

SCIENCE-FICTION OPENINGS

A Grand Master offers some observations on crafting an effective beginning in an alternate world

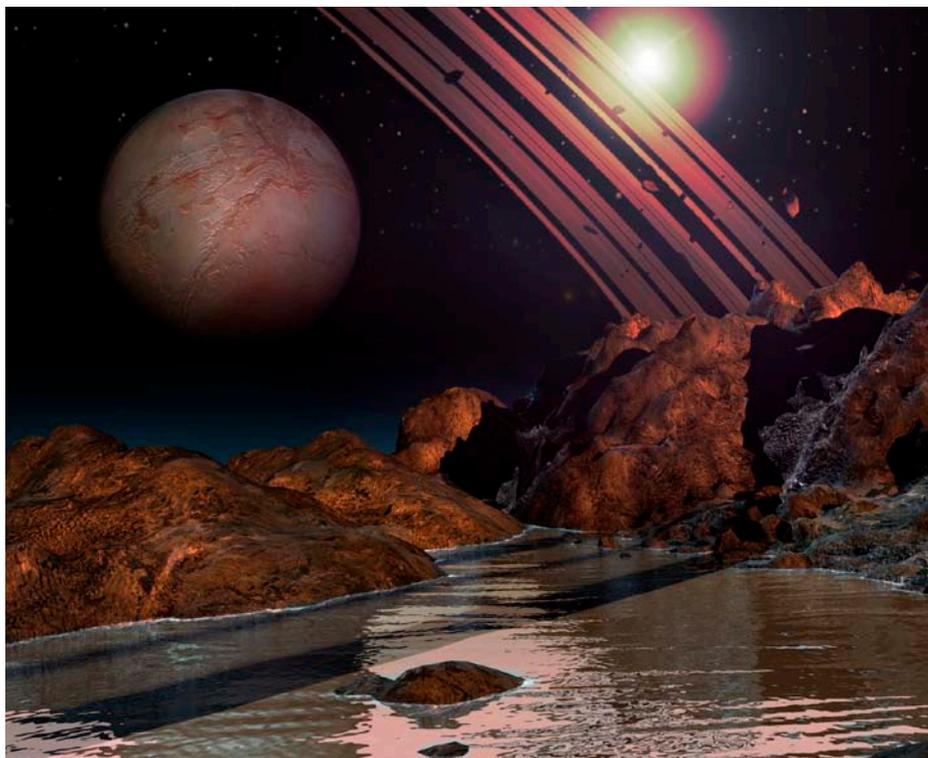
By James Gunn

There's nothing like a good beginning—unless it's a good ending. But, as I used to tell my fiction students, without a good beginning the reader will never get to the ending.

That opening sentence had better grab the reader. I'm not talking about the “narrative hook” that used to be touted by the old pulp writers, but the need for the science-fiction story to propel the reader into a different world. Theodore Sturgeon, the quintessential science-fiction short-story writer, and Don Ward, the longtime editor of *Zane Grey's Western Magazine*, once collaborated on a series of Western stories. They challenged each other to a contest for the best opening sentence. Sturgeon's was “At last they sat a dance out,” but he conceded that Ward's was better: “They banged out through the cabin door and squared off in the snow outside.”

The advice to apprentice Western-story writers was “Shoot the sheriff in the first paragraph.” That was to provide an opportunity for everybody to compete for dominance as well as to establish that the issue was life-and-death. In science fiction the challenge is to alert the reader to what is different about the world of the story and, if possible, to plant a clue that will eventually combine with other clues to complete the jigsaw puzzle that is the alternate reality.

In the early 1960s, I attended a Westcon in Santa Barbara, Calif., at which A.E. van Vogt gave a talk about his writing methods. Van Vogt was the master of what I called, in volume three of my



Readers of science fiction, says our prolific author, want a new idea for how technology or science or cataclysm might change the world, or they want what is familiar reimaged. The world, in effect, becomes a leading character in the story.

Road to Science Fiction anthologies, “fairy tales of science.” In a seminal essay titled “Complication in the science fiction story,” he discussed writing in 800-word scenes and throwing into each scene whatever new idea he had in his head. It made for exciting, if not always fully comprehensible, narrative. (But then, van Vogt's methods themselves were unique. In Santa Barbara, for instance, he described how, when he

went to sleep with a story problem, he always awakened with the solution. So he set his alarm to wake himself every two hours, so he could write down the ideas that were fresh out of his dreams.)

Van Vogt went on to say that he had focused on writing what he called “the science-fiction sentence.” He didn't explain what a “science-fiction sentence” was, so I've come up with my own definition. A science-fiction sentence is a state-

ment that isn't true in our world but is true in the science-fiction world at hand. An example is the opening sentence of Philip José Farmer's *Sail On! Sail On!*: "Friar Sparks sat wedged between the wall and the realizer." The reason this is a science-fiction sentence is that there is no "realizer" in our world (and maybe no Friar Sparks either), but there is in the *Sail On! Sail On!* world.

