

Openings in Contemporary Fiction – Questions, Challenges and Surprises

Stephen Dillely takes a look at the openings of four books on the 2016 Man Booker Prize shortlist to see how they work, and reflects on how these examples tie in with new trends in contemporary narrative writing. The best openings of novels do more than just introduce plot, character and setting: they allow the writer to tell us something about the kind of novel we are about to read, and the role which they expect us to play as readers. Small details matter in these first sentences. By interrogating the openings of four of the novels from this year's Man Booker Prize shortlist, we can see how writers today set out to challenge and surprise their readers, and how the role of the reader is changing in fiction today.

Paul Beatty – The Sellout

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.

Beatty's satire on American race relations is immediately provocative; as enlightened liberal readers, we may feel a sense of affront at the first-person narrator's initial assumptions about our prejudices (‘This may be hard to believe’) but the following list of perceived misdemeanours reveals a lighter touch, the use of minor sentences and repeated ‘Never’ giving it the flavour and force of a spoken voice. This paragraph is full of unexpected juxtapositions as the speaker moves seamlessly between trivial and serious offences. As with all satire, we may laugh at the exaggeration, whilst recognising the angry truth behind it in the context of continuing police shootings, inequality and discrimination. This list reaches its climax as he describes ‘board[ing] a crowded bus or subway car’: given the racial context, we are likely to recall Rosa Parks’ anti-segregation protest and may feel that we know what is coming next. His subsequent volte-face as he introduces his ‘gigantic penis’ is therefore doubly surprising: it should make us laugh at its outrageous irreverence (and the implication that even this

might be seen as normal behaviour for a black man), but also warns us that this novel will have no respect for any taboos surrounding racism and is therefore not for the easily shocked. The 'perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look' seems to encapsulate the mixture of absurdity, pathos and anger that will run throughout the novel.

In the final sentence, the comparison between the 'thickly padded chair' and 'this country' is particularly telling: here, Beatty is giving us a sense of the novel's scope and ambition – this is a novel not just one man but about a whole nation – but also that he will not be afraid of exposing uncomfortable truths behind 'comfortable' façades.

Deborah Levy – Hot Milk

2015. Almeria. Southern Spain. August.

Today I dropped my laptop on the concrete floor of a bar built on the beach. It was tucked under my arm and slid out of its black rubber sheath (designed like an envelope), landing screen side down. The digital page is now shattered but at least it still works. My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else.

So what I am saying is that if it's broken, so am I.

The words '2015' and 'Today' immediately anchor this novel in the present: this is a novel of now, for now, about now and it's another first-person narrative. Some readers may feel that the speaker's reaction to her broken screen lacks perspective, but most of us will recognise her feeling that 'my laptop has all my life on it, and knows more about me than anyone else'.

But there is more going on here than just a comment on today's digital world. A sense of fracturing is central to Levy's opening: the full stops in the chapter title immediately create a jolting, fragmented effect which lacks the fluency we might expect of a diary entry. This is compounded by the violence of the first sentence, emphasised through the hard 'concrete floor'. We don't need to draw the parallel between the laptop's shattered screen and the speaker's feelings of brokenness because Levy does this for us. The observation we might make instead is that symbols of this kind will be important to how the novel communicates with us. Note, for instance, the sexual connotations of the 'rubber sheath' which is then compared to an 'envelope', associating the laptop with both sexuality and communication and suggesting that both might be slippery and difficult to grasp. As readers, we are being told to be alert to resonances like this throughout the novel, and to be ready to make these connections ourselves. We are also being told explicitly that what we're hearing is an account – 'So what I am saying is' – which draws attention to the telling in a way that many contemporary fictions like to do.

Otessa Moshfegh – Eileen

I looked like a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus, reading some clothbound book from the library about plants or geography, perhaps wearing a net over my light brown hair. You might take me for a nursing student or a typist, note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip. I looked like nothing special. It's easy for me to imagine this girl, a strange, young and mousy

version of me, carrying an anonymous leather purse or eating from a small package of peanuts, rolling each one between her gloved fingers, sucking in her cheeks, staring anxiously out the window.

