



YOUR BOOK DONE RIGHT

Master Class

Mixing Setting, Plot and Character and First-Page Checklist/The Girl on the Train excerpts from writing blog by C.S. Lakin (editor of my book, *The Peace Maker*)

Openings to novels carry a heavy burden. It's the make-or-break page for the reader. Many people won't read past the first page if it fails to engage their interest. So writers need to pay huge attention to the first page—maybe not so much at the first-draft stage, but at some point before that novel is submitted to agents or published.

First pages need to be tight, with concise description, and jump right into dynamic action and hint of conflict. Every word counts, so excess verbiage and unimportant movement and speech must be eliminated.

We're using my [first-page checklist](#) to go through the author's first page to see why it effectively draws the reader quickly into the story. While novels don't have to have every one of these checklist elements on the first page, usually the more they do have, the stronger the opening.

Today we're going to look at my favorite read of last year—[The Girl on the Train](#) by Paula Hawkins. I was a bit wary upon reading the first few pages because, for me the opening was a little slow, but it quickly become riveting, and like a train barreling down a steep ravine, the novel kept me breathless and hooked until the last page.

It is one of those rare novels that fill my thoughts from waking till sleeping. I was intrigued by the characters and had to know what happened to them, and the story builds beautifully to the climax and ending and left me mulling over the story for weeks after I finished it.

"She's buried beneath a silver birch tree, down towards the old train tracks, her grave marked with a cairn. Not more than a little pile of stones, really. I didn't want to draw attention to her resting place, but I couldn't leave her without remembrance. She'll sleep peacefully there, no one to disturb her, no sounds but birdsong and the rumble of passing trains.

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One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl . . . Three for a girl. I'm stuck on three, I just can't get any further. My head is thick with sounds, my mouth thick with blood. Three for a girl. I can hear the magpies—they're laughing, mocking me, a raucous cackling. A tiding. Bad tidings. I can see them now, black against the sun. Not the birds, something else. Someone's coming. Someone is speaking to me. *Now look. Look what you made me do.*

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Rachel
Friday, July 5, 2013
Morning

There is a pile of clothing on the side of the train tracks. Light-blue cloth—a shirt, perhaps—jumbled up with something dirty white. It's probably rubbish, part of a load dumped into the scrubby little wood up the bank. It could have been left behind by the engineers who work this part of the track, they're here often enough. Or it could be something else. My mother used to tell me that I had an overactive imagination; Tom said that, too. I can't help it, I catch sight of these discarded scraps, a dirty T-shirt or a lonesome shoe, and all I can think of is the other shoe and the feet that fitted into them.

The train jolts and scrapes and screeches back into motion, the little pile of clothes disappears from view and we trundle on towards London, moving at a brisk jogger's pace. Someone in the seat behind me gives a sigh of helpless irritation; the 8:04 slow train from Ashbury to Euston can test the patience of the most seasoned commuter. The journey is supposed to take fifty-four minutes, but it rarely does; this section of the track is ancient, decrepit, beset with signaling problems and never-ending engineering works.

The train crawls along; it judders past warehouses and water towers, bridges and sheds, past modest Victorian houses, their backs turned squarely to the track.

My head leaning against the carriage window, I watch these houses roll past me like a tracking shot in a film. I see them as others do not; even their owners probably don't see them from this perspective. Twice a day, I am offered a view into other lives, just for a moment. There's something comforting about the sight of strangers safe at home.

Someone's phone is ringing, an incongruously joyful and upbeat song. They're slow to answer, it jingles on and on around me. I can feel my fellow commuters shift in

their seats, rustle their newspapers, tap at their computers. The train lurches and sways around the bend, slowing as it approaches a red signal. I try not to look up, I try to read the free newspaper I was handed on my way into the station, but the words blur in front of my eyes, nothing holds my interest. In my head I can still see that little pile of clothes lying at the edge of the track, abandoned.”

Why This Works

Let’s use the first-page checklist and see why this opening works.

