

Opening Your Story with Power
From PPW's March 6, 2010 Workshop
Presenters: MacFarlane, Majors & Williams
Article by Bonnie M. Hagan

Anticipating a stellar workshop, the PPW members buzzed around the hotel meeting room sipping the nectar of coffee and nibbling on croissants. I nudged my laptop awake and leaned back, ready to be bored.

Story openings. Done that. I'd read books about openings. Worked with my critique group on openings. Gone to conference and listened to other people read their openings, and of course, I'd read my own, too. I chewed a muffin and waited for the old familiar words I'd heard a thousand times.

When will I ever learn? Within minutes of the PPW Spring Workshop starting, I was bent over my keyboard feverishly trying to get every tip, trick, note, and lesson into a Word document. This stuff was gold.

Michelle Majors, Annie MacFarlane, and Lana Williams taught this light speed course with an effortless ease that was more dance than lecture, one instructor stepping in just as another stepped back.

Michelle started off with a word about circadian rhythms. Your peak creative time is likely the eight (or fewer) hours diametrically opposite the hours you spend sleeping. Annie spoke about *The Writer's Journey* by Chris Vogler which started her thinking about story structure and tracking her own journey. Lana discussed the necessity of having an immediate hook, and from there the trio launched into an activity designed to reveal your character's true self. This was the meatiest work on characterization I'd done in a long time. All thirty-eight participants began exploring their character's desire, tragic flaw, protective belief, fear, false front, need, and finally, true self. Each of these traits dovetails into the next and creates the core of your character as well as a development path for growth. This exercise surpassed many other characterization techniques I've heard which inevitably begin with the disappointing, "Describe how your character looks physically."

Not everything at the workshop was new to me. Some of the solid rocks of writing were also brought up, such as knowing your backstory and communicating it, not by information dump, but by carefully layering it throughout the opening chapters. The instructors talked about setting up your log line and beginning your story with the inciting incident. All of which are tips I'd picked up long ago, but what was impressive was that Lana, Michelle, and Annie didn't dwell on these classic nuggets but instead touched on them as essential points and kept the workshop trucking right along to deeper and more fascinating tools.

After a break, we started working on those crucial first 120 words. This segment took the workshop over the top. I never realized the "opening" could be viewed not as a chapter

or a few pages or even the first page, but the first couple paragraphs – 120 words to be exact. Lana, Michelle, and Annie gave examples of openings from fantastic novels that were unforgettable, and through this process I realized that I'd only just begun to get the right elements, the right words, and the right polish into my manuscript openings.

This workshop introduced the concept that an opening has to do a much bigger job than simply start with an exciting piece of action. The opening must build reader empathy. This can be accomplished by making the reader become the hero on a psychological level. Our instructors presented us with a list of devices for introducing the hero, stating that a strong opening uses at least two of these devices. They include: creating sympathy for the hero, putting the hero in jeopardy, making the hero likable, making the reader laugh, making the hero powerful, and giving the hero strong ethics and honor.

For the closing segment, many participants shared the first 120 words of their manuscripts and solicited feedback from Michelle, Annie, and Lana. It amazed me how much story can be conveyed in such a small number of words. Do you doubt that an opening can really convey so much and hook a reader that quickly? Go back and read the first 120 words of this article. It was constructed from the very principles I learned at the workshop, and hey, if you're still reading, then the hook worked.

Sidebar:

Every character has a:

surface desire

tragic flaw

protective belief

deep fear

false front

ultimate need

true self

Originally appeared in The Pikes Peak Writer, Volume IX, Issue 3, May 2010.