**Writing Beginnings that Totally Hook the Reader**

**By Dan Walsh – 1 Hour Workshop**

Remember that Old Saying, “*You only have ONE CHANCE to make a great first impression*?”

* Well, that saying TOTALLY APPLIES in the **arena** of **writing**, **especially** writing **fiction**.
* **Whether** your **goal** is to **persuade** an **agent or editor** to take you on, or if **writing** as an **Indie**, to **convince** a **reader** to buy your **book**.
* **How Your Book Begins** makes **all the difference** in the World.

**Brief Introduction** –

* First, a little **About Myself** and my **Publishing Journey** -
  + **Married** to my wife Cindi for **46 years**. 2 grown children, both married, and 5 grandchildren (5th on the way). I’m 65 years old.
  + Back in HIGH SCHOOL, I **wanted** to **write novels** for a living, but **life** took me in a **different direction**. I became a pastor at 28 and wound up serving at the same church fulltime for next 25 years.
  + During the **last 2** of those 25 years (2008), I **began** **writing** novels (at my wife’s suggestion) in my spare time (mainly to **relax**).
  + After finishing that first novel, *The Unfinished Gift*, things **kinda TOOK OFF**.
    - Back then, Amazon/Kindle not in play, no such thing as “Indies.”
    - Able to **secure** an **A-list literary agent** in **New York**. She had a **contract** with a **major publisher** within 2 **months**.
    - The **Following** **Christmas**, it came out in Every Book Store.
    - It **did Very Well** in terms of Sales & Awards, leading to contracts for Books 2 and 3.
    - Those **novels did very well** also, so they began **urging me** to **write** **fulltime**, offered me a **multi-book contract**.
    - In 2010, I **retired** from pastoral **ministry** and began writing **novels** **full**-**time**.
  + BUT as I **finished** my last contracted book in 2014, I began to **notice** a **Major Shift** in publishing.
    - From **Readers** Buying **Books** in **Bookstores** to Buying them **Online**.
    - And **shifting** from **print** books to **Ebooks** (like Kindle).
  + This **Shift led me to NOT re-sign** with my publisher in 2015 and **go indie** **instead**.
  + So my last 14 novels are indie (published them on my own).
    - The **last 6-7 years** in the indie world, **things** have been **going** **very well** for me.
    - I am **making significantly more income** these past several years than **my best year** with my **publisher**.
    - And I **absolutely love the freedom** and **creative** **control** I have now, as well as the **freedom** to do some very **creative** **marketing** ideas (things my publisher would never consider).
* **Sharing** all this is **actually** **relevant** to my **Talk** to day about **Great** **Beginnings**.
  + I **applied EVERYTHING** I’ll be **sharing** **today** when writing my 1st Novel to my Most Recent one.
  + In fact, **both my agent** and **editors** told me the **reason** they **snapped** up that **first novel** right away was because, “*from the very first page they couldn’t stop reading*.”
* So, **that’s my story**. Now let’s **jump** into the **main reason** I’m **here** with you **today**.
* **Whether you** **plan** to publish the traditional way or **self-publish** (go indie) the principals I’ll be sharing today are the same whatever your goal.

**Proof that Great Beginnings Really Matter to Readers**

* A **few years** ago, I did a **Reader Survey**, asking this Question? “*What Matters Most to You When Reading a Novel*?”
  + I listed the **7 Components** of **Every** **Novel**.
  + The **#1** **Answer** (got the most votes) was: “**Characters** Readers Really Care About.”
  + Guess what **came in 2nd** as Most Important? “A **Great Beginning** that Totally Grabs The Reader.”
* **Think** about the **process** a **reader** goes **through** **before** **picking** out a **book** by an author they've never heard of (what YOU go through as a reader).
  + **What are the kind of things that matter at this point**?
    - Certainly, **the cover** matters, right?
    - The **back cover blurb**: the 1-paragraph summary, maybe a few of the endorsements (if online, some of the reviews).
    - If still interested, they might **Click on the “Look Inside**” button or bring it back to the coffee shop for a closer look.
  + **What happens next**? They're going to **read the first few pages**, maybe the **first chapter**.
  + If those first few pages **don’t grab them** and **suck them in**, the book goes **back on the shelf**. End of story.
* That’s **what happens** if you’re **already published**. But most here aren’t published yet.
* For those **hoping** for a **traditional publishing house**, the **readers** we need to **care most about at this stage** will be that **agent or editor** who looks at our submission.
  + Agents and editors will go right to those **first few pages**.
  + If they're **not written incredibly well**, all your hard work will go straight to the slush pile (rejection letters to follow).
* Top Literary agent Noah Luke, wrote a bestselling book for writers called, “**The First Five Pages: A Writer'S Guide To Staying Out of the Rejection Pile.”**
  + Here’s a Quote from a Review of the book:

