INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE ENGLISH: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE 11
SUMMER ASSIGNMENT 2024

Mrs. Bjorson
Pueblo West High School English Department

Hello!

Congratulations on your decision to take IB English. Right now, you may feel a little overwhelmed and are probably wondering what you have gotten yourself into. I want you to know it is okay to feel that way. I promise that if you stick it out, you will be so glad that you did. IB English dives deep into texts and explores how they connect not only to ourselves but the world. During the first year, we focus on both non-literary and literary texts. This next year we will read:

- *I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai
- *1984* by George Orwell
- *Diary of a Murderer* by Young-Ha Kim
- *A World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy
- A study of Ad Council Campaigns
- A study of political cartoons by Patrick Chappatte

To prepare for your upcoming year, I ask that you complete the attached readings and assignment. We will use the information in these chapters for the entire year, so it is important that you complete the task to the best of your ability.

Attached is the reading I would like you to complete over the summer. Read the Preface and Chapter 1: Pickup Lines and Open(ings) Seductions or Why Novels Have First Pages from *How to Read Novels Like a Professor* by Thomas C Foster (2008). Please have this assignment complete on the first day of class. There will be a digital drop box or you may print it off and do by hand, whichever you prefer.

If you have questions over the summer, please email me and I will get back to you as soon as I can. I am looking forward to meeting all of you. Have a wonderful summer!

Sincerely:

Mrs. Deidre Bjorson
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Complete the following: You may do it on the computer or by hand, whichever you prefer.

1) Summarize the preface. What was the biggest takeaway? Explain your reasoning. Write in complete sentences.

Foster claims we will learn 18 things from the first page of every novel that you read. I have provided you with the first page of two novels. Read them and fill in the chart below, using Chapter 1 for reference.

	The Day my World Changed	One
Style:		
Tone:		
Mood:		
Diction:		
Point of View:		
Narrative Presence:		
Narrative Attitude:		
Time Frame:		
Time Management:		
Place:		
Motif:		
Theme:		
Irony:		
Rhythm:		

Pace:		
Expectations:		
Character:		
Instructions on how to read the novel:		

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Preface

Novel Possibilities, or All Animals Aren't Pigs?

When Huck and Jim are floating south on their raft, where are we? How is it that we can identify with a being as monstrous, literally, as John Gardner's Grendel? Have you ever been Lucy Honeychurch? Leopold Bloom? Humbert Humbert? Tom Jones? Bridget Jones? The novels we read allow us to encounter possible persons, versions of ourselves that we would never see, never permit ourselves to become, in places we can never go and might not care to, while assuring that we get to return home again. At the same time, the novel holds out its own possibilities, narrative miracles, and tricks that are rewards in themselves, seductions for unsuspecting and even canny readers.

Much of the continuing appeal of the novel lies in its collaborative nature; readers invest themselves in the characters' stories, becoming actively involved in the creation of meaning. At the same time, they are rewarded by pleasures that are more intimate than the essentially vicarious genres of drama and film. That give-and-take between creator and audience starts in the first line, runs through the last word, and causes the novel to stay in our minds long after we close the cover.

And it is a real give-and-take. The novel begs to be read from its opening words, tells us how it would like to be read, suggests things we might look for. We readers decide whether we'll go with the program, even whether we'll read the book or not. We decide whether we agree with the author about what's important, we bring our understanding and imagination to bear on characters and events, we involve ourselves not merely in the story but in all aspects of the novel, we collude in the creation of meaning. And we carry the book with us and keep it alive, sometimes centuries after the author himself is dead. Active and engaged reading is critical to the life of the novel and rewarding and fulfilling in the life of the reader.