Poul Anderson once said that what readers want from fiction are the twin pleasures of surprise and rightness. The end of the story ought to come out in a way the reader doesn't expect, but the rationale for it ought to be apparent on rereading. The reader ought to say, "My God! How surprising. But I should have seen it coming." (For more on how to use the element of surprise in endings, see the article on page 42.) Though that applies to endings, it applies even more to beginnings, where the clues are planted that will lead inevitably, though not obviously, to the ending.

In the late 1950s, I took a writers workshop from Caroline Gordon. A rule of hers was that the ending of a story should be implicit in the first paragraph. One of my favorite examples of that rule was the opening sentence in Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without catching a fish."

A good example of that in science fiction is the opening paragraph of Alfred Bester's story "Fondly Fahrenheit":

He doesn't know which of us I am these days, but they know one truth. You must own nothing but yourself. You must make your own life, live your own life, and die your own death ... or else you will die another's.

Novels, I should say here, are a different genre. Readers have more patience with them, knowing they've settled in for the long haul, and are willing to let the process play out at a more leisurely pace.

The short story has to work more quickly. It also has to get into the story quicker. Inexperienced writers tend to

More tips on writing engaging science fiction

WRITERS LIKE rules. Every writer has some, either learned or acquired, conscious or unconscious, and every genre has its requirements—the expectations of its readers—codified. Mark Twain had a list; Robert Heinlein had one. All of them provide insight into our intuitive processes. Here are a few of mine:

- Come up with a new idea for how the world will be changed by technology or science or cataclysm. The science-fiction reader wants a new idea, or the familiar reimagined.
- Read the literature. You can't come up with a new idea if you don't know the old ones.
- Create your world in detail. Science fiction makes background foreground, because it constructs a different world around a kernel of change, and that world becomes the leading character.
- Create your characters to fit that world. If fiction considers the human condition, science fiction believes that environment changes humanity and even the human condition.
- Resolve your world. If the world is the leading character, its situation must be resolved by the end, even if the ending involves the defeat, surrender or acceptance of the characters.
- Don't write it as science fiction if it will work as traditional fiction. The real world is too powerful to sacrifice as a publishing strategy.

—J.G.

start their stories slowly, like a broad jumper begins his approach to the pit. Isaac Asimov regularly discussed his story ideas with John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction/Analog*. On one occasion, he proposed a robot story incorporating religion. But on his next visit, he told Campbell that he had run into problems writing what turned out to be "Reason," his second robot story and the story from which his famous "Three Laws of Robotics" were derived. Campbell told him that when this kind of thing happened to him, it meant he had started the story too soon. Asimov took that advice and started "Reason" one week after his two fictional engineers had assembled the QT-1 robot—"Cutie"—and were trying to respond to Cutie's refusal to believe that they had created him.

When I was writing plays back in my undergraduate days, a professor gave me a book on playwriting that contained the advice: Throw away the first act. Fiction-writing textbooks have recommended something similar—that a novelist should throw away the first chapter, and a short-story writer, the first scene. All of that material, the experts say, is written for the author's benefit, to get

him or her started. The readers don't need it.

Many years ago I ran across a story in *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier's* (that dates it!) that started with the sentence, "A story, like a puppy, should be picked up a little ahead of the middle." Generally speaking—all such admonitions have their exceptions—a story should be started when the story issue is engaged. In "Reason," the issue is Cutie's refusal to believe that Powell and Donovan, the comparatively feeble and mentally deficient humans, have created him, and it continues with their failures to convince the robot otherwise. The reader should be thrown into the middle of the situation, where the tension is high.

After that, background information—exposition—can be filled in as necessary. And it often isn't necessary. My definition of exposition is information the author

wants to provide the reader that the reader doesn't want to read. Once questions have been raised in the reader's mind, exposition loses its curse by becoming answers that the reader actually wants. Giving the reader incentives makes all the difference.

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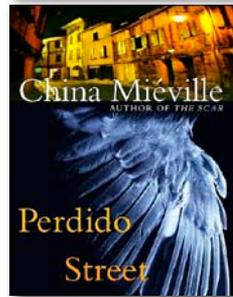
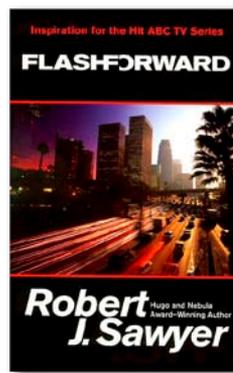
masters of this art. Their story “Private Eye” begins with a killing in a metropolitan business office. Two men are seen arguing. One picks up an ornamental whip and strikes the other, who grabs an ornamental knife off the desk and kills his attacker. The story shifts to two men who are watching this occur in front of their eyes!