1. *Opening Hook:* Clever writing and image that grabs the reader. First off, we have these two very short teaser sections that are packed full of mystery and implication. The reader doesn’t have a clue who is talking here. It’s not Rachel, because hers is the next, first full section that kicks off the novel. So we’re made to wonder—who is speaking here? Who has this person buried, and why is her mouth filled with blood? We quickly see she’s in danger and someone has hurt her (*Look what you made me do*).

From there, Rachel, the protagonist, draws the reader into her world and leaves us wondering about her. Imagery of the train, tracks, the little pile of clothes alongside the tracks, all make the reader question what’s going on. The title of this book is part of the hook. Upon hearing about it the first time, I found myself asking, What girl on the train? Why is she on a train? What’s she doing? I was drawn into Rachel’s world and had to find out who she was and what she was about.

2. *Introduction of main character in first few lines:* Written in first person (there are actually three first-person narrators in this novel), we’re first introduced to one unnamed character, and even in these short lines we get deep into her heart. She’s buried someone she cares much about, and then she’s reciting a rhyme (this scene will play near the end of the book in full, but is used here to entice and frame the story) that’s stuck in her head as she is (evidently) lying hurt and feeling mocked by magpies and believing they mean bad tidings for her (understatement). When we switch abruptly to Rachel, we meet a very different character, and the things she thinks about draw us in to wonder who she is, why she’s riding this train, and what’s going on with her.

3. *Starting the story in the middle of something that's happened (or happening):* The opening paragraphs before Rachel's section draws us immediately into something happening—or into something that's already happened. We know someone has died, probably a child, as a small pile of stones covers her. This sets the stage for the novel's mystery, which is not just about a murder. Then, when we switch to Rachel on the train, we sense more than a dull, morning commute.
4. *A nod to setting; avoid excessive exposition or narrative:* In the short teaser opening, we are brought to the train tracks, where we then switch to Rachel traveling past that spot while on the train. The setting where the unnamed character is hurt is tinted with violence and evil. The magpies laugh at her, and they're dark against the sky. Then, implying the character is so injured she can't think or see clearly, she realizes it's a person who is blocking out the sky, someone coming and speaking to her. The person who's hurt her.

The author paints a detailed picture of the slow, mundane commute, using the sounds of both the train and the passengers within the car. She shows the view through the protagonist's eyes. We sense it's a gray morning. Hawkins casts this gray mood through her descriptions of the industrial scenery—"warehouses and water towers, bridges, and sheds." Also, the gray mood is set by the mundane movements of the passengers as they "shift in their seats, rustle their newspapers, tap at their computers," and by the train itself as it "judders, lurches, jolts, and scrapes"—great use of language.

5. *A catalyst, inciting incident, or complication introduced for your character:* For Rachel, nothing yet has happened, but it will soon, as a result of the things she witnesses from the train. But with the opening paragraphs that reveal a death and the character attacked, we are shown two incidents, and we don't know whether they occurred close in time or not, or whether they are even related (we wonder if the burial mentioned incited the violence that follows, which is answered late in the novel).

Michele Chynoweth

Author/Speaker/Book Coach

Phone: 410-937-9801

Email: Michele@michelechynoweth.com

www.michelechynoweth.com

First-Page Checklist

- ___ Opening Hook: Clever writing and image that grabs the reader
- ___ Introduction of main character in first few lines
- ___ Starting the story in the middle of something that's happened (or happening)
- ___ A nod to setting; avoid excessive exposition or narrative
- ___ A catalyst, inciting incident, or complication introduced for your character
- ___ A hint at character's immediate intentions
- ___ A hint at character's hidden need, desire, goal, dream, fear
- ___ Unique voice/writing style
- ___ A tone set for the entire book
- ___ A glimpse at character's personal history, personality—shed light on motivation
- ___ Hint of character's initial plot goal
- ___ A course of action/decision implied: introduction of high stakes/dramatic tension
- ___ Good Pacing: jump right into present action. No backstory

Think of including:

- one characteristic to reveal that makes your character heroic and vulnerable
- one element of mystery, something hinted at that raises curiosity
- one element out of the ordinary that catches readers' attention
- concise, catchy dialogue (if in the first scene) that is not boring or predictable
- a way to hint at your theme, if you have one