

## GREAT BEGINNINGS

The last thing Maxwell Hamilton had planned to do on his wedding night was make love to his wife.

Yes, a great beginning. And in my opinion, very descriptive of the tone and overall theme of the story to follow. That's what this article is about. How to open your book with a first line, or a great beginning, that will grab readers and make them want to read more. The conflict of a story needs to be introduced as quickly as possible. Well, I'd say Nikki Bejamen did that in *BABY DAZE*, a Silhouette Special Edition, which is why I used her first line as an opener to this article.

*BABY DAZE* is about a CEO of a multi-national company. Max feels he needs a wife. He was so devastated by the loss of his first wife and child, however, that he thinks a marriage in name only would be best. Using his head, rather than his heart, he approaches his company's vp of marketing. For reasons of her own, she agrees to his "proposal." By their wedding night, he has decided he would like to have sex with his wife. She has fallen in love with him and believes he's had a change of heart because he loves her, too. The next morning, scared to death because he realizes he could love her, Max wants to go back to their original agreement.

And then the fun begins.

I explained this story because I wanted to show just how indicative that first line really is. A reader would have a good idea right from the start whether or not this is a story that would appeal to her. I know it appealed to me.

I asked authors to provide me with their favorite first lines to use as further examples. Being a person who needs to see to learn, rather than just hear, I thought this might help others as well to have in front of them real examples of first lines or beginnings that are truly remarkable. I'd like to share a few of these great beginnings with you.

From St. Martin's Press, in the novella *ROCKY ROAD*, from the *Chocolate Kisses* anthology: Of all the blasted luck! Josh Travis couldn't believe his eyes. Now he had no choice but to cut the damned thing off!

Do you wonder what happened; what the bad luck is all about? What exactly, Travis will be snipping? And can you feel that this story will have amusing overtones? If so, then the writer has certainly accomplished her goal.

If only they wouldn't keep falling in love with me, from *CHRISTMAS ANGEL*, by Jo Beverly. I don't know about you, but I'm already curious about the guileless person contemplating such a problem. And I already like her!

There are some men who enter a woman's life and screw it up forever. Janet Evanovich, *ONE FOR THE MONEY*. In this example, Evanovich has shown, in one small sentence, part of the

heroine's inner-most thoughts, a portion of her background, and her present state of mind. She's also left us wondering if the heroine still has feelings for this man, and if that can be part of the conflict. It certainly will play in with the theme.

Here's an opening that is so rich in texture, so beautifully visual, that I had to share it. Summer, that vicious green bitch, flexed her sweaty muscles and flattened Innocence, Mississippi. Nora Roberts, *CARNAL INNOCENCE*. We have place established, time of year, tone -- which is very sensual -- and a perfect visual image to tempt us to read on. The setting in a book is just as important as the characters. It should be a part of the story, and with that one incredible line, Ms. Roberts managed to make the setting a vital part of her book.

Of all the lines turned in, the next one is my favorite. I haven't read the book myself, but being a Linda Howard fan, and adoring those naughty Alpha males, I know I'll be hunting for it. Saxon Malone didn't look at her as he said, "This won't work. You can be either my secretary or my mistress, but you can't be both. Choose." From the *TO MOTHER WITH LOVE* collection. Wow! Doesn't the conflict explode in just that small bit of dialogue? Already, we know the type of man Saxon is, and I'd say setting is somewhat established since he's giving her the option of being a secretary. We know we must be in an office atmosphere and I, personally, could see the clash of wills begin.

I hope these examples have given you some ideas of how important the beginning to a story is. From the very first line, the tone of the book should be established. Never should you lead the reader to believe the story will be lighthearted, and then leap into melodrama, or vice versa. You shouldn't start out sweet, then turn sexy hot. But tone isn't the only thing that should be set up in the first paragraph, or as early as you can accomplish it.

The level of sensuality should be developed from the introduction of the first character. A reader should never get beyond the first page without having some indication of time, place, conflict and who the two main protagonists are. As you introduce your characters and develop their motivations for the reader, be sure to do it in a way that shows the conflict, the setting and the theme.

I'm not going to get into rules here, because personally, I hate the idea of hard and fast rules. They're destructive to a writer's creativity and often don't apply except in a very general sense.

But I will say that however you open your book, be original, and keep the reader hooked. If you start with tons of exposition and description of surrounding scenery, with no relevance to the actual opening conflict between the hero/heroine, you may not get a reader beyond the first page. You need to tie them in, to get the readers so caught up in the questions, the who, what, when, where, that she'll not be able to put that book down.

In the same light, if you open with dialogue without first giving the reader some clue as to who is speaking and to whom, confusion will overtake interest. It won't matter how intriguing the dialogue might be. Without characterization, it could become meaningless.

Characterization can and should be established, for the beginning, with just a few choice words, as the examples showed. How something is said, and in what setting, is a good way to pinpoint the character. Also, a character's reaction to any given situation can lend insight into the story's conflict.

As a closing, I'd like to offer you a good hands-on way to practice getting the perfect first line for your book. It's not easy, but then writing something that an entire audience will enjoy never is.

Take your first page and condense it into a paragraph. Then take that paragraph and condense it into a single line. Does it make sense? Can you get a good grasp of the situation about

to unfold in your story? Do you feel the tone of the story? Do you see a hint of the conflict and the possible motivations?

You'd be surprised at how much info you can convey, and how much more punch that first line will give, when you manage to whittle down pages of info into the most essential points of your story. I'm not saying you should use the line you end up with. Only you can know if that line is the perfect prose you need to open your book. But it should give you a better grasp of how to create a truly memorable, great beginning.