Only then do the Kuttners tell us that devices have been invented that read the impressions light waves make on the walls around them, allowing the tracing of motives. And now that motives can be traced, only premeditated murders are punished.

The rest of the story is about the way in which unpunishable murder can be committed in such a system, like Alfred Bester’s concept in *The Demolished Man* of how someone can get away with murder in a telepathic society. Bester also starts with murder in the first chapter (guilt, too).

But in both cases, the involving action occurs before the explanation of the situation in which it makes sense, and the reader receives the explanation as engrossing answers to the questions raised by the opening scene or chapter. Or, better yet, a writer can omit the explanations and allow the actions of the story to speak for themselves: Show, don’t tell. A well-crafted story is like a stage play in which the reader—the audience—provides interpretation for what goes on, and the author withholds his authorial voice.

Controlling readers’ expectations is the key to a successful story, and beginnings are where the questions that the story intends to answer are raised. Sometimes the question is a simple “What happens next?” Other times the question is “Why is the character doing that?” Or “How is the character going to get out of that predicament?” At its most subtle, the question may be “Why is the story being told this way?” Or “Why are the characters behaving this way?” Or even, “Why



Robert J. Sawyer’s novel let its characters experience their futures, while China Miéville’s tale offers a mixture of fantasy and science fiction.

does the story use this kind of diction or this kind of sentence structure?”

Stories that frustrate us are often those that don’t raise the right questions or don’t answer the questions they raise. Or the style conflicts with the theme, like a story of character told in the diction of an action story, or, more often, the other way: an action story told in the diction of someone’s internal conflict.

And yet a combination of approaches, if done well, can work. An action story involving an introspective protagonist and told in a diction appropriate to that introspection can take a formula story to the next level, as in Michael Bishop’s “Rogue Tomato,” whose elevated diction contrasts with his protagonist’s working-class origins. It

also starts with an effective opening (with some tributes to Franz Kafka and Philip K. Dick):

When Philip K. awoke, he found that overnight he had grown from a reasonably well shaped, bilaterally symmetrical human being into ... a rotund and limbless body circling a gigantic, gauzy red star. In fact, by the simple feel, by the total aura projected into the seeds of his consciousness, Philip K. concluded that he was a tomato. A tomato of approximately the same dimensions and mass as the planet Mars.

One way to come up with good story ideas is to change one or more elements in a traditional theme, take a new look at it, and come up with a more satisfying response. Ontario’s Robert Sawyer has made a career out of that. His novel *Flashforward*, which was dramatized as a television series, lets its characters (due to the side effects of a scientific experiment) experience their personal futures.

Not to say that reader expectations must always be satisfied. Sometimes the joy of reading is in the disappointed expectation, or the story that arouses a

generic response only to show, usually with a more sophisticated development, that the generic response is a cliché and the more realistic response is superior.

That is the reason, for instance, that some writers evoke a fantasy response to a story that is going to resolve itself as science fiction, as in Robert Silverberg’s *Kingdoms of the Wall*, in which a quest through hidden dangers leads to a revelation, and a transformation into science fiction, at the top of the mountain. Or Michael Swanwick’s *The Iron Dragon’s Daughter*, which begins in a Dickensian workshop in a fantasy land and later reveals its science fiction aspect when it turns out that the young protagonist has been abducted from our reality.

And it may be the reason why the New Weird, as evidenced in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*, achieves its special effect by offering a mixture of fantasy and science fiction, or fantasy told with realistic details and backstory rather than relying on fantasy tropes. Sometimes an author can use the protocols for reading genres to achieve other effects that expand the genre or its capabilities.

Finally, a well-crafted beginning provides instructions for the reader, first identifying the genre, then establishing the mood and preparing the reader to laugh or weep, to hold his breath, or to feel his blood chilled. It anticipates the characters’ success in solving their problems or accomplishing their ends, or developing the will or ability to enable their decisive actions, or to dread their failure. (Unless it doesn’t, and the author decides to approximate the complexities and ambiguities of real life. I admire the writers who can get away with that. Sometimes it works. Often it doesn’t.)

The only thing a writer can always depend upon is craft. Craft doesn’t always enable the author to scale mountains; that depends on the author’s talent, inspiration and dedication. But craft is like the mountaineer’s tools and experience. They help when the going gets tough.

James Gunn

James Gunn is the author or editor of 42 books, including *The Science of Science-Fiction Writing* (Scarecrow Press, 2000), and was named the 2007 Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. He is a professor emeritus of English at the University of Kansas.