

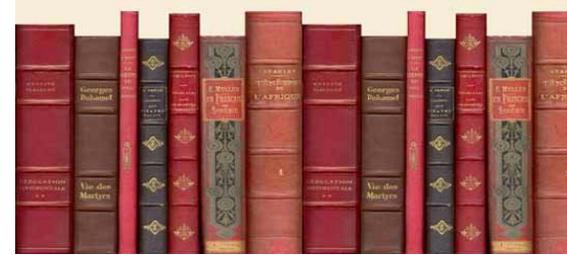


# **FABULOUS OPENINGS!**

How to Keep Them Reading Past the First Page

Melanie Rigney  
Bay to Ocean Writers Conference  
February 26, 2011

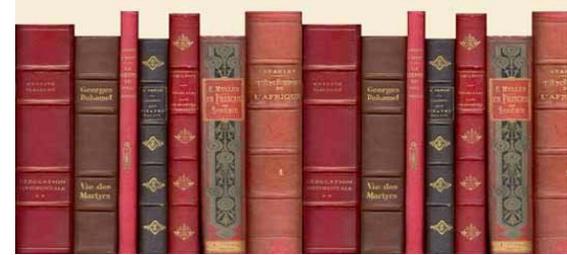
# WHY ARE THEY SO CRITICAL?



Because these days, they're all you have to catch someone's attention.

- Many writers spend the majority of their time devising their plot. What they don't seem to understand is that if their execution—if their *prose*—isn't up to par, their plot will never even be considered. Agents and editors often ignore synopses and plot outlines; instead, we skip right to the actual manuscript. If the writing is good, *then* we'll go back and consider the synopsis. If not, the manuscript is discarded. A great writer can produce an amazing piece of writing with virtually no plot at all. —Noah Lukeman, *The First Five Pages*
- No doubt about it, a great first line pulls us immediately into a story. It hooks. It intrigues. It opens a world in which things already are happening, in which discoveries await. Or it can. Sadly, many first lines lie flat on the page doing nothing helpful at all, merely setting a scene or in some other way getting us ready for a story rather than telling it. Weak first lines greet us like a limp handshake.—Donald Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel Workbook*

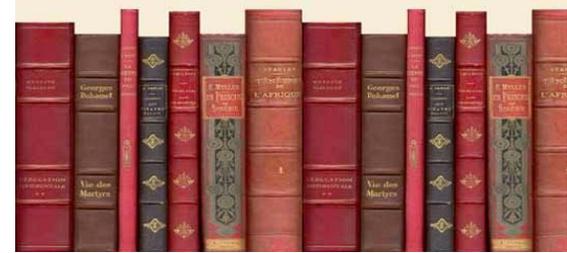
# BLAME THE INTERNET



Imagine filling a bathtub with a thimble; that's the challenge involved in moving information from working memory to long-term memory. When we read a book, the information faucet provides a steady drip, which we can control by varying the pace of our reading. ... On the Net, we face many information faucets, all going full blast. Our little thimble overflows as we rush from tap to tap. We transfer only a small jumble of drops from different faucets, not a continuous, coherent stream.

... There's nothing wrong with absorbing information quickly and in bits and pieces. We've always skimmed newspapers more than we've read them, and we routinely run our eyes over books and magazines to get the gist of a piece of writing and decide whether it warrants more thorough reading. The ability to scan and browse is as important as the ability to read deeply and think attentively. The problem is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of thought. Once a means to an end, a way to identify information for further study, it's becoming an end in itself—our preferred method of both learning and analysis. —Nicholas Carr, *Wired*, May 2010

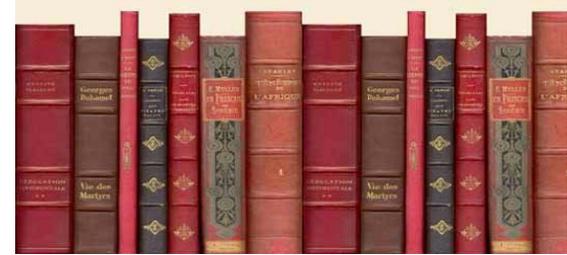
# WHAT MAKES AN OPENING FABULOUS?



It's changed over the years—depending in part on what's competing for the readers' attention.

- As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place, where was a Den, and I laid me down in *that* place to sleep: And as I slept, I dreamed a Dream. I dreamed, and behold *I saw a Man cloathed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a Book in his hand, and a great Burden upon his back.* I looked, and saw him open the Book, and read therein; and as he read, he wept and trembled; and not being able to contain, he brake out with a lamentable cry, saying, *What shall I do?*
- An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money. In the former case, it is well known that the entertainer provides what fare he pleases; and though this should be very indifferent, and utterly disagreeable to the taste of his company, they must not find any fault; nay, on the contrary, good breeding forces them outwardly to approve and to commend whatever is set before them. Now the contrary of this happens to the master of an ordinary. Men who pay for what they eat will insist on gratifying their palates, however nice and whimsical these may prove; and if everything is not agreeable to their taste, will challenge a right to censure, to abuse, and to d---n their dinner without control.

# GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT



➤ While the present century was in its teens, and on one sunshiny morning in June, there drove up to the great iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, on Chiswick Mall, a large family coach, with two fat horses in blazing harness, driven with a fat coachman in a three-cornered hat and wig, at the rate of four miles an hour. A black servant, who reposed on the box beside the fat coachman, uncurled his bandy legs as soon as the equipage drew up opposite Miss Pinkerton's shining brass plate, and as he pulled the bell, at least a score of young heads were seen peering out of the narrow windows of the stately old brick house. Nay, the acute observer might have recognized the little red nose of good-natured Miss Jemima Pinkerton herself, rising over some geranium-pots in the window of that lady's own drawing-room.

➤ It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

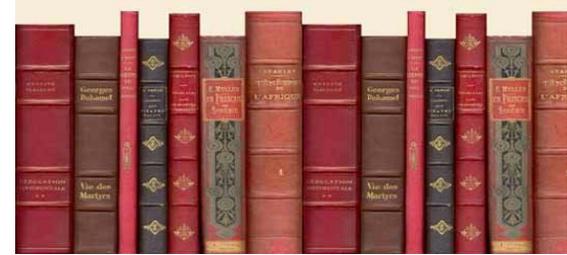
Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she, "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

# CHARACTER AND CONFLICT



➤ “TOM!”

No answer.

“TOM!”

No answer.

“What’s gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!”

No answer.

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked THROUGH them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for “style,” not service—she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well. She looked perplexed for a moment, and then said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear:

“Well, I lay if I get hold of you I’ll—”

➤ “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

“It’s so dreadful to be poor,” sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

“I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have lots of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

“We’ve got father and mother, and each other, anyhow,” said Beth, contentedly, from her corner.

The four young faces on which the firelight shone brightened at the cheerful words, but darkened again as Jo said sadly,—

“We haven’t got father, and shall not have him for a long time.” She didn’t say “perhaps never,” but each silently added it, thinking of father far away, where the fighting was.

# A TALE OF TWO FRIENEMIES



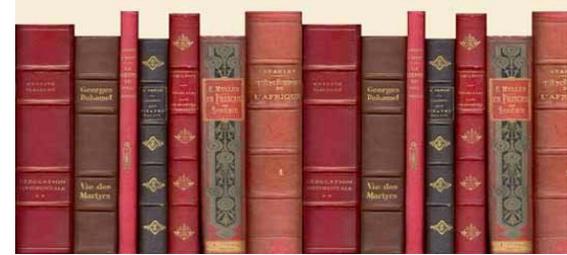
➤ Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym. ...

➤ 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 any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”

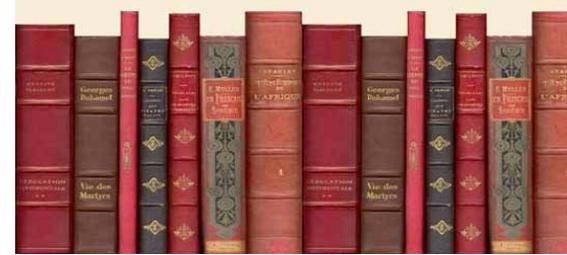
He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. ...

# SOMETIMES, WE GET BETTER



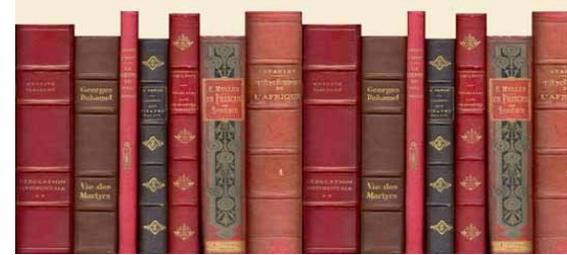
- Billy Ray Cobb was the younger and smaller of the two rednecks. At twenty-three he was already a three-year veteran of the state penitentiary at Parchmans. Possession, with intent to sell. He was a lean, tough little punk who had survived prison by somehow maintaining a ready supply of drugs that he sold and sometimes gave to the blacks and the guards for protection. In the year since his release he had continued to prosper, and his small-time narcotics business had elevated him to the position of one of the most affluent rednecks in Ford County. He was a businessman, with employees, obligations, deals, everything but taxes. Down at the Ford place in Clanton he was known as the last man in recent history to pay cash for a new pickup truck. ...
- The senior partner studied the resume for the hundredth time and again found nothing he disliked about Mitchell Y. McDeere, at least not on paper. He had the brains, the ambition, the good looks. And he was hungry; with his background, he had to be. He was married, and that was mandatory. The firm had never hired an unmarried lawyer, and it frowned heavily on divorce, as well as womanizing and drinking. Drug testing was in the contract. He had a degree in accounting, passed the CPA exam the first time he took it and wanted to be a tax lawyer, which of course was a requirement with a tax firm. He was white, and the firm had never hired a black. They managed this by being secretive and clubbish and never soliciting job applications. ...

