Lesson 13 – Act One: The Hook

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Good morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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It's time to get started. Again. It's an old song, it's a sad song, but we sing it anyway: "One upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened."

Those three statements, to me, sum up the storytelling journey – both the journey of the storyteller and the story itself. The first is my own, the second is from the musical *Hadestown*, and the last is from John Yorke's *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Story*. Together, they encapsulate one of the great appeals – and greatest mysteries – of storytelling: that it's something human beings have been doing ever since we learned to speak, and yet it feels fresh and new every time we begin to tell a new story. Whether *it's an old song* or a new one, the first words of every story, written or read, connects it to a tradition going back hundreds of thousands of years. It is informed, influenced, and colored by all that came before, but it is a new verse in a never-ending melody, and we all can't help but listen in when we hear it.

As the second season of Homestead on the Corner begins, I thought it was high time to dust off my original pilot episode, rework it, and talk about beginnings. After all, we're starting a new chapter with this show, turning in a new direction as we sail into this strange and unknown world we suddenly find ourselves in. In the same way every story is not isolated but a new phrase in the eternal project of storytelling, this podcast is going to continue as it changes and evolves. A new cycle is beginning – and, in the words of Frank Herbert's Dune, **"A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct."**

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Let's get our definitions clear before we get started. When I talk about the beginning of a story, I'm referring to it in the sense of the "beginning, middle, and end" summary of three-act story structure. In other words, the first act of the story, from what Blake Snyder calls "the opening image" in *Save the Cat* to the first "plot point" – the first decision made by the protagonist that spins the narrative in a new direction. The fist act varies widely in length, structure, and narrative function, but there are some key things that it has to accomplish to

successfully set the story in motion. Today, we're mainly going to talk about ways to effectively open your narrative and get from the first page to the inciting incident in a way that engages and excites the audience for the story to come.

Now, when it comes to writing the very beginning a narrative, I've found that there are two main schools of thought. The first is the one most of us will be familiar with from high school English and any creative writing courses we've taken: the *in media res* approach. For those unfamiliar with the term, it's literally translated to "Into the middle of things," although it's more often defined as just beginning a story in the middle of some action already unfolding. This school of thought emphasizes the energy that an active opening can create, thrusting the reader or audience into a situation that immediately has stakes, conflict, tension, and drama. In Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* he recommends choosing the point when, quote: "at least one character has reached a turning point in their life." He calls this the "point of attack," and in playwriting, it is crucial to get the audience engaged. By initially holding back the setup and backstory of the conflict in motion, such beginnings, when done well, draw the audience into the narrative by making them want to understand the scene: who the players are, what the history is, and why it's happening.

The other school of thought tries to start at the earliest root cause of the story, flowing chronologically from first cause to final effect to ensure the reader or audience member has all the information they need to construct the story's full meaning. This is what I like to call "the prologue approach:" starting your story with an event that is not part of the central plot, but is often necessary to inform what comes next. Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* and Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* are very dissimilar in tone and story, but both feature prologues set in the past with only tenuous connections to the main plot. That because prologues largely serve to introduce central characters outside of conflict so the audience becomes familiar with their personality or central flaw. They also illuminate the backstory of a fictional world or a historical context, or else set up mysteries more complicated than an *in media res* opening could effectively communicate.

There's also a third approach that threads the line between these two, often called "a cold open" in film and a "teaser" in TV writing. Basically, it's is a prologue that begins *in media res* of a situation of high energy or tension, placed before the actual plot gets going. Usually, that main plot initially has a slower, more deliberate pace, and the writer wants to avoid boring their audience. The technique is a staple of the James Bond and Indiana Jones series, which often feature a standalone sequence with its own beginning, middle, and end at the start of the film. Sometimes it's directly connected to the main plot, such as in *Raiders of the Lost Arc* and *Goldeneye*, but most of the time, it's not. Nor do we expect it to be: it's just a flashy mini-movie that establish or remind us of why we like this character and this world. Pretty much every network TV show uses this technique as well, in order to keep the viewer from

changing the channel during the opening credits. It's highly effective at grabbing the audience's attention before you begin dumping exposition on them, but it can also feel like a cheat if the cold open is more interesting than the story itself, or if most of your first act is undramatized information about characters or setting.

