

It's My Party

By B.K. Stevens

“It’s my party,” Lesley Gore sang, “and I’ll cry if I want to.” Or, in this case, it’s my blog, and I’ll break the rules if I want to. The guidelines for this blog ask writers to discuss the first two pages of one novel or short story. I’m not going to do that. Instead, I’ll discuss the opening sentences of several stories in my recently released collection, *Her Infinite Variety: Tales of Women and Crime*. In short stories, we probably don’t have two pages to make readers and editors want to keep reading. We’re lucky if we get two sentences. So I thought it might be interesting to compare the openings of these stories and see if I can come to any general conclusions. Other writers, of course, have used other approaches to beginning short stories, and have often succeeded far more than I ever will. But this is what’s worked for me.

I started my comparison by trying to put the eleven stories in *Her Infinite Variety* into various sorts of categories. Five open with dialogue, five with a narrative or summary statement, and one with an action. I was surprised only one story begins with action. And the action’s far from dramatic—nobody pointing a gun at the protagonist’s head, no bombs about to explode, no cops speeding after escaping criminals. None of the eleven stories begins with anything like that. Here are the first three sentences of my one “action” story, “Aunt Jessica’s Party” (first published in *Woman’s World* in 1993):

Carefully, Jessica polished her favorite sherry glass and placed it on the silver tray. Soon, her nephew would arrive. He was to be the only guest at her little party, and everything had to be perfect.

Again, not exactly dramatic sentences—an elderly lady polishes a glass. Even so, I hope this opening is quietly ominous. The focus on the glass, a party with only one guest, the desire to make everything perfect—exactly what does Aunt Jessica have in mind for her nephew?

As I continued to put story openings into categories, I found only four began with more or less explicit references to crime, and most of those references weren’t especially dramatic, either:

The first time it happened, it was just barely a crime. It started as an honest mistake, and she simply didn’t correct it. (“Honor among Thieves,” *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, 2000)

Clearly, we’re not dealing with a hardened criminal here, and we’re probably not dealing with a violent crime, not if it’s something that can start as “an honest mistake.” (The title, obviously, gives readers a strong hint about what sort of crime it is.) Again, though, I hope there’s something quietly ominous about these sentences. “The first time it

happened” lets us know that it’s going to happen again, and that next time it probably won’t start as “an honest mistake.” So someone who’s generally honest is going to commit a number of crimes. When I wrote the story, I hoped readers would wonder how and why that might happen, and would want to read on.

Another story that begins with an explicit reference to crime also doesn’t feature career criminals:

“The one thing we *haven’t* tried,” Maureen said, “is a life of crime.”

She was joking, of course. At least, mostly joking. At least, I thought so at the time. (“Adjuncts Anonymous,” *AHMM*, 2009)

No Mafia types or hired killers here, just a woman who’s never tried a life of crime and a friend who thinks she’s probably joking—but isn’t completely sure. Still, the possibility that Maureen isn’t joking dangles in front of the readers, enticing them (I hope) to read on. “The Shopper” also begins with a reference to a crime:

The worst part was knowing that she’d been in the house when it happened, that she’d slept through it. Compared to that, the loss of her purse and of the other things he’d taken hardly mattered. (*Creatures, Crimes, and Creativity* anthology, 2014)

Again, there’s not much drama, at least not on the surface. Burglary isn’t usually a violent crime, and this burglary’s in the past—the protagonist slept through it. But it’s unusual that the burglar broke in while she was home, and she feels violated by his intrusion. The fact that she slept through the first crime only makes her seem more vulnerable. I hope all that sets up the expectation that the crime isn’t securely in the past, that there’s more to come, that the protagonist’s still in danger.

The fourth story to begin with a reference to crime—or at least to possible crime, possible danger—is “Death in Rehab”:

“I’m not so sure about this job,” he said. “It sounds dangerous. You’ll be surrounded by addicts.” (*AHMM*, 2011)

That’s probably as close as any story in *Her Infinite Variety* comes to trying to tantalize readers with an explicit reference to a dangerous situation. But the next paragraphs establish the story’s comic tone, and the reader soon discovers the protagonist won’t be working at a rehab center for people with the sorts of addictions usually considered dangerous. Instead, she’ll work at The Cocoon Center, which caters to unusual sorts of addicts—a compulsive proofreader, a serial plagiarist, a *Jeopardy!* fanatic. (Even so, one of them—naturally—proves to be a murderer.)