# TIMING: EVERYTHING OR NOTHING



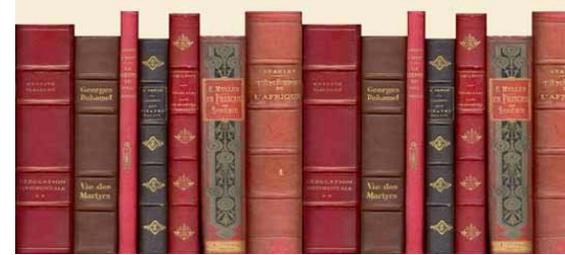
- Captain First Rank Marko Ramius of the Soviet Navy was dressed for the Arctic conditions normal to the Northern Fleet submarine base at Polyarnyy. Five layers of wool and oilskin enclosed him. A dirty harbor tug pushed his submarine's bow around to the north, facing down the channel. The dock that had held his *Red October* for two interminable months was now a water-filled concrete box, one of the many specially built to shelter strategic missile submarines from the harsh elements. On its edge a collection of sailors and dockyard workers watched his ship sail in stolid Russian fashion, without a wave or a cheer.
- At the first gesture of morning, flies began stirring. Inman's eyes and the long wound at his neck drew them, and the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet were soon more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake. So he came to yet one more day in the hospital ward. He flapped the flies away with his hands and looked across the foot of his bed to an open triple-hung window. Ordinarily he could see to the red road and the oak tree and the low brick wall. And beyond them to a sweep of fields and flat piney woods that stretched to the western horizon. The view was a long one for the flatlands, the hospital having been built on the only swell within eyeshot. But it was too early yet for a vista. The window might as well have been painted grey.

# CHARACTERS WITH SOMETHING TO SAY



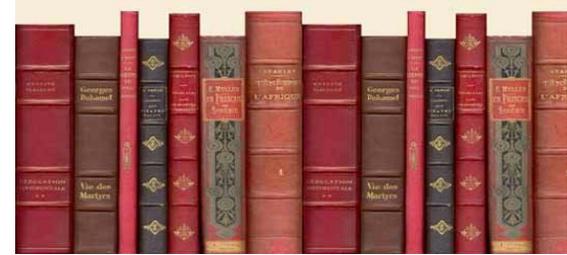
- My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973. In newspaper photos of missing girls from the seventies, most looked like me: white girls with mousy brown hair. This was before kids of all races and genders started appearing on milk cartons or in the daily mail. It was still back when people believed things like that didn't happen.
- I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other. When you're five, you know your age down to the month. Even in your twenties you know how old you are. I'm twenty-three you say, or maybe twenty-seven. But then in your thirties something strange starts to happen. It's a mere hiccup at first, an instant of hesitation. How old are you? Oh, I'm—you start confidently, but then you stop. You were going to say thirty-three, but you're not. You're thirty-five. And then you're bothered, because you wonder if this is the beginning of the end. It is, of course, but it's decades before you admit it.

# ABOUT NONFICTION



- In the cold, nearly colorless light of a New England winter, two men on horseback traveled the coast road below Boston, heading north. A foot or more of snow covered the landscape, the remnants of a Christmas storm that had blanketed Massachusetts from one end of the province to the other. Beneath the snow, after weeks of severe cold, the ground was frozen solid to a depth of two feet. Packed ice in the road, ruts as hard as iron, made the going hazardous, and the riders, mindful of the horses, kept at a walk.
- My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone. When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood; the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.
- The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call “out there.” Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

# WHAT WE'RE READING TODAY



The trial was irretrievably over; everything that could be said had been said, but he had never doubted that he would lose. The written verdict was handed down at 10:00 on Friday morning, and all that remained was a summing up from the reporters waiting in the corridor outside the district court.

Carl Mikael Blomkvist saw them through the doorway and slowed his step. He had no wish to discuss the verdict, but questions were unavoidable and he—of all people—knew that they had to be asked and answered. *This is how it is to be a criminal*, he thought. *On the other side of the microphone*. He straightened up and tried to smile. The reporters gave him friendly, almost embarrassed greetings.

# THE TAKEAWAYS



- Analyze the opening paragraphs in stories within your genre. Look at breakout work published in the past three to five years—preferably by a first-time author.
- Whether you're writing in first or third person, fiction or non-fiction, the style and tone of your opening lines should reflect the overall flavor of the book.
- Give the reader a reason to keep reading—whether that reason is conflict, a quirky character, or beautiful prose.
- Resist the temptation to start with an information dump. Determine where your story starts—and start there.

**AND NOW...**



**It's your turn!**