Reading for Pleasure

Opening lines and others

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If you were writing a novel what would you set down for the opening sentence? There is an endless variety of possible styles, each of which an author must have chosen as his best bet to get the reader hooked.

There can be an aphorism before getting down to business. "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion" (*Anna Karenina*). "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (*Pride and Prejudice*). You can set the scene, briefly ("Thirty years ago, Marseilles lay burning in the sun, one day"—*Little Dorritt*; "The Bottoms' succeeded to 'Hell Row'"—*Sons and Lovers*) or more atmospherically ("A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment"—*The Return of the Native*; and, a few miles away, "The Sea lost nothing of the swallowing identity of its great outer mass of waters in the emphatic, individual character of each particular wave"—*Weymouth Sands*).

The narrator may start inviting the reader into his story ("I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with"—*Wuthering Heights*; "For a long time I used to go to bed early"—*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*). The scene may be set in detail, in the style in which the book will go on, as in *Ulysses* ("Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed"), *Barchester Towers* ("In the latter days of July in the year 185-, a most important question was for ten days hourly asked in the Cathedral city of Barchester, and answered every hour in various ways—Who was to be the new Bishop?"), and *The Brothers Karamazov* ("Alexey Fyodorovitch Karamazov was the third son of Fyodor Pavlovitch Karamazov, a landowner of our district, who became notorious in his own day (and is still remembered among us) because of his tragic and mysterious death, which occurred exactly 13 years ago and which I shall relate in its proper place").

Our contemporaries can be laconic ("The cell door slammed shut behind Rubashov"—*Darkness at Noon*), or parade an arresting eye-opener for the sheer fun of the craft of writing, as does Anthony Burgess in my current book, *Earthly Powers*: "It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the archbishop had come to see me."

Jack of all trades . . .

My problem is the compulsion to try to read and know everything. It is essential to try, but the intention to read up all about a

subject is rapidly displaced by the next book, which then is itself so absorbing that its subject must in turn be pursued. In the end this is a recipe for a Jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none mind; but it is fun and, yes, I *do* admire and envy the Master-mind competitors for their general knowledge.

I always want to read up their specialist subjects too. Perhaps not the history of boxing, but certainly I get the yen to start the next day on the life of Henry II, mammals, the career of Lord Kitchener, the novels of Dornford Yates, the operas of Handel, the family of Earl Godwin of Northumbria, and so on. Nothing can be completed, as the next desire distracts from the earlier fantasy. Reading *Pickwick Papers* for the first time since childhood, I am carried away into a world of eating and drinking (especially drinking) at parties in taverns and houses, Victorian town and country scenes, prison and mansion, lawyers, eccentrics, cads, Mrs Bardell, the Eatanswill election, and Bob Sawyer, Guy's medical student of 1830 vintage (impoverished, drinks a good deal, too early for rugby). I resolve to read all of Dickens's novels, and some essays on them, when a postcard arrives from the public library announcing the arrival of a book I requested months ago, and I read Antonia Fraser's *Mary Queen of Scots*. This is a masterpiece of history writing for the general reader, every episode vivid, all the issues discussed, evidence apparently presented with full scholarly references to primary sources in Scotland, France, and England. If it is not highly regarded by professional historians then I am afraid that is a point against them. I decide to read some Scottish history—especially about the Middle Ages, when the country must have been so backward. And the history of languages is so interesting. What is known of the origins of the Scottish dialect? When did Aberdonians start speaking English and not Gaelic?

I am destined never to take up that subject because a book relevant to my work arrives for review, and takes priority. The world moves on, and a book is waiting to be read since it came as a Christmas present: *Rites of Passage*, last year's prize-winning novel by William Golding. A sailing ship is en route to Australia, and an aristocratic young man sends letters home about the voyage, these letters being the novel. Brilliant, detailed, and apparently accurate descriptions of the trimming, manning, and navigating of the ship have great interest of their own. Meanwhile a story develops among the passengers, which include pert and haughty young women as well as men of all social classes. Intrigue allows an affaire to develop, even to copulation in a diminutive cabin no bigger than a trunk. The proletarians on board live forward and separated from the ladies and gentlemen by an invisible social barrier, existing yet disembodied, an imaginary line on the deck delimiting the permissible exercise areas of the different social classes. The young gentleman disdains the sweaty great unwashed, but in the ceremonies for crossing the line (which line?) there are rites of passage (passage to where?) and nameless, passionate, presumably homosexual deeds down below. A powerful atmosphere is invoked in this fine novel, which has many levels of meaning.

No linking theme

Selecting from the endless chain of books suggesting the next book, I have no linking theme from my recent reading but a short list of six books I cannot resist recommending.

First is Samuel Morison's *The Great Explorers* (Oxford University Press, 1978), telling the story of the European discovery of America, in fact a one-volume abridgement of two volumes describing the northern and southern voyages. Morison, United States admiral, historian, and widespread traveller, has visited all the locations, and he understands the navigational problems. He gives photographs of the landfalls from the sea, as they looked to the explorer, and the book has plentiful maps. And he can write. With Morison you begin to understand Columbus's achievement and to admire him as an infinitely interesting man. Not only did he have to be impressive enough to get the expedition supported and fitted out, not only did he have to be brave enough to sail westwards into totally unknown seas, but he had to have the qualities of leadership to make the men stay with him week after week. And, as the reader realises from Morison's compelling account, they sailed onwards full speed even at night, when they could see nothing in the unknown ahead of them. After Columbus's return, and decoration with honours, he should have retired and left the exploitation to others. He made *three* more long voyages, however, with innumerable adventures (and only one shipwreck) but, tragically, with declining success. He retired in relative obscurity, with his accustomed great piety.

