

My Gangbuster First Paragraph

Two days ago I talked to four groups of fourth graders at an elementary school. They were surprisingly well informed about writing and fiction (hats off to their teachers!). I asked them if it was a story if I described a walk through the woods and described the trees and undergrowth and animals. They said no, so I asked what it would take to make a story. They answered “rising action,” a problem, etc., but the thing they most consistently said was, “A hook.”

I’ve always been a believer in “hooking” the reader from the first sentence. I’m admittedly a pantsner, having always thought outlines were for all those research papers I did in graduate school. So if I can get that first line done, be it a blog, book review, short story, or novel, I’m usually on my way.

I’ve written one really gangbuster opening in my long career. *The Perfect Coed* opens with this short paragraph:

Susan Hogan drove around Oak Grove, Texas, for two days before she realized there was a dead body in the trunk of her car. And it was another three days before she knew that someone was trying to kill her.

Reviewers praised it: “Few mysteries open with a single paragraph of eye-popping intrigue, but *The Perfect Coed* is full of such moments and its introduction is apt warning that readers will rapidly become involved in something far from mundane or predictable” (D. Donovan, ebook reviewer, Midwest Book Reviews) or “Starting with one of the best opening paragraphs in recent memory, *The Perfect Coed* takes off, and doesn’t let up through the course of the book” (Andrew MacRae, *Suspense Magazine*).

Those comments indicate that the first lines did what we all want them to do—they set the tone for the book. But they weren’t easy to come by. I worked on this book off and on for a good ten years, the first mystery I attempted and long before I

was published as a mystery author. An agent, in whom I had little faith, shopped it around, getting comments like, “We have a similar book” or “I already have an academic novel on the list” or the dreaded, “I like it, but I didn’t love it.” I abandoned the agent and kept editing, rewriting, polishing.

I wish I had saved earlier openings, but I didn’t. I do remember that in one iteration it began with central figure Susan Hogan walking across the campus of Oak Grove University toward her car, having finished her last English class for the day. She hears a rhythmic banging and discovers someone has pounded the trunk of her car shut. Not nearly as dramatic as the existing opening.

Once I arrived at that final version of the opening paragraph, I realized of course that it could not carry the weight of getting readers into the book, and I began to re-work the first two pages, weaving in who Susan was, the campus where she taught, her antagonistic relationship with her English department chair, her tenuous relationship with Jake Phillips, campus chief of police. She’s the kind of person who drives an old and slightly battered car and is used to bad smells, puts off worrying about such until later. I tried hard to make the first two pages set the stage for what was to come, including that Susan is a bit prickly.

That prickly side to her nature got me some bad reviews, from my beta reader up to reviewers I respect. But I held firm—prickly fit Susan, and in this story, it motivated her to do what needed to be done. Of course, I don’t think I knew all that when I wrote those pages. Here they are (I realize in retrospect there’s a head-jump in there but I hope it’s not too jarring):

Susan Hogan drove around Oak Grove, Texas, for two days before she realized there was a dead body in the trunk of her car. And it was another three days before she knew that someone was trying to kill her.

On the second day, she noticed a slightly unpleasant, sweet but foul odor in the car as she drove south on Main Street, headed for the Oak Grove State University campus and her eight o'clock American lit class. Susan's 1998 Honda Civic often had mysterious odors that were all her own fault. Now her mind ranged over the possibilities—leftover spaghetti and meatballs that she'd put in an icebox dish to bring to school for lunch, maybe a to-go box from her favorite Thai restaurant in Fort Worth, spilled coffee since she drank hers with cream.

No matter. She was late for her class, so she opened the windows to let the cool air of the October morning blow through the car as she passed through the town. Oak Grove was one of those towns kept alive and even attractive by the presence of a small university. Main Street was landscaped with trees, benches, and some brick paving. Boutiques and small cafes sat next to a bookstore, a lawyer's office, and the traditional old stone bank. It was, Susan always thought, a perfect place to live and teach. She didn't really care if it was second-tier, not as prestigious as some of the bigger universities in the state.

"I'll clean the car tonight," she told herself, "before Jake sees it or smells it."

Her thoughts wandered to Jake Phillips. He was the police chief on the Oak Grove campus but more than that, he had been Susan's lover for two years. That he loved her, she had no doubt; that he might get tired of her high jinks and stubbornness was a thought that lingered in the back of her mind. Sometimes she wondered if she kept the relationship because it irritated her department chair, John Scott, that she

was involved with someone with no more than a community college two-year degree. Well, maybe at first, but she knew now she was hooked. She needed Jake in her life.

For his part, Jake Phillips was attracted neither by Susan's intellect nor her beauty but by the fact that she insisted on swimming upstream. If there was a difficult way to do something, Susan Hogan would stubbornly find it. She simply could not operate within the usual confines of academic tradition, and Jake knew she was forever being called into Dr. Scott's office for conferences that amounted to reprimands.

Not that he didn't find her attractive. Tall and thin, she wore her light blonde hair—he had seen the dark roots—in a boyishly short cut. Her smile was wide and quick and her eyes were brown under incredibly dark eyebrows. At thirty-five, Susan could still make heads turn, and Jake was proud to be seen with her.

As she drove onto campus, Susan looked at the seemingly endless construction, adding new imitations to the lovely old red brick, red-tiled roofs of the original building. But the administration had been on a construction jag in the last few years, adding buildings so fast it made the head spin, a few with ornate, out-of-place arches but for the most part there was an attempt at consistency. For all her sometime rebellion at academic restrictions and prejudices, Susan always felt a sense of being home when she arrived on campus. She had been at Oak Grove State eight years now and considered it home.



Judy Alter is the author of six books in the Kelly O’Connell Mysteries, the newest being *Desperate for Death*; two books in the Blue Plate Café Mysteries; and the new Oak Grove Mysteries, beginning with *The Perfect Coed*, a mystery set on a university campus. Judy is no stranger to college campuses. She attended the University of Chicago, Truman State University in Missouri, and Texas Christian University, where she earned a Ph.D. and taught English. For twenty years, she was director of TCU Press, the book publishing program of the university. The author of many books for both children and adults primarily on women of the American West, she retired in 2010 and turned her attention to writing contemporary cozy mysteries.

She holds awards from the Western Writers of America, the National Cowboy Museum and Hall of Fame, and the Texas Institute of Letters. She was inducted into the Texas Literary Hall of Fame and recognized as an Outstanding Woman of Fort Worth and a woman who has left her mark on Texas. Western Writers of America gave her the Owen Wister Award for Lifetime Achievement and will induct her into its Hall of Fame in June 2015.

The single parent of four and the grandmother of seven, she lives in Fort Worth, Texas, with her Bordoodle, Sophie.