In 1967, the novel was in a bad way, or so it seemed. Two seminal essays by writers with distressingly similar names appeared in American publications, fortelling doom and gloom. The French critic and philosopher Roland Barthes published an essay called "The Death of the Author" in the journal *Aspen*. In that essay, Barthes places the whole responsibility for the construction of meaning and significance, that is to say the interpretive enterprise, on the reader, the writer (whom he prefers to call a "scriptor") being little more than a conduit through which the accumulated culture pours its *texts*. Barthes is being more than a little impish in denying the author the quasi-divine *author*ity he was accorded in earlier understandings of literary creation. But what he is chiefly supporting is the role of active and creative reading, something about which we will have occasion to discuss throughout the book. Perhaps more alarmingly, the American novelist John Barth published "The Literature of Exhaustion" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in which he seemed to many readers to suggest that the novel was on its deathbed. What he in fact argued was that the novel as we had known it was pretty largely played out, the "exhaustion" of the essay's title referring to

exhausted possibilities. Fiction, he suggested, was going to have to find something new to do in order to reinvigorate itself. There was a lot of talk of the "death" of old ways in 1967, a lot of emphasis on newness, its signature event being the accumulation of outrageous humanity around the intersection of Haight and Ashbury streets in San Francisco.

What Barth seemed not to know (although with him, a lot of seeming is disingenuous) was that help was on the way. That same year, a novel was being published by a writer in Colombia and another was being composed by a writer in England, and they would offer ways forward from the apparent impasse. The English novelist John Fowles was composing *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, possibly the first major commercial novel to seriously address changes in the landscape of fictional theory. At the beginning of Chapter 13, he says of his faux-historical novel that it cannot be a conventional Victorian novel despite its outward appearance as such because "I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes." Instead, the novel teases readers with Victorian characters and settings even as it reminds them that it is a fictional, twentieth-century work that is merely employing Victorian conventions for its own ends. The literary gamesmanship did not harm sales; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was the best-selling novel in America in 1969. The Colombian novel was, of course, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which would appear in English three years later. The solution it offered was not one of metafictional play but of the wild eruption of the fabulous amidst the commonplace, what would become known as "magic realism." These works and writers changed everything, so much so that Barth returned to *The Atlantic* in 1979 with an essay called "The Literature of Replenishment," in which he admitted things had changed more in a dozen years than

he could have foreseen and that maybe, just maybe, this novel thing did have a future. He cites García Márquez and Italo Calvino in particular as reinvigorating the form. So what does it mean to say that they "changed everything"? Did everyone begin copying what they did? No, even they didn't copy what they did. There is only one *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and even García Márquez can't write a second one. But those novels showed possibilities in the form that had not been tried in quite the same way before, things a writer might do with fiction that would be sufficiently new and interesting to keep readers hanging around.

I believe, moreover, that the essays and the novels in question show something else: the history of the genre. The novel is always dying, always running out of steam, and always being renewed, reinvented. We might say, following the philosopher Heraclitus, one cannot step in the same novel twice. To stay put is to stagnate. Even those novelists we value for their sameness—Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Ernest Hemingway—are constantly changing and growing. They move, if only slightly, from one novel to the next; they set themselves new challenges. Those who stand pat soon seem stale, flat, and unprofitable. As it is with individual writers, so it is with the form itself. The movement is neither inevitably forward nor backward; "progress" in matters literary is chiefly an illusion. But movement there is and movement there must be. In a genre called "novel," readers have some right to expect novelty. That's only fair, isn't it?

A FRIEND OF MINE, a colleague in another discipline, noted the very slight change between the previous book's title and this one and asked, "So how are novels different from literature?" It's an excellent question, one that the literature priesthood would never think to ask

but that lay people will come up with right off. I was reminded of the old syllogism, "All pigs are animals, but not all animals are pigs." We can say roughly the same thing in literary terms by substituting "novels" for "pigs" and "literature" for "animals." Are all novels literature? We could get some disagreement here from inside and outside the academy. A sizable percentage of literary people want to maintain walls around their little corner of heaven, although rarely do they concur on whom to wall in or wall out. Would Jonathan Franzen, for instance, object to being lumped in with Jackie Collins? Nor am I suggesting that the quality of all writing is the same. There are significant differences in quality between novels, as between poems, stories, plays, movies, songs, and dirty limericks. I would, however, suggest that they all belong to the same field of human endeavor, and we can call that field "literature." Drawing distinctions comes later. For me, there is writing (in which I would include oral forms of entertainment and instruction, since when they reach me, they're generally written down), and writing comes in two forms, good and bad. Okay, sometimes execrable, which could be a third category but which I think we can fold into "bad" writing more generally. All right then, so all novels are literature. All literature, on the other hand, is not novels. We have lyric poetry, epic poetry, verse drama, verse romance, short story, drama, and whatever those things are that Woody Allen and David Sedaris are wont to publish in *The New Yorker*. Among others. That only leaves one question.

