WHERE WOULD YOU PLACE THEM?

In all honesty, categorizing openings really isn't that important. The only reason I've done so here is for the purpose of helping you understand the variety of approaches available to you when you work on an opening.

If you thought some of the openings we've covered would have fit better in a different category, you might very well be right. Feel free to go back and take a closer look.

More important, however, I hope you come away from this book with an increased sense of the effect a strong opening can leave on the reader. Remember ... you only have a few short seconds once that bookstore browser opens your book to capture her imagination and leave her wanting more.

So have fun with these ...

The decision to bomb the office of the radical Jew lawyer was reached with relative ease. Only three people were involved in the process. The first was the man with the money. The second was a local operative who knew the territory. And the third was a young patriot and zealot with a talent for explosives and an astonishing knack for disappearing without a trail. After the bombing, he fled the country and hid in Northern Ireland for six years.

**John Grisham**  
*The Chamber*

Every time they got a call from the leper hospital to pick up a body Jack Delaney would feel himself coming down with the flu or something. Leo Mullen, his boss, was finally calling it to Jack's attention. "You notice that? They phone, usually it's one of the sisters, and a while later you get kind of a moan in your voice. 'Oh, man, I don't know what's the matter with me. I feel kind of punk.'"

**Elmore Leonard**  
*Bandits*

Exactly forty days after she'd last held the hand of her husband, July Barenson sat looking through her window toward the quiet streets of Swansboro. It was cold; the sky had been angry for a week, and the rain made gentle tapping sounds against the window. Trees were barren, their cragged limbs curling in the frigid air like arthritic fingers.

**Nicholas Sparks**  
*The Guardian*

One night when she was four and sleeping in the bottom bunk of her bunk bed, Ruth Cole woke to the sound of lovemaking---it was coming from her parents' bedroom. It was a totally unfamiliar sound to her. Ruth had recently been ill with a stomach flu; when she first heard her mother making love, Ruth thought that her mother was throwing up.

**John Irving**

*A Widow For One Year*

Stupid me—I fell right into the old pattern and spent a week pretending I was a moving target. All along, a part of me knew that I was hitching toward southern Illinois because my mother was passing. When your mother's checking out, you get yourself back home.

**Peter Straub**

*Mr. X*

With the exception of a nine-week old Australian shepherd puppy sniffing and whining as if he'd discovered a treasure chest and sought a way inside, everyone was politely pretending Anna didn't stink.

**Nevada Barr**

*Blood Lure*

The *Dancing Lady* was not a thing of beauty. She was sixty-three feet of welded steel, much of it dripping rust down her sides like dried blood.

**Steve Martini**

*Critical Mass*

It was the week after Thanksgiving when I saw him again. The stores along Hollywood Boulevard were already beginning to fill up with over priced Christmas junk, and the daily papers were beginning to scream about how terrible it would be if you didn't get your Christmas shipping done early. It would be terrible anyway; it always is.

**Raymond Chandler**

*The Long Goodbye*

The last time I talked to Rob, I was checking my luggage at Lindbergh Field to fly to Seattle and meet with an angel. My cell phone beeped and flashed *Nemesis*, code for my brother. We hadn't spoken in months.

**Greg Bear**

*Vitals*

# CONCLUSION

That's it.

Next time you're in a bookstore, and you absently pick up a book and browse the first page, catch yourself. Take a closer look at the opening. What is it you like about it? What is it that seems to be missing? If you decide to buy the book, what prompted that decision? And if you decide to pass on it, what was the key to that decision?

I hope you've enjoyed what you found here. If you'd like to drop me a note with your comments, I'd love to hear from you. And if you have any suggestions for other ebooks you'd like to see in the future, I'd love to hear those as well. My e-mail address is: [dbsilva@thesuccessfulwriter.com](mailto:dbsilva@thesuccessfulwriter.com).

And if you'd like to pass this ebook along to a friend, please feel free.

My best,

David B. Silva

<http://www.thesuccessfulwriter.com>

PS: If you're eager to get started with that novel that's been in you forever, but you aren't quite sure where or how to start, let me recommend [Novel Writing Made Easy](#). One of the most comprehensive and yet easy novel writing systems you'll ever discover. Check it out: [Novel Writing Made Easy](#).