Surprise: Agents and editors don't read manuscripts for fun; *they are looking for reasons to reject them*. Lukeman has arranged his book ‘in the order of what I look for when trying to dismiss a manuscript…"

* + **Why** is this so?
* **After completing** each of my 27 novels, I spent a **major amount of time** working on **Chapter 1**.
  + **Sometimes days**, just crafting the **1st paragraph**...even the **first few lines**.
  + As I said, that hard work paid off…**my 1st novel was picked up almost instantly by a top agent (contract in 2 months).**
* Here are some **Examples** of How **Some of My Books Begin**:
  + **The Unfinished Gift** (1st Book) –

When the black sedan stopped at the traffic light, Patrick rose quietly to his knees in the back seat and peaked out the side window. He flattened his palms against the glass, cold as ice, but he didn’t pull back. His eyes were drawn to a large picture window on a house at a nearby corner. Set deep within the night shadows, the window gave the appearance of a painting suspended in mid-air. Patrick would give anything to be a part of what he saw inside.

A plump Christmas tree glowed through the curtains. Two stockings dangled from a fireplace mantle. Flames shimmered against the glass ornaments on the tree. A real family, a whole family—mom and dad, two kids and a dog⎯sat in a semi-circle around a radio.

* **The Deepest Waters**

September, 1857

Yesterday, when it had become a certainty their ship would sink, Laura and John Foster held hands, as they had on their wedding day three weeks ago, and made a vow: when that moment finally came they would leap into the sea together and slip beneath the waves. One quick inhale of water. It wouldn’t be suicide. God had already determined it to be their last day on earth.

But that’s not what happened.

Laura was still here, alive and alone. By now, John had most certainly perished along with the rest.

* **The Homecoming (Sequel to Unfinished Gift)**

Sean looked down at the empty seat beside him, trying to imagine Elizabeth there. He tried to remember the smell of her hair, the sound of her voice, one of her smiles. It all seemed just out of reach.

She wasn’t there. She would never be there again.

He came here, in part, thinking some time alone might help. He was tired of pretending to be fine. It was exhausting. Pretending to see scenes out the window, pretending to read a book, pretending to listen. Elizabeth preoccupied his every waking moment. Sean had known a depth of love with her he’d never imagined possible, a love he was sure most men would never see, not in a lifetime….

The main reason he came back was to remember her, to reclaim moments of time, conversations they’d shared, places they’d visited. He wanted to see and feel all these things again. To do anything that helped him see and feel all these things again.

* **Remembering Dresden**

How was it that just being in a certain place could give you the creeps? Jack Turner never understood it.

He wasn’t superstitious. He was a rational, level-headed guy with a fairly disciplined mind. Nevertheless, he was on his way to check out a lakeside cabin after selling another perfectly good cabin on the same lake less than three miles away.

Just one reason.

The other cabin gave him the creeps.

They’d start the moment Jack would drive onto the property and intensify by degrees the closer he got to the front door. Once inside, the tension would become almost unbearable. Jack hadn’t even been there when the murder was committed.

* You **get the idea**…the **goal** is to **create** a **beginning** that “HOOKS” the reader in a strong way (not unlike **the way a fisherman sets the hook** once the fish bites his line).
  + SO, **important** **not** to **start** your book in a **wimpy way.**
  + And then, of course, **once** you **set the Hook**, you need to be able to **reel** the fish **all the way in**.

