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Beginnings: 3 Examples (And Why They Work)

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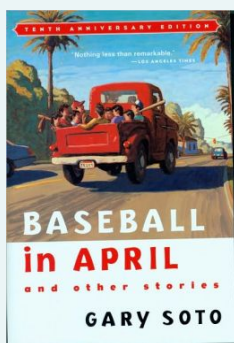
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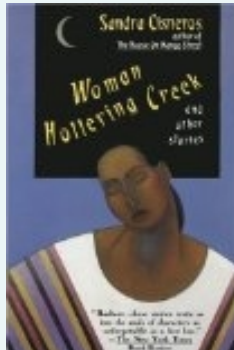
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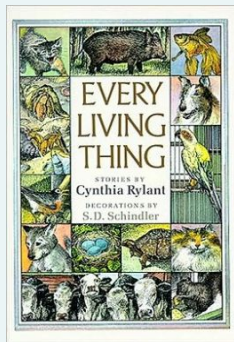
Touchstone Texts:



"The Marble Champ" by Gary Soto is a short story in the collection titled *Baseball in April and Other Stories*.



"Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros is a short story in the collection titled *Woman Hollering Creek*.



"Slower than the Rest" by Cynthia Rylant is a short story in the collection titled *Every Living Thing*.

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Julie has taught in classrooms and after-school programs in Boston, Chicago and Indianapolis, and is currently on the artist roster for Arts for Learning Indiana (formerly Young Audiences of Indiana) and the Indiana Repertory Theatre. She has presented at the annual Indiana State Reading Association conference and Pike Township's Literocity.

Beginnings: 3 Examples (and why they work)

by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence

After my post about "[Beginnings, Middles and Ends](#)" a few weeks ago, a teacher-friend reached out to me.

"When I tell students I want them to work on 'the beginning,' I don't mean all that rising action you mentioned," she said. "I am talking about much simpler stuff. I just want them to write an opening that draws readers in. I am talking about a hook."

I wouldn't call crafting a compelling opening *simple*, by any means, but I appreciate her point. Maybe you, too, want to focus on teaching students to write great opening lines. So how do we do that?

It probably won't surprise you to hear me say that in order to write compelling beginnings, we must first look closely at the beginnings of some excellent touchstone texts. Since my posts on beginnings, middles and ends have been focused on narrative writing, I've chosen three short realistic fiction stories: "The Marble Champ" by Gary Soto, "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros and "Slower than the Rest" by Cynthia Rylant.

"The Marble Champ" begins with a description of Lupe, the main character:

Lupe Medrano, a shy girl who spoke in whispers, was the school's spelling bee champion, winner of the reading contest at the public library three summers in a row, blue ribbon awardee in the science fair, the top student at her piano recital, and the playground grand champion in chess. She was a straight-A student and-not counting kindergarten, when she had been stung by a wasp-never missed one day of elementary school. She had received a small trophy for this honor and had been congratulated by the mayor.

Soto's words are like cinematic close-ups that open a movie. As I read, it is as if a camera is panning Lupe's dresser, revealing first the shiny spelling bee plaque, then three gold-starred certificates from the library, the blue ribbon,...the angle widening at last to reveal a framed photo of Lupe and the mayor. Soto opens with a description of Lupe, because the story is only remarkable because of *who* Lupe is--she's perfect.

In contrast, "Eleven" begins with the main character's reflection on birthdays:

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Cisneros doesn't open with strong images the way Soto does. This is much more ethereal, perhaps, leaving the reader to form images from his own imagination. Certainly, as I read it, my mind fills with memories of my own childhood birthdays. This is exactly as it should be. The main character in this story is nobody special (sorry, Rachel). She's *all* of us. We don't need an especially clear image of her, because we've all been in her shoes. What is perhaps most important in this opening is the child-like voice. It underscores the character's vulnerability, her powerlessness.

Let's look now at "Slower than the Rest." Rylant begins her story *in medias res*, or in the middle of the action:

Leo was the first one to spot the turtle, so he was the one who got to keep it. They had all been in the car, driving up Tyler Mountain to church, when Leo shouted, "There's a turtle!" and everyone's head jerked with the stop.

We know immediately that Leo is important, because he's the only character whose name is revealed, and the turtle is surely important since it brought a car to a complete stop on the way to church. In the paragraphs that follow, the similarities between Leo and the turtle are revealed, and evidence mounts to suggest that this turtle changed Leo's life.

So there we have three ways to start a story: (1) with a description of an important character, (2) with a reflection that reveals significant theme(s) in the story, and (3) in the middle of an event that turns out to be life altering.

But notice how I talked about these openings. It isn't simply *how* the author began that is important but *why* he or she began that way. In each case, the author made a conscious choice that established what was important in the story. The opening helps serve the meaning or overall message of the story. *Those stories can't possibly begin any other way and have the same meaning.* Seriously. Try rewriting one of them. I guarantee if you start "Eleven" with a detailed description of Rachel, it ends up a different story. If you start it in medias res, when the teacher declares the red sweater Rachel's, it doesn't feel as egregious.

When you teach "beginnings" in your classroom, don't let students believe that writers choose a strategy from a list of options--opening your story is not like selecting a salad from a lunch menu. It is much more intentional than that.

And remember that you can revisit this lesson in a non-fiction unit, too, studying the opening lines of touchstone texts, creating theories as to *why* the texts begin that way, then applying those theories to your own works-in-progress. Students will see that similar types of logic are applied when deciding how to begin a piece of writing, no matter what the genre is. This is deeper and more useful knowledge--applicable to a wide range of communication skills--than simply memorizing a list of strategies and choosing one at random.