All three of these techniques are solid approaches to writing your opening, though they all have inherent dangers. With a poorly constructed prologue or cold open, you risk your audience feeling cheated if you don't deliver the same kind of storytelling in the rest of the narrative. Starting *In Media Res* can lead to you losing an inattentive audience due to confusion, especially if vital information or setup is dispensed before they get their bearings. *In Media Res* is thus best suited to mediums where you know that 90% of your audience won't be multitasking while consuming the narrative. This includes books, short stories, theatrical films, video games, and live theatre. However, for TV shows and podcasts, audience members often have your stories running in the background while they work on something else. While you shouldn't coddle or handhold them too much because it risks insulting everyone actually paying attention, you do need to be a little less subtle in how you dispense story information. You have to find ways to make vital exposition memorable, usually by linking it to a specific dramatic moment that is clear and consciously engaging to the audience. The classic example of Chekhov's gun might work in a film if the gun is just shown in a close up, but in an audio drama, someone will have to comment on it in order to clue the audience in to its significance. It's even better if the owner of the weapon makes some interesting, memorable, or funny commentary about it. The audience will consciously remember the joke because it made them laugh, but the knowledge that "this person has a gun, and they'll probably use it" is now burned in their memory without them realizing. Thus, the prologue approach is often more useful in these mediums, as it clearly sets up and dramatizes narrative information in a memorable way if done well.

Whatever the case, the first moment of your story should have something that pulls people in – an intriguing or engaging element that's usually referred to as the hook. There are an infinite number of ways to hook a reader, listener, or viewer, and I can't get too deep into the weeds in this episode. In a genre piece, it might be as simple as a piece of imagery, music, or character work that immediately connects the story to others in the audience's mind. Sergio Leon's films often begin with wide shots of barren, desert landscapes, with a lone gunslinger riding across it. That imagery has such a fundamental link to the myth of the old west that, for those who enjoy the genre, those kinds of shots register immediate recognition, pleasure, and excitement, and so attachment to the genre carries the film until the plot begins. Other examples include the opening images of *Clue* and *Knives Out,* with their gothic atmosphere and mix of humor and horror, as well as the opening crawl of *Star Wars,* with its iconic score and starfield imagery now burned into the subconscious of 99% of filmgoers worldwide.

This technique is primarily used in film and TV, though visual, engaging passages of descriptive prose can evoke the same kinds of responses. *It was a dark and stormy night* is a cliché for a reason – though one that is often mocked. Try to avoid writing in a way that draws attention to the prose, but instead let the reader's imagination fill in the details. In essence, this is what I did with several story episodes last season: using soundscapes and vague sensory details to paint a picture of the setting, mood, and genre in the listener's mind.

Keep this kind of opening subtle and simple, but clear, no matter what the medium. This will help *pull* your reader into the story you're telling. In the book *Craft TV Writing*, Alex Epstein points out the difference between storytelling that *pulls* readers in versus storytelling that *pushes* story at them. Quote: "*Pushing* is giving the audience more story than they can absorb – **You *pull* them in by giving them reasons to want more story than you've given them so far.**"

Whatever you use for your hook, it should be something that *pulls* your reader in. Has anyone ever tried pushing something along with a hook? No. Obviously, that's not what they're made for. **Mystery, uncertainty, beauty, fear, excitement, tension, conflict – all of these pull us into stories, engaging us on an emotional and instinctive level.** Stories can't just stay on that level the whole time, of course – otherwise they run the risk of becoming emotionally exploitative. But they have to engage their audience first and foremost on what Blake Snyder calls a "primal" level – something that quote, "a caveman could understand." If a story doesn't engage us at a gut level, it's lost us from page one.

On the other hand, dumping exposition, historical details, and biographical facts is pushing story at the audience before they have a reason to care. High Fantasy and Sci-Fi run this risk more often than most other genres put together. Sorry to pick on *Snowpiercer*'s opening again, but we still don't need an explanation of how the apocalypse started as the first thing we see on screen. Since we don't know the story world or anyone in it yet, we don't have much reason to care about how it ended. The opening text pushes exposition at us, rather than pulling us in – though it could have been much worse. The Weinstein Company apparently wanted to bolt opening and closing monologues onto the already finished film, which, in my opinion, is one of the fastest ways to ruin a good movie (see the original cut of Blade Runner).

Lord of the Rings, on the other hand, gets away with this by slowly drawing us into the narrative as it delivers exposition, using a carefully crafted prologue that drips with tone, mystery, tension, and suspense. When I first watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* in high school, that opening sequence was definitely my favorite part of the film. How did the filmmakers and screenwriters deliver that much exposition without losing the audience?