Here again, we have a first-person narrator, and, like Beatty, Moshfegh immediately explores the assumptions we might form about her speaker ('a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus', you might take me for'). The message is clear: appearances will be significant in this novel but might be deceptive too. The reader is explicitly instructed to 'note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip' – all familiar signifiers of anxiety – but because we can only see the speaker from the outside at this stage, we are left guessing at its causes.

But then, unlike Beatty and Levy, Moshfegh pivots quite unexpectedly to give a different view: 'it's easy for me to imagine this girl.' Here, Moshfegh establishes a gulf between the speaker then and now, and we realise that the first sentence's past tense ('I looked like') refers back much further than we had initially realised. As she continues to describe this 'strange, young and mousy version of me', we realise that the speaker has now changed into a completely different person. She subsequently tells us that 'I was not myself back then. I was someone else. I was Eileen.' The questions that will fuel our interest concern the idea of identity: how and why has she changed, and what did it mean for her to be 'not myself'?

Graeme Macrae Burnet – His Bloody Project

Preface

I am writing this at the behest of my advocate, Mr Andrew Sinclair, who since my incarceration here in Inverness has treated me with a degree of civility I in no way deserve. My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed. It is thus for no other reason than to repay my advocate's kindness towards me that I commit these words to paper.

So begins the memoir of Roderick Macrae, a 17-year-old crofter, indicted on the charge of three brutal murders carried out in his native village of Culduie in Ross-shire on the morning of the 10th of August 1869.

This prologue gives us two voices – the beginning of a first-person historical testimony and a commentary on this. Roderick Macrae's memoir immediately raises plenty of questions – the speaker's situation, the 'deeds' he has committed, the reasons for his current emotional state – and therefore, its interruption partly serves to pique our interest by withholding answers. But it also changes how we respond to what we have just read. The fact that these words have become the subject of scrutiny within the text invites us to read them critically too: we should not just accept Roderick's words at face value.

Macrae Burnet also uses this device to establish an illusion of historical veracity: the novel comprises a series of 'found' 19th-century documents, and the inclusion of a modern-day commentary adds authenticity, inviting us to suspend disbelief and imagine that the fictional events we are about to

encounter might actually be true. To add further weight, the author has playfully given his protagonist the same surname as himself, claiming this as a work of family history and thereby further blurring those boundaries between fact and fiction.

What's Revealed About Contemporary Fiction

So what, if anything, can these openings tell us about contemporary fiction? To a greater or lesser extent, they are all postmodern novels which reject the idea that they might contain any inherent objective truth or meaning. They are also concerned as much with how their stories are told as with the stories themselves, and all share a degree of self-consciousness in their openings, whether this is through explicit reference to the act of writing in His Bloody Project ('I am writing this at the behest of my advocate [...] that I commit these words to paper') or of speaking in Hot Milk ('So what I am saying is'), or through the willingness to address us as readers directly and subvert what we might 'expect' in Eileen and The Sellout. In all of these novels, the process of telling is fraught with great unreliability and fragility, and we should therefore anticipate as much drama to stem from the relation of events as we will find within the events themselves.

Linked to this is the role which we can expect to play as readers – we are not being treated simply as vessels expected to receive each novel's contents passively and uncritically, but are instead invited to become active participants, bringing our own experiences, beliefs and prejudices with us into each text and allowing these to be exposed and challenged by what we read. The direct involvement of the reader is a device as old as the novel itself, but what distinguishes these novels as particularly contemporary is that we are not simply being asked to decode meanings, but to create them. As this year's winner, Paul Beatty, said,

I definitely don't have a message.

Any messages that we wish to take from these novels we will have to construct ourselves, and we are invited to begin that process of constructing meanings from the novels' very first pages.

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