Are novels pigs?

There are many elements common to all forms of literature, many sorts of signification we can see whether the writing in question is a poem, play, or novel—pattern making, imagery, figurative language, use of detail, invention, it's a long list. There are also, however, elements that are specific to each genre. Our discussion in this

book is concerned with the specific formal elements of one genre, the novel. I know, I know, those structural components, things like chapters—point of view, style, voice, beginnings and endings, and characterization—seem dull as ditchwater. They're the groaners in English class, right? *Oh, no, not flat and round characters again.* But they don't have to be that. Because they're also the portals to meaning, the doors and windows where possibilities establish themselves. In choosing this opening and not another, the writer has closed off some options but opened up several others. A method of revealing characters both limits and determines what sorts of characters can be revealed. The way the story is told, in other words, is as important as the story being told.

And how readers will respond. I can't go as far as Barthes in killing off the author, but I'm with him on the importance of the reader. We are the ones, after all, who exist long after the author (the real, physical being) is in the grave, choosing to read the book, deciding if it still has meaning, deciding what it means for us, feeling sympathy or contempt or amusement for its people and their problems. Take just the opening paragraph. If, having read that, we decide the book isn't worth our time, then the book ceases to exist in any meaningful fashion. Someone else may cause it to live again another day in another reading, but for now, it's as dead as Jacob Marley. Who's as dead as a doornail. Did you have any idea you held so much power? But with great power comes great responsibility. If we readers are going to hold the life and death of novels in our hands, we should probably find out more about them.

How to Read Novels Like a Professor



have a hard time recognizing it with all the sex and profanity, all the bedroom shenanigans that never appeared in (or maybe occurred to) George Eliot or Howells. The late twentieth century even produced some great Victorian novelists of its own, perhaps most notably that magnificent Canadian, Robertson Davies. Davies, who didn't start publishing novels until his late thirties, produced three and two-thirds trilogies before his death at age eighty-two. His novels would fit uncomfortably into the 1870s or 1880s because of his greater frankness, but in terms of form and sensibility, he's one of Them. In *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985) he even asks the question, what is an artist born out of his right time supposed to do? The answer, in this as in the rest of his novels, is to produce the art he was born to make. Literary history and fashion are artificial constructs, and a Victorian should be a Victorian, whatever his era. And he was.

Which brings us, by a commodius vicus of recirculation, back to our point. Every age has experimentalists and traditionalists. Form breakers and form followers. You can call them radicals and reactionaries if you like, but their aesthetic stances don't inevitably follow their political views. Some ages tend one way and some another, but within them there are always writers out of step with their own time. There are rebels and rebels against rebellion. That's why every literary history is a lie, including this one. They're overly simplistic, failing to capture the vast complexity of men and women doing their own thing in their historical moment, whether that thing comports with those of other writers or not. Mere reporting can't capture all the facets and all the nuances of the fiction of a given year, much less of all the years, in the dizzying multiplicity of what James called the "house of fiction." Who can possibly keep up? Your head, it simply swirls.

1

Pickup Lines and Open(ing) Seductions, or Why Novels Have First Pages

Ever watch people in bookstores? They pull a book from a shelf, read the cover, then the back cover, then the benefits page (that little number with all the blurbs on it, if it's a paperback), and then . . . what? You know this one. Hardly anyone I've ever noticed has leapt into the middle of Chapter 23, so that first page had better deliver the goods. Otherwise, the book goes back on the shelf. You can't read 'em all.

We need first pages—and so do novelists. Right from the top, a novel begins working its magic on readers. Perhaps more remarkably, readers also begin working their magic on the novel. The beginning of a novel is, variously, a social contract negotiation, an invitation to a dance, a list of rules of the game, and a fairly complex seduction. I know, I know—seduction? Seems extreme, doesn't it?