I made one more attempt at putting the stories in the collection into categories, this time by looking at whether they opened by focusing on characters, relationships, or situations. According to my first, quick count, five stories began with a focus on character, two with a focus on relationships, and four with a focus on a situation. When I looked at the opening sentences more carefully, though, I realized that they all at least implied a situation, and that the situations were probably the element most likely to draw readers in. Here, for example, is the opening paragraph of “Thea’s First Husband”:

She had learned to brace herself against it. It happened whenever they met new people—sometimes at large social events connected to his firm, more often at the charity dinners and political fundraisers he’d grown so fond of attending. They’d be greeting clients from out of town, or sitting down at a table with an unfamiliar couple, or meeting the guest of honor in a receiving line, and that sly look she’d grown to know so well would come into his eyes. (*AHMM*, 2012)

In one sense, the focus is on the protagonist; in another, it’s on her relationship with a man. Neither character has been named yet, but readers will naturally (and correctly) assume “she” is Thea, and “he” is her first husband. But the focus is also on a situation—“it,” another pronoun without an antecedent. If readers want to keep reading, I think, it will be because they want to find out what “it” is. What has Thea learned to brace herself against? What is this thing that happens when she and her husband go out? Why does she simply brace herself against it, rather than putting an end to it? Why does her husband seem to enjoy something she finds painful? And what might happen as a result of this tense situation?

The last opening sentences I’ll quote are from “The Listener,” a story that won first place in a national suspense-writing contest judged by Mary Higgins Clark:

The universal confidante—that’s what my college roommate called me. It didn’t start in college, though. Ever since I can remember, people have wanted to tell me their secrets. When I was a little girl, cousins, aunts, even my grandparents would drift toward me at birthday parties and Christmas gatherings. They’d work their way over to the quiet corner where I stood watching, they’d chat pleasantly for a few minutes, and before long they’d be assaulting me with tales of their petty dishonesties, their drinking problems, their adulteries. (*Family Circle*, 1995)

Again, in one sense, the focus is on a character, the narrator. She’s got some quality that makes people want to confess their secrets to her—to me, that’s disquieting, even vaguely spooky. I’d like to think readers will keep turning pages because they find this character intriguing and want to learn more about her. But it’s probably at least as likely that they’ll keep reading (if they do) because they

want to find out what's going to happen because the character has this unusual, potentially dangerous quality.

So, looking at the opening sentences of these stories, what conclusions, if any, can we draw? It's hardly a revelation to say that there's no one right way for mystery short stories to begin. They can begin with dialogue, with statements of one sort or another, with action. It also seems safe to conclude that they don't have to begin with explicit references to crime or violence. Quietly ominous opening lines that suggest more than they say may do an even better job of creating suspense and drawing readers in.

The one somewhat surprising conclusion I came to after making this comparison is that in one way or another, the opening lines of a short mystery story should promise readers an intriguing situation. It's a compliment to call a novel or short story "character driven," and it's become fashionable to disparage plot, to say we find characters far more interesting than mere story. And heaven knows I love my characters as much as other writers love theirs. But in short stories, we have to draw readers in quickly, and it's hard to create a fascinating, three-dimensional character in just a few sentences. By the end of the story, I think we can manage that. In our opening sentences, though, whatever else we do, we'd better give readers strong reasons to believe that something interesting is about to happen.

Bio



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens writes mysteries, both novels and short stories. Her most recent release, from Wildside Press, is *Her Infinite Variety: Tales of Women and Crime*, a collection of eleven of her previously published stories. Some of those stories have been nominated for Agatha, Macavity, and Derringer awards; one is a current Macavity finalist. B.K.'s first novel, *Interpretation of*

Murder, published by Black Opal Books, is a traditional whodunit offering readers insights into deaf culture and sign-language interpreting. Her second novel, *Fighting Chance*, is a martial arts mystery for young adults, published by Poisoned Pen Press. It was an Agatha finalist and is now an Anthony finalist. Most of the more than fifty short stories B.K. has published appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Others appeared in *Woman's World*, *Family Circle*, and various anthologies. She blogs at SleuthSayers and also hosts The First Two Pages. B.K. and her husband live in Virginia and have two grown daughters. Website: <http://www.bkstevensmysteries.com>.