First off, it definitely helped that the design of the story world allowed the characters in the historical prologue to still be alive and active in the main plot. It also helps that the scenes shown were all fundamentally connected to the central narrative spine – to defeat the influence of the one ring and destroy it in the fires of Mount Doom – by providing a glimpse of how the quest could fail. It also reinforced the themes of the narrative: the cyclical pattern of history and the unchanging flaws of human (or hobbit) nature. And, most importantly, **it pulled the audience in with skillful storytelling and a strong dramatic structure**. There's a hook for the hook – Galadriel's mysterious, otherworldly voice drifting out the darkness, proclaiming that: "The world has changed. Much that once was is lost… for none now live who remember it." Immediately, our minds are filled with questions: who's talking? What's changed? What was forgotten? Then, in the next few shots, we see Galadriel; an ancient, mythical world of elves, dwarves, and dark lords; the one ring being forged; and "the last alliance of elves and men." There's an inciting incident: Sauron's deception and conquest of Middle Earth. There are escalating stakes in the rising action: first the threat of Sauron's army, then the seemingly unstoppable dark lord himself, and then finally, a hopeless moment as the king dies and the army is all-but routed. Then a crisis, climax, and reversal: Isildur turns and cuts the ring off Sauron's hand, defeating him. Falling action: Isildur takes the ring, and we follow it as it passes from one person to the next until it finally comes to rest with Bilbo Baggins, who is totally unaware of the bloody history he's now a part of. The prologue complete, the story quickly transitions to our protagonist, Frodo, and the real story starts in the quiet, peaceful Shire. Even so, we're sitting up in our seat all through the Hobbiton scenes, just waiting for the moment the ring's true nature is revealed and the darkness we just saw returns. In other words, we are *hooked*.

The book begins in a different way, as well it should: that kind of wide, sweeping prologue only really worked because of the unique capacity of filmmaking to compactify time and information through visual storytelling. If Tolkien had tried to accomplish the same kind of prologue in his novel, it would've resulted in the appendixes being put at the front of the first book, long before we had any reason to care about the family history of the Sackville-Bagginses. In narrative openings or prologues, it's almost always better to stick to the most essential and interesting details of the characters and setting, then let the backstory be filled in as the reader's investment grows. In the first few chapter of *Les Misérables*, we don't see Jean Valjean in prison like we do in the film version: we first meet bishop Myriel and learn his moral character, then see Valjean being thrown out and verbally abused by pretty much everyone in the village because of his convict status. When the two characters collide, the dramatic question is raised simply by the contrast between them. Will Valjean be changed by this kind, generous man? The answer, as in all good storytelling, is yes – but not in the way you expect.

How you pull people in varies from medium to medium, and from story to story. The one thing you always have to do is engage your target audience at their level, rather than forcing them to get on yours from the outset. Once you do, you can take them on a journey wherever they see fit, but if they're not hooked, every piece of dialogue, exposition, and plot will be pushed at an audience that doesn't want it yet. A disinterested or distanced audience won't make for an enjoyable storytelling experience for anyone.

This is one of the reasons I think so many people disliked *The Last Jedi*. I know I'm poking the hornet's nest a little bit by talking about it (even if it has been three years since it was released), but when Luke Skywalker chucks his lightsaber over his shoulder without any explanation beforehand, it comes off as a cheap attempt at shock-value. If it had been a different character, the moment might have landed and been a great way to establish their personality – but based on everything we knew about Luke Skywalker from the original trilogy and the way he was portrayed in *The Force Awakens* (albeit briefly), we were primed to expect a sage (if somewhat disillusioned) old wizard and mentor, rather than a bitter, cranky old man. It was a perfectly acceptable direction for Luke's arc to take on paper, and subversions of expectation are a great tool for writers to challenge our preconceived notions – but at that point, we hadn't been sufficiently pulled into the narrative to earn that moment. Throwing the entire audience for a loop in the first moments of the story immediately makes some audience members disengage, get confused, and fall out of the story before it really begins. This is especially a danger in a series with such strong expectations and emotions associated with it. If the film lost you at that point, then everything afterwards feels like the story is being pushed at you – your emotional investment has been removed, and you're just along for the ride.

While on the subject, a common problem that sequels tend to have in their first acts is exemplified by this narrative move in *TLJ*. It's clear that the writers were banking on audience buy-in to carry over from the original story without establishing or reminding us of why we are invested in these characters. *Terminator 2*, often held up as one of the best movie sequels of all time, handles this problem very elegantly by having all of the characters undergo major change between films. By carefully tuning the story world, playing on our expectations, and creating buy-in before the big subversion arrives, James Cameron and co-writer William Wisher effectively got to reintroduce us to characters who are the same, but different, and thus pull the audience into a story that felt just as fresh as the original.

Another requirement for an effective beginning is knowing the ending. If your story is going to arc – to show the transformation of a character or a world from one state to another – then you need to demonstrate what Lajos Egri refers to as "the thesis." In most other books on writing, it is referred to as "the ordinary world," a term derived from the Joseph Campbell monomyth structure of journey plots. **In essence, you need to**

establish your starting point: the solid ground that your story and characters begin on before the plot begins to shake it to its core. It's Tatooine, the Shire, or Jean Valjean's selfish and fearful view of life. It's Lera Lynn, happily married to Ada but holding on to an unrealistic expectation of the world, or Captain Aster's inability to square her ethical duty with personal loyalty.