The book describes Cabot's voyages to Newfoundland, Verrazano's to what is now the Eastern United States, Cartier's to Labrador and Quebec, and Frobisher's and Davis's to the icy far northwest; and, in the south, Magellan's through his strait and across the Pacific and Drake's circumnavigation. Every line is fascinating: no book have I enjoyed or admired so much in years.

The second is *Freud: the Man and the Cause* by Ronald W Clark (Jonathan Cape, and Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1980). This huge and scholarly biography is more professionally written than the three-volume biography by Ernest Jones the psychoanalyst. More material has come to light, and the stance is more properly one of interest, curiosity, and analysis, without the commitment and discipleship of Jones. The fascination and dominance of Freud, and the tensions and cracks in the facade of the movement as one supporter after another forms his own views and is condemned by the great man when he cannot accommodate them within the scheme, are beautifully brought out—utterly clearly, yet ultimately with the sympathy of full understanding. A great biography: I can only hope that Clark's other lives—of Bertrand Russell, one of my childhood heroes, and Einstein—will be as good when I have time to reach them.

My third choice is *The Elephant Man*, but the story must be read in the version by Michael Howell and Peter Ford, *The True*

History of the Elephant Man (Penguin, 1980), which as well as bringing the East End and the world of show booths to life has as a bonus a particularly vivid account of the Leicester workhouse, its inmates, and how the system worked in 1879.

Fourth comes a particular discovery of my own, read because of its probable interest for a psychiatrist, but to be recommended to all lovers of life and literature: *Love and Marriage: Literature and its Social Context* by Laurence Lerner, (Edward Arnold, 1979). The author, a fine literary critic, takes a small number of great works of literature and shows how the views of love and the way love fits with, or need not fit with, marriage are so different in different ages. All authors are under triple influences in their books: the writing is in the literary tradition, as only certain kinds of books are conceivable at that time; it is a product of and reflects the society of the author's time, as we see clearly enough when we are far enough ahead to look back over a century or more; and yet all the books are uniquely of their author. Lerner writes essays on this theme as applied to love and marriage in the story of Tristan and Isolde, in Dante and his relation to Beatrice, via Samuel Richardson in eighteenth-century England, and so on to more recent examples in the nineteenth-century novel about adulterous passion (he chooses as his main example neither *Anna Karenina* nor *Madame Bovary* but *Effi Briest* by Fontane) and his contemporary example, the novels of Elizabeth-Jane Howard (when will I find time to read them? He makes me want to).

The fifth recommendation is *The Russian Empire in Photographs* by C Obolensky (Jonathan Cape, 1980), a haunting collection of sepia prints of Old Russia before the revolution, and very good value at £9.95. It includes an excellent potted history of Russia and her expansion in the introduction. What did Peter the Great do to modernise Russia? He ended the compulsory wearing of beards for a start. Where did he learn what was needed in a modern Russian navy? Working at manual labour in Deptford Dockyard on his trip to England.

Lastly and most entertaining of all, a racy, gossipy, allusive, snobbish, combative, interesting, impossible, and yet compulsive book: *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980). If you remember Waugh's diaries, as I do, as repulsive, boorish, and drunken, you should try again with an open mind. It seems that he wrote his diaries in the evening when he was drunk, and his letters in the morning when he was sober. There is immaculate editing, explaining all the references to virtually everyone in public life in England this century. Despite some of his public postures, he is found to be entirely tender to his wife Laura (though sometimes apparently testily dismissive of his children) and capable of a wonderful witty friendship with Nancy Mitford.

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Is there any contraindication in an otherwise fit patient to repairing bilateral inguinal hernias at one operating session? Is there any contraindication to operating on a "clean" case of inguinal hernia before a patient having a vagotomy and pyloroplasty?

An estimated 5% of men and 1% of women develop hernias. Of 1000 external hernias, 750 are male and 75 female inguinal hernias. Of the remainder, 6% are femoral, 5% incisional, 4% umbilical, 1% epigastric, and 1% miscellaneous.¹ Since some 20% of inguinal hernias are bilateral, the patient who presents with bilateral inguinal herniae is a common problem. In children both ruptures may be repaired at the same sitting by simple herniotomy. In adults there is some controversy over the question of whether repair should be synchronous or sequential. The more prolonged operating time in carrying out a bilateral repair at the same session could theoretically, at least, be associated with an increased risk of deep vein thrombosis or postoperative chest complications, although I have come across no documented evidence of this. Against this, however, must be placed the serious inconvenience of two admissions to hospital, with

subsequent time away from work after each and the accumulative dangers of postoperative complications after two separate operations. The vast majority of bilateral hernias may safely be repaired at the one intervention. The only exception would be when a long and difficult operation for a massive irreducible scrotal hernia or an emergency intervention for a strangulated hernia, perhaps with resection of gangrenous bowel, makes it obviously unwise to proceed to the repair of a contralateral, non-complicated hernia, which in these circumstances is better left to another day. An inguinal hernia in an otherwise healthy patient who is to undergo some other elective abdominal operation, cholecystectomy or vagotomy, for example, may safely be repaired at one and the same operative session. The hernia repair should, however, be carried out as a formal procedure, with complete change of gloves, gowns, drapes, and instruments to maintain the strict sterility that is mandatory in this operation.—H ELLIS, professor of surgery, London.

¹ Zimmerman LM, Anson BJ. *Anatomy and surgery of hernia*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins Company, 1967.