But that's what's going on at the beginning of a novel. We're being asked to commit a lot of time and energy to an enterprise with very little in the way of guarantee of what's in it for us. That's where the seduction comes in. And it wants to tell us what it thinks is im-

portant, so much so that it can't wait to get started. Perhaps more importantly, it wants us to get involved. When it's over, we may feel wooed, adored, appreciated, or abused, but it will have been an affair to remember. The opening of a novel is an invitation to come inside and play. The first page, in this context, is not so much a guarantee as a promissory note: "Hey," it says, "I've got something good here. You'll like it. You can trust me. Give me a whirl." And that's why the very first line is so important. Try a few of these on for size.

- "What's it going to be, then?"
- "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."
- "This is the saddest story I ever heard."
- "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."
- "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife."
- "At an age when most young Scotsmen were lifting skirts, plowing furrows and spreading seed, Mungo Park was displaying his bare buttocks to al-haj' Ali Ibu Fatoudi, Emir of Ludamar."

Now how can you not want to read those novels? They pique the interest. What flowers? Why saddest? And for heaven's sake, who is Mungo Park and what's with the bare buttocks? Those were the first words many of us ever read from a writer who then called himself T. Coraghessan Boyle but has since mercifully shortened the middle name to its initial consonant, in a novel called *Water Music*. The book proved to be just as wild as the opening promised, full of outrageous events, exuberant language, astonishing surprises, and

zany humor. Boyle's subsequent novels and stories have shown equal panache in the matter of first pages.

Is the first page the whole novel? Of course not. I once asked in class what group had the best hooks in rock music. The response, not from a burly guy but from a surprisingly demure-looking woman, was AC/DC. Works for me. Now, that doesn't make the lads from down under the best rock group ever, any more than writing the best hooks since Chuck Berry makes Angus Young another Mozart. But his hooks sure are catchy. So are Boyle's. And hooks get novels started. Get readers started. Offer insights into coming attractions. Make us want to read and begin teaching us how to read it.

Say what? We can even make a general proposition here, the Law of Getting Started: The opening is the first lesson in how to read the novel. We have to learn to read every new novel, so the novel must be a series of lessons on how to read this one. Unconvinced? Think about it. Is a Spenser mystery by Robert B. Parker anything like *The Sound and the Fury*? Aside from both having lots of words and justified right margins? But the big things—narrative style, method of character presentation, revelation of consciousness, dialogue, plot? You can make a lot of claims for old Bill Faulkner, but compelling plotting and zingy dialogue aren't among them. Now you might think this means Faulkner is hard to read and any knucklehead can read Parker, but it's not so simple. Parker gives Spenser a certain mind-set that we have to learn, a certain rhythm to his narration, friends and associates who take some getting used to. Lots more people may enjoy reading him than Faulkner, but there's still a learning process we go through when we open his book. The other difference between what's often called genre or category fiction and the "literary sort" is the amount of change from one novel to the next. Parker's lessons carry over pretty well from book to book, so

if you've read *Looking for Rachel Wallace* you can manage *A Catskill Eagle* pretty well. Faulkner, on the other hand, rarely does quite the same thing twice, so while some strategies we learn reading *The Sound and the Fury* will help if we open *Light in August* or *Absalom, Absalom!*, each new book will present new and different challenges. And we'll notice the changes on the first page. That's where the new lesson begins.

Take, for instance, that first sentence from Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the one about the colonel, the firing squad, and the ice. Almost everything we need to know about reading this novel is present in this first sentence. It establishes the main family of the novel and the turbulent times in which they live, as evidenced by the firing squad. It emphasizes the importance of marvels, not in the ice but in the verb "discover," which suggests how miraculous this substance must have been to the child in, as we shortly discover, a pre-electrified equatorial Colombia. We know what sort of voice is telling the story, how it manages information, what sorts of words it chooses—and plenty more follows in the next two paragraphs. And it's not just fabulous novels by South American Nobel laureates that accomplish this sort of feat. Robert Parker mysteries, Anita Shreve domestic dramas, Dan Brown thrillers, and this month's Harlequin romances, as well as classics by Hardy, Hawthorne, and Hemingway, do the same thing: tell us how to go about reading them. They can't help it, really. Whatever a novel tells us first is information—about who, what, where, when, how, why. About intent. About irony. About what the writer is up to this time.