Your thesis – which will be confronted throughout act two by your antithesis – needs to have its day in the sun before it gets raked through the mud. We need to see the characters' needs, both psychological and moral. We need to know what the characters think of their ordinary world: do they want to stay there, safe but ultimately unfulfilled, or would they like nothing more than to change, but can't? By clearly showing the problem with the protagonist's life and the reason they haven't changed before now, you make the arc of the story more apparent and compelling to the reader. I think we can all relate to being stuck in some place, situation, or personal rut that feels inescapable – that's just human nature. Story gives us the chance to see it resolved over the course of a physical or personal odyssey, whether that's leaving the planet with an old wizard or just being faced with a situation that defies your view of reality – the antithesis of your ordinary world.

We'll get into antithesis in later episode about second act structure and character design. But for now, know that by clearly arguing for your thesis in the first act, you make the other acts of your story much stronger – especially your last. And by knowing your ending before you start, you can foreshadow the resolution of your story, building layers of irony and contrast between how your characters start off and where they will end. This will not only add to the reader's enjoyment to your narrative, but subconsciously cue the audience in and prime them for the major story turns later on. In other words, **it will help you earn your twists and subversions, and make them feel natural to the plot.**

Much of the work of storytelling has to be done up front to make the storyline unfolding naturally from page one. There are few things more irritating than an unearned ending or an out of nowhere plot twist that takes you out of the story for the sake of shock value or narrative convenience. On the flip side, there are few things quite so satisfying as an ending that leaves you stunned but satisfied or a twist that was well foreshadowed by the rest of the narrative; a moment that perfectly fulfills the internal logic of the story in an unexpected way. And a large part of making sure those elements work is making sure they're set up from page one. For example, in *Siren's Gold*, the plot twist of Anne Bonny's fate was hinted at through the creepy nighttime atmosphere of the opening, the offhanded mentions of ghouls and ghosts by Andrews, and, most of all, by captain Barnet's insistence that Anne Bonny is dead – which pays off in spades at the third act turn, when he clarifies his meaning and reveals the fate of the *Morgan* to Eli Barrett. As I knew the plot twist would seem cheap without proper foreshadowing, I had to be absolutely sure I set it up to feel both surprising and inevitable to the audience. And the time to prepare readers for those moments is right

up top, when offering tantalizing mysteries and clues will pull them in and directly engage their attention.

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But what about your main character? Should they be on page one, kicking off their plotline right away? Not necessarily. As mentioned in some of the examples above, the prologue and cold open approaches sometimes tell a different side-story that establishes the world, stakes, or threat without featuring the protagonist at all. Or perhaps they do feature the protagonist, but in a different subplot – the Indiana Jones approach. How does this work? How do you keep your main character off the screen or page for the first part of your story without losing narrative focus? Or how do you introduce the protagonist's world in an interesting way without kicking off the threat of the main antagonist?

These types of openings are more common than you might think, and there are as many answers to that question as there are stories in this style. If you do decide to start with a prologue or cold open that doesn't feature the protagonist or the central plot, try to figure out why you're doing so and what you're trying to accomplish. The solution will probably be found in your answer to those questions. If you want to establish your hero's personality and skill set before they're confronted with an enemy too powerful to overcome, then a short, standalone sequence before the main story begins makes sense. If you want to have the main villain appear in the first scene and establish a sense of menace, you probably can't have your untested protagonist confront them just yet. In that case, an opening scene or sequence showing your villain in action will function in much the same way as the first case: see *Jaws* and *The Dark Knight*. **Just make sure that those sequences are interesting enough to hold the audience's attention while you lay the groundwork for the A-plot.** Set up tension, stakes, goals, and conflict within these sub-plots to draw your audience in, and then deliver on it when the main plot finally begins. Then – with the balances correct – you've set a solid foundation for your story to spring from.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's act one elucidation was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker and Jesse Haugen.

Speaking of beginnings, our new fiction show, "The Sheridan Tapes" begins Friday, April 24th. Keep an eye on this feed for updates, follow us on Instagram and Twitter @trevor_VW for more info, and check out Patreon.com/homesteadcorner if you want to support our little production team.

Next episode, we'll be talking about the next step in a strong first act: the inciting incident, or "the thing that makes the story go," in less pretentious terms. Starting this season, we'll be releasing new teaching

episodes every Wednesday at 2pm Pacific Standard Time, so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.