

**“ENTER THE SCENE LATE;
LEAVE THE SCENE EARLY”**

Erik Therme

“Enter the scene late; leave the scene early.”

I can't remember where I originally heard those words, but it's possibly the best writing advice ever, and it's especially apt for beginnings of books. I've never written a novel where I haven't gone back and cut anywhere from 2-20 pages from the beginning. Case in point: The original draft of my debut mystery, *Mortom*, began with siblings Andy & Kate driving into the small town of Mortom on a deserted road. Sure, there was some fun banter, they saw some semi-interesting scenery, but nothing really *happened*. I ended up cutting the entire scene, and there was no question it was for the best. The new and improved beginning has Andy & Kate arriving at their destination—a dilapidated house in the small town of Mortom—which gets things moving along much more quickly.

At first glance, Andy Crowl thought they had the wrong house: The property at 21 Abel Avenue looked as if it had been vacant for weeks, not days. Two garbage cans lay overturned by the mailbox, a nest of rolled-up newspapers had collected by the front steps, and the lawn was easily overgrown by a foot. Something that resembled a station wagon was parked in the gravel beside the driveway. All four wheels were missing, and the front end had been stripped to the frame.

Is my opening brilliant? Nope. Does it get the job done? I'd like to think it does. A writer's job is to pique the reader's interest enough to keep them reading and—of course—set the stage for things to come. I've introduced my main characters, disclosed a location, and described a few details about the place instead of just saying "the house and yard were crappy." There are definitely times when brevity works to your advantage, but you also want to help the reader form a picture in their mind. Finding a balance between the two is always a challenge.

"This could be interesting," said Kate.

Andy cut the engine. "We're sure this is the place?"

"Directions were dead on. What time are we meeting the bank manager again?"

"Five o'clock on the buttonhole."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "Buttonhole?"

"Trust me, if Thatcher is half as pompous in person as he was on the phone, it's going to be a fun-filled hour. The little twit even instructed me to bring along three forms of identification."

I love dialogue. If I'm reading a book and see only unbroken blocks of text, there's a good chance I'm going to skim right through it. It's a horrible way to go through life, but I love listening to characters talk. Needless to say, dialogue is an invaluable tool for a writer, as you can convey a lot about your characters from not only the things they say, but also how they say it. Andy has only spoken to the bank manager on the phone, but it's clear he already dislikes him. So much so, in fact, that he resorts to childish name calling—not exactly the type of thing most mature adults would do. Was the bank manager truly that horrible? Or is that just Andy's personality? Hopefully you will want to read on and discover for yourself.

He unzipped his bag and thumbed through the papers inside. The last two days were still a blur of e-mails and faxes, and it would be a miracle if he had remembered everything.

“Remind me to get copies of anything I sign—” he began, then realized Kate was gone. He opened his door and saw her standing on the front step.

“Door’s open,” she called down.

“Of course,” he said under his breath. “The locals probably have a meth lab inside already.”

He started up the driveway and cast a curious glance at the moped leaning against the garage. Ugly knots of rust had overtaken part of the metal frame, but it looked like it had been recently washed and waxed.

As much as I’d *love* to self-indulge with layers upon layers of dialogue, it’s time to dole out a few more bits of information. We now know that something happened in the last two days (apparently involving multiple forms of electronic communication) but we still don’t have specifics. Were the e-mails important documents pertaining to the house? Did the faxes disclose Maxine Wirt’s top-secret recipe for sugar cookies? And more importantly: is there really a meth lab inside the house, or is Andy just making a joke? Andy also notes there is a beat-up moped in the driveway . . . but why would it look recently washed and waxed, especially if the owner of the place is dead? Again, creating small and interesting details—without giving answers—is a sure way to keep the reader invested and turning pages.

“Can I go inside?” Kate asked.

“I thought you said it was open.”

“Yeah, but do you think it’s okay to go in while we wait?”

“Go,” he said irritably. “It’s—”

The screen door slammed shut. He stared at the moped a moment longer, wondering if it had been abandoned on the property after Craig had died. Whatever the case, it was just more junk to deal with.

He was halfway up the steps when Kate burst back out. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

"Why?"

"Just don't say you weren't warned."

He opened the door and winced. "What's that lovely smell?"

"I don't know, but it's twice as bad upstairs."

"What is it? Spoiled food or something?"

She only shrugged. He took a cautious step inside the foyer and sniffed. Whatever it was, he had smelled worse. Not by much.

And now we have some answers. A few, anyway. We know the owner of the house was someone named Craig who is now deceased. We also learn that the house isn't only junky, it smells. And not just a little—it stinks badly enough that Kate doesn't want to stay inside. Andy, on the other hand, seems unfazed by the smell . . . but is it because he's tougher than Kate? Or is it simply that he doesn't care about such things? And what could possibly be making the smell? Surely it has *nothing* to do with the picture of the rat on the book's cover.

The best beginnings are ones that ask many questions and give few answers. A fellow author (much more talented than me) once said: "It's not about what you say—it's more about what you *don't* say."

I couldn't have (not) said it better myself.



Erik Therme has thrashed in garage bands, inadvertently harbored runaways, and met Darth Vader.

When he's not at his computer, he can be found cheering for his oldest daughter's volleyball team, or chilling on the PlayStation 3 with his twelve-year-old. He currently resides in Iowa City, Iowa—one of only seven places in the world UNESCO has certified as a City of Literature.

Visit him at www.eriktherme.com.

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