That first page, sometimes the first paragraph, even the first sentence, can give you everything you need to know to read the novel. How? By conveying some or all of the eighteen things the first page

can tell you. First pages convey information without half trying, but they're always trying.

Yeah, but . . . *eighteen?* I mean, five or six, or even seven, but eighteen? Conservatively. There are probably many other things we can glean from a first page, but here are eighteen beauties.

1. **Style.** Short or long sentences? Simple or complex? Rushed or leisurely? How many modifiers—adjectives and adverbs and such? The first page of any Hemingway novel will impress us with short declarative sentences and a strong sense that the writer was badly frightened in infancy by words ending in "ly." Any first page by an American detective novelist—John D. or Ross Macdonald, say, or Raymond Chandler or Mickey Spillane or even Linda Barnes—will convince us that the writer has read Hemingway. In Spillane's case, with no great comprehension.
2. **Tone.** Every book has a tone. Is it elegiac, or matter-of-fact, or ironic? That opening from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife," is a tonal masterpiece. It distances the speaker from the source of the "truth" while giving her permission to trot out an ironic statement about wives running through husbands' fortunes and wealthy men being more desirable than poor ones. "In want of" cuts two ways at least.
3. **Mood.** Similar to tone but not quite the same. The previous item is about how the voice sounds; this one is about how it feels about what it's telling. However we describe the tone of *The Great Gatsby*, the mood of the narration, in Nick Carraway's person, is one of regret, guilt, and even anger, all

of which sneak in between his overly reasonable-sounding statements about mulling over advice from his father and the disparities of privilege. So what is it, we wonder at once, that he's not quite saying here?

4. **Diction.** What kinds of words does the novel use? Are they common or rare? Friendly or challenging? Are the sentences whole or fractured, and if the latter, on purpose or accidentally? Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*—which begins with the deceptively simple query, "What's it going to be, then?"—has the most remarkable diction of any novel I know. His narrator, the barely educated young thug Alex, speaks with an Elizabethan elaboration worthy of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. His insults are colorful and baffling to his adversaries, his descriptions and praise effusive, his curses wonders of invention, and his language shot through with a made-up teen slang, Nadsat, based largely on Slavic words. And we get the first inklings of his linguistic temperament in the novel's opening passages. This is merely the extreme example; every novel has its own diction, and every word chosen details it further.
5. **Point of view.** The first issue isn't *who* is telling the story in terms of identity. Indeed, for most of the novels we'll ever read, there is no "who" in that sense. But who relative to the story and its characters—that we can learn straight off. Is this a "he/she" story or an "I" story? When "I" shows up we expect to meet a character, major or minor, and we immediately have our suspicions aroused. That discussion, however, can wait. If the narrative employs "he" and "she" for persons in the story, with no "I" in sight, we can be fairly safe in assuming this is a more distant, third-person narration. If the narration employs "you," all bets are off and we head for shelter. Happily, second-person narrations are rare, but they are, like Italo Calvino's experimental *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and Tom Robbins's *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas*, very likely to be strange experiences. We can get fooled in all this; as with all literary rules, this one exists to be broken. Sometimes a character-narrator will hide culpability behind a mock third-person viewpoint, or an outside narrator will employ "I" as a narrative gambit. Even with such tricky business, though, we sometimes get hints in the first paragraphs.
6. **Narrative presence.** Now we can speak of that other who. Is this voice disembodied or possessed by a personage, inside or outside the story? Is it a servant talking about her masters, a victim talking about his persecutors, a perpetrator speaking of his victims? They often give us hints right away. With first-person narrators, the "presence" is pretty clear. Hemingway's Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*) and Fredric Henry (*A Farewell to Arms*) make themselves known right away; their personality imprints itself on the text from sentence one. But what about third-person narrators? In the eighteenth century, narrators were often full of personality, genial companions who, like ourselves (so went the conceit), were men and women of the world, who understood what people were like, who were amused by the foibles of their neighbors. We see such poses in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In the following era, Charles Dickens's storytelling presence insinuates his way into *Our Mutual Friend* in the first five words, "In these times of ours," announcing that the narrator will be a very

involved participant in the tale, a passionate observer and commentator. By the time we get to the twentieth century, that third-person narrator is often impersonal, detached, cool, as in Hemingway or Anita Brookner. Compare that Dickens opening to this one you probably read at school: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." This voice is more aloof, less likely to get in there and mix it up emotionally than his Victorian counterpart.