**The First 5 Pages – Practical Considerations**

* Must be completely error free – no misspellings, typos or grammar issues.
  + Read **craft books** (how-to books) on these things, make sure you **understand the basics**.
  + **Critique groups** and **test readers** are great to help spot these things.
  + An **agent or editor will stop reading** if they **spot** these kinds of **errors**, assuming you haven’t matured in your writing yet to be “ready for prime time.”
* Beware of overusing and abusing Adjectives and Adverbs (Beginners Snare).
  + This is **not the 1800’s**. Writing to today needs to be way tighter.
  + We may **need a few Adjectives**, but **just a few**. Let me read to you that same opening paragraph of my 1st Book with WAY TOO MANY adjectives and adverbs:

When the big black sedan stopped at the noisy traffic light, Patrick rose quietly on his knees in the back seat and peaked curiously out the side window. He carefully flattened his palms against the hard glass, which was as cold as ice, but he didn’t pull his hand back. His childish eyes were drawn to a large picture window on a small house at a nearby corner. Set deep within the night shadows, the house window almost gave the appearance of an old museum painting suspended in mid-air. Young Patrick would give anything he owned to be a part of what he saw inside.

* + Use **even less Adverbs** – those “**ly words**” (modify verbs). Use sparingly (meaning, almost never).
    - Examples?
      * He screamed loudly.
      * She laughed hilariously.
      * They walked quickly. (How about, They hurried).
    - The **rule of thumb** is: try **cutting it out**; if it still **works**, **leave** it **out**.
* Descriptions - We need to adopt a "less is more" outlook when ***describing*** *anything* in our book (settings, locations and people, etc.).
  + In **other generations**, it wasn’t uncommon to **read pages of description** about a chapter’s setting, and **several paragraphs** **describing** a new **character**.
  + That **worked back** when there were **no movies or TV shows** and **people** **hardly ever traveled** beyond their hometowns.
  + **Today’s readers** have grown up in a **video/visual atmosphere**. Not only do they *not* require all that detail, it **bores them to tears**, and they hate it.
  + My **favorite Writer’s Quote** is from NY Times bestselling author, the late Elmore Leonard:
    - **“In your writing, try to leave out the parts readers skip.”**
  + **How many** of you have read a book that is **way too descriptive** for you?
    - **What do you do** when you come across this kind of thing (the blah-blah-blah parts)?
    - What do you **think an agent or editor** would do?
* We need to help the reader to start **caring about our main characters right away**.
  + If you recall, THIS was the **#1 Thing** that **Mattered Most** to Readers (**Characters** they **care about**).
  + This crucial element **needs to surface** at the **very beginning** of our story.
  + **Give them a reason to care** about the characters **right off the bat**.
* Some **specific Tips** on This:
  + Create **scenes** with **Characters** they can **instantly** **sympathize** with.
  + Think about the **Examples** I read earlier:
    - The Unfinished Gift – A **lonely little boy** being driven **somewhere** at **night**, **stares** at a **scene** at a **nearby home**, **longing** deeply to be a **part** of what **he sees inside**. A family—a **whole family**—enjoying a **Christmas** **moment** together.
    - The Deepest Waters – A **young woman** **recalls** the **tragic** **moments** when she **last saw** her beloved **husband**, as the **sailing ship** taking them on their **honeymoon** **voyage** is **sinking** into the **sea**.
    - The Homecoming – A **grieving** **husband** is **driving** **back** to the place **where** he **met** the **love of his life**, where they **fell in love**, trying to **remember** and **reclaim** **moments** they’d shared together.
  + If you’re **writing a Suspense Novel**, **sympathy** **isn’t** the first thing on your list. You **create** a **scene** that immediately **starts** **building** the **suspense** for your **character**.
    - Remembering Dresden – We see our **main character** **leaving** a perfectly **good** **cabin** in **search** of **another**. Why? Every time he gets near it, it **gives him the creeps**. The **anxiety** becomes almost **unbearable**. Why? *He tells us…he wasn’t even their when the* ***murder*** *was* ***committed***.
* **More** I could **say** (have an entire workshop just on this), but I’ve **run out of time**.