7. **Narrative attitude** toward characters and events. How does the narrator feel about the people and action in the novel? Austen's narrators are generally amused, slightly aloof, a little superior. Dickens's tend to be earnest, involved, direct (if third-person); naïve, earnest, fond (if first-person). Flaubert's narrator in *Madame Bovary* is famously cool and impersonal, largely in reaction to the overheated involvement of narrators in the previous romantic era. In rejecting the extant cliché, Flaubert created the narrative cliché that would predominate for much of the next century.
8. **Time frame.** When is all this happening? Contemporaneously or a long time ago? How can we tell? Does the novel cover a lot of time or a little? In what part of the narrator's life, if she's a character? That "many years later" of the García Márquez opening is magical. It says, first of all, that this novel will cover a great deal of time, enough for a small child holding his father's hand to rise to power and fall from it. But it also says something else magical: "once upon a time." This is a kind of fairy tale, it says, about an exotic place and time, neither of which exists anymore (nowhere can be that backward, he hints), that were special in their own time. Any novelist who isn't jealous about those three words alone isn't very serious about craft.
9. **Time management.** Will time go fast or slow in this novel? Is it being told in or near the now of the story or long after? Nicholson Baker's little gem, *The Mezzanine* takes place—all of it—during the time it takes its narrator to ride an escalator from the first floor to the aforementioned destination. In order to pull off that stunt, the writer must elongate time to the extreme, relying on flashbacks and digressions, and that strategy shows up right away, as it must.
10. **Place.** Okay, setting, but also more than mere setting. Place is a sense of things, a mode of thought, a way of seeing. Take that T. C. Boyle opening I quote above. In the second paragraph, we learn that Mungo Park, a Scotsman, is an explorer looking for the Niger River who has taken a serious wrong turn. Place here is both locale and story. This—the tent, the continent, the country—is where he is, to be sure. But this is also where he's an outsider, the leading edge of nascent imperial intentions, and a blunderer who keeps finding himself in variations of his current humiliating situation. In that sense, place, the immediate place, becomes motif: time after time we will see Mungo blunder into disastrous situations through total ignorance of the nature, culture, and geography—in other words, of place. Which leads us to . . .
11. **Motif.** Stuff that happens again and again. Sorry about the technical jargon, but that's what it is. Motif can be image, action, language pattern, anything that happens again and again. Like Mungo and his recurrent disasters based on cultural arrogance. Like miracles and the colonel's narrow

escapes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like the flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

12. **Theme.** Stop groaning—there won't be a test. Theme is the bane of all tenth-grade English students, but it's also about, well, aboutness. Story is what gets a novel going and what we focus on, but theme is one of the things that makes it worthwhile. Theme is, roughly speaking, the idea content of the novel. Sometimes that content is simple: most mysteries share the theme that crime will be found out, that no one gets away with it, that order will prevail. Often, it's more subtle than that. Agatha Christie often has a secondary theme concerning the decadence of the aristocracy. Ever notice with her how many bad eggs there are in manor houses? Or how inept, corrupt, or stupid they are? Think that's accidental? Sometimes theme overlaps with motif, as those recurrences serve to reinforce a key idea. One of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s main ideas, the presence of the past, shows up on the first page, as Clarissa's plunge into the beautiful June day in 1923 launches her back to a similar day when she was eighteen. Throughout the novel, those old days keep showing up in the form of memories and persons, and it all starts right away.

13. **Irony.** Or not—some novels are in dead earnest. The entire nineteenth century springs to mind. Okay, maybe not Mark Twain. Oh, and Gustave Flaubert. But you know what I mean. Others are ironic on any number of levels—verbal, dramatic, comic, situational—and often that shows up right away. This is one of Parker's Spenser novels, *A Catskill Eagle*, getting rolling: "It was midnight and I was just getting home from detecting. I had followed an embezzler around on a warm day in early summer trying to observe him spending his ill-gotten gain. The best I'd been able to do was catch him eating a veal cutlet in a sub shop in Danvers Square across from the Security National Bank. It wasn't much, but it was as close as you could get to sin in Danvers." Now Spenser is utterly earnest about what he does when he's doing it; he never expresses doubt or irony while shooting someone, for instance, but he's plenty ironic when he talks about it. He knows that his chosen trade, "professional thug" as he calls it in another book, is morally dubious. And that awareness makes its way into the books in phrases like "getting home from detecting." He may, moreover, want to distance his "real" or "private" self from the actions of his professional self: "I'm the sensitive lover and excellent cook who likes wine with dinner and not merely the hired tough guy who threatens and shoots people," he seems to say with this strategy. And he also knows full well that you can find plenty of sin in Danvers or any other sleepy burg; that's just frustration talking. Throughout the novel, then, he'll veer between hard-charging action—lots of bodies fall in this one—and ironic, distanced commentary.

14. **Rhythm.** Of one sort. There are two levels of rhythm in a novel: prose and narrative. Narrative rhythm will take a while to establish, but the prose starts showing up at once. Better, it often suggests how the larger narrative's rhythm will work. Rhythm is related to diction, which we discussed earlier, but with this difference: diction has to do with the words a writer uses, rhythm with how they're deployed in sentences. In practice, they're largely inseparable, as prose rhythm depends a good deal on the words chosen while

also coloring how those words sound. Everything in narrative is related to everything else on some level. Does the writer blurt out information or withhold it? State it directly or bury it inside a tangle of clauses? Cause words to tumble over one another or meander along? Here's the beginning of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible.*

Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened.

First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like skeletons, clutched in copulation, secreting their precious eggs onto dripping leaves. Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The breathing of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch.

How's that for rhythm? It's calm, measured, almost leisurely, yet every detail is a warning or a peril. Why "conscience" rather than the more neutral "awareness" or "delicate" to describe the poisonous frogs? That's masterful—tranquil danger. You are free to like or dislike me, the novel says, but at least you know what you're getting yourself into.

15. **Pace.** How fast do we go? Consider this opening, from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady.*

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon.

This is not going to be a hundred-yard dash. Everything about the passage says "leisurely"—the long, abstract words, the embedded "some people never do," the sense that this should be no more rushed than the event, if you can call it that, that it describes. Know what? Get used to it. James is never frantic, never in a hurry. The things he values in narrative, like psychological insight and interior drama, just can't be rushed.

16. **Expectations.** Of the writer, of the reader. Wait—of the *reader*? Yep, I know what you're thinking: he's lost his mind. But your expectations are there on page one. This is the most interactive space on the first page, or any other. The writer gets to announce his expectations. Does the novelist expect, like George Eliot, someone with time and patience, or like Thomas Pynchon, someone hip and savvy who's unafraid of the wacky and unconventional, or like Wodehouse, a relaxed, jaunty companion? How hard does the novel expect us to work? How much information should we bring to the novel? What sort of attitude is the ideal reader supposed to have? That's all well and good, but this is one place where we get a say. Do we want to read that novel? Do we approve of the word choice? Are we that hip? More? What do we want the novel to do? The first page is the beginning of

a negotiation, or collaboration, between writer and reader. The writer brings a great deal to the process, but so do we. The reader's expectations—this is what I want from a novel today—matter as much as the writer's—this is what I need from a reader. Page one is where we have our first meeting of the minds. And where we find out if there will be a page two.

17. **Character.** Not always on page one, but more often than not. And more often than not, the main character. "Protagonist" comes from the Greek for "first agent," and trotting out your star attraction first works in twenty-first-century novels just as well as it did in fifth-century BCE plays. Naturally, in first-person narratives, we meet someone very like a character right away, as with Huck Finn or Mike Hammer or Humbert Humbert, even if we don't know his name or how he features in the tale. But he's there. And so he or she is in many third-person novels. Mrs. Dalloway is mentioned in the first two words of her novel. James Joyce begins *Ulysses* with "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan"—not the main character but his nemesis. And of course, Aureliano Buendía is one of the leading characters of his family's hundred-year saga. The bottom line: people are helpful to start a novel.

18. **Instructions on how to read the novel.** All of these previously mentioned elements go into teaching us how the novel *wants* to be read. Whether we read it that way or not is, naturally, our call. But every novel wants to be read in a certain way. Try this opening on for size.

As I sat in the bath-tub, soaping a meditative foot and singing, if I remember correctly, "Pale Hands I Loved Beside the Shalimar," it would be deceiving my public to say that I was feeling boomps-a-daisy. The evening that lay before me promised to be one of those sticky evenings, no good to man or beast. My Aunt Dahlia, writing from her country residence, Brinkley Court down in Worcestershire, had asked me as a personal favor to take some acquaintances of hers out to dinner, a couple of the name of Trotter.

Well, "Aunt Dahlia" pretty much gives the game away as a Bertie Wooster, but for anyone who has ever read a P. G. Wodehouse Wooster-and-Jeeves story before, it was already game over. Only one narrator I've ever come across is capable of having a "meditative foot," only one character capable of singing something as insipid as a song with that title must needs be, and reporting it proudly, in a digression. "Boomps-a-daisy," moreover, has Bertie Wooster written all over it, as does the "no good to man or beast" characterization of the evening. For those new to Wodehouse, it merely promises good, clean, comic fun, but it's a masterpiece of reader indoctrination. The paragraph is chock-full of information—about character, narrative attitudes, style, diction (he favors the goofier sorts of Edwardian slang), improbable turns of phrase, feelings about his aunt, class and social set, as well as musical taste. Nearly everything one needs to know to read this novel, which is *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, is present in the first paragraph except the character's name and the all-important Jeeves, but even he can be deduced. A character this vapid will surely need a handler. And the most important thing we learn? This won't be Dostoevsky. That's always a relief. All that from one paragraph.

Whew! It's worth noting that we won't get all of those features in every first page, but most of them will show up, and even a mere dozen will stand as a pretty fair assemblage of information. That's a lot of work for a single page to handle. Is it the whole novel? Of course not. Otherwise, we wouldn't need the other hundred thousand words. And in any case, all of those elements are only beginning to be articulated in a first paragraph. There's plenty more to be accomplished, but for that, we'll have to turn the page.

2

You Can't Breathe Where the Air Is Clear

Quick, what do these have in common: Middle-earth, Macondo, West Egg, Yoknapatawpha County, San Narcisso, and Narnia? They're places you (and I) have never lived, and never will. They're not fit for human habitation. And no matter how scrupulously detailed or sumptuously furnished, they can't be our towns and cities and farms. Not Joyce's Dublin nor Farrell's Chicago nor Roddy Doyle's Barrytown nor Carlos Fuentes's Mexico City (since I've abused his title here). Don't get me wrong—I like them. They're great places for fiction to take us; often they are quite similar to the real deal, occasionally even better. They are, however, not the real deal.

One thing I insist on with my students is that we understand the essential artifice of the novel. It is a made-up work about made-up people in a made-up place. All of which is very real. We are asked to believe in and treat as potentially real a space that is manifestly imaginary. Headaches are guaranteed.

Consider this, on June 16, 1954, five men undertook a lugubri-

Prologue

The Day My World Changed

I come from a country that was created at midnight. When I almost died it was just after midday.

One year ago I left my home for school and never returned. I was shot by a Taliban bullet and was flown out of Pakistan unconscious. Some people say I will never return home, but I believe firmly in my heart that I will. To be torn from the country that you love is not something to wish on anyone.

Now, every morning when I open my eyes, I long to see my old room full of my things, my clothes all over the floor, and my school prizes on the shelves. Instead I am in a country which is five hours behind my beloved homeland Pakistan and my home in the Swat Valley. But my country is centuries behind this one. Here there is any convenience you can imagine. Water running from every tap, hot or cold as you wish; lights at the flick of a switch, day and night, no need for oil lamps; ovens to cook on that don't need anyone to go and fetch gas cylinders from the bazaar. Here everything is so modern one can even find food ready cooked in packets.

When I stand in front of my window and look out, I see tall

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as "agitated," even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I *am* boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying "calm." I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it.

Anyway, I'm not making any big claims for myself. I know