

Slow Beginnings and Lines of Action

By Art Taylor

I recently scanned through my story “Parallel Play,” looking for a short excerpt that would give readers a sense of the story and perhaps tease them into reading it in its entirety. (This was for a blog post at SleuthSayers, hosted by B.K. Stevens, who is also hosting this essay today—not just a tremendous short story writer herself but a true supporter of our whole community.) I knew the passage I was looking for: a short scene that kick-starts the central conflict, that sets all the drama into motion, really the beginning of main character Maggie’s long ordeal.

Starts? A beginning? Imagine my surprise when I located the scene nearly halfway through the story.

Conventional wisdom says that short fiction should open right in the midst of the conflict (if not, as Kurt Vonnegut urges, “as close to the end as possible”). And wasn’t it Chekhov who urged writers to tear up the first three pages of their manuscript in order to find the true start of their story?

So what was I doing with all that *extra* stuff there at the beginning?

Here’s the entire opening scene of “Parallel Play,” originally published in *Chesapeake Crimes: Storm Warning* (Wildside Press) and now a finalist for both the Agatha Award and the Thriller Award for Best Short Story. In manuscript, this scene is exactly two pages:

The Teeter Toddlers class was finally drawing to a close—and none too soon, Maggie thought, keeping an eye on the windows and the dark clouds crowding the sky.

Ms. Amy, the instructor, had spread the parachute across the foam mats and gathered everyone on top of it. The children had jumped to catch and pop the soap bubbles she'd blown into the air. They'd sat cross-legged on the parachute and sung umpteen verses of "Wheels on the Bus" and two rounds of "Itsy Bitsy Spider." The routine never varied, the children's delight never waned—at least until the time came to raise that parachute with its spiral of colors into the air.

"Everybody off and let's go under," Ms. Amy said in a sing-songy voice. The children scrambled clear. The adults pulled the edges of the fabric tight. The parachute rose. All the kids raced beneath.

Or nearly all of them. Maggie's son, Daniel, grabbed her leg with his chubby fingers and held on tight.

"Don't you want to join your friends?" Maggie urged, same as she did each week. Daniel shook his head.

"No like," he mumbled into her thigh.

Despite what he said, Maggie knew he did like the parachute—or at least watching it, how it rose and fell, how it floated at the top for a moment and then drifted downward as the children giggled and tussled beneath. He seemed enchanted by it really—and Maggie saw some comfort there too, the parachute like a blanket slowly coming to rest, encircle, and enfold. But much as Daniel liked to watch, he refused to join the other kids underneath it, and generally he kept a distance from them, preferring to

play on his own. Ms. Amy always asked one of the parents to crawl beneath as well, to keep the rowdiness under control, but the one time Maggie had volunteered, beckoning her son to join her, Daniel had stood at the edges and wept, almost frantically, until another parent—Walter, the only dad in the class—had graciously swapped places with her.

Walter was actually looking her way now too. He smiled, Maggie shrugged. What could you do?

“Maybe next time,” Maggie said to Daniel, as Ms. Amy began to sing.

Come under my umbrella, umbrella, umbrella,

Come under my umbrella, it’s starting to storm.

There’ll be thunder and lightning, and wind and rain.

Come under my umbrella, it’s starting to storm.

Maggie could hear the steady patter of rain overhead now. Through the windows, the sky was nearly black.

As she’d told Amy when they got to class late, her husband, Ben, was away on yet another business trip, and with all her hustling to get Daniel dressed and ready for class, she’d felt lucky to have gotten them out the door at all. Now she kicked herself for forgetting to check the weather earlier—and for forgetting an umbrella.

“Almost done,” she whispered, more to herself than to Daniel. But as she ran her fingers through his wispy blond hair, she could feel his tension easing up a bit.

In order to explain my choices here—and perhaps defend them against Chekhov

and Vonnegut—I'm going to draw in another authority, Patricia Highsmith, whose *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* acknowledges that same phrase about starting close to the end of a story before she herself admits, "I like a slow beginning."

Elsewhere in that book, Highsmith describes the need to provide "lines of action" in the opening of stories and novels—even in an opening where "nothing *happens*":

By lines of action, I mean lines of potential action, such as: the desire of a character to make a trip somewhere; of another to quit the scene and his inability to do so; the desire of a character for something (or someone) he or she does not yet have; or the mention of a potential danger. . . . Thus, merely to describe characters' relationships can create "a line of action," provided that the relationship is dynamic.

Revisiting the opening scene of "Parallel Play," I find several lines of action in terms of relationships, most especially the relationship between Maggie and her son Daniel: the mother's competing desires to encourage and to shelter her child, the son's mix of curiosity and anxiety and fear. But that's not the only relationship, of course. There's also the mention of Maggie's husband, "away on yet another business trip"—with that *yet* intended to hint toward larger desires and struggles—and we also see Maggie's search elsewhere for connection and understanding: the confession to Amy about hustling to stay on top of things, seeking empathy, followed by the quick exchange of a smile and a shrug with Walter, who'd stepped to the rescue at an earlier play session, just when Maggie needed it most.

As far as potential danger, the looming storm serves as an obvious metaphor for trouble ahead (drawing deliberately on that old trope), but it's the small detail of Maggie forgetting her umbrella that helps to set all the action into motion. And the echo of that

phrase “set into motion” from earlier in this essay may reveal a more subtle kick-starting of conflicts even in this early scene, both internal ones—a mother who’s found herself on her own, who feels she’s falling short even remembering simple things—and external ones: the potential for missteps in everyday routines, everyday encounters, and the roads down which missteps built on missteps might lead.

These lines of action aren’t just laid out in the opening scene but deliberately laid out criss-cross with one another, tangling, troubled, the full scope of the story right there in front of the reader.

I want to make one other comment here about my vision of how the short story should work. Obviously writers should strive toward some graceful curve in any narrative arc, but a story’s shape might also benefit from a careful interweaving of other elements, images, or motifs. Just as the brewing storm parallels the rising conflicts of the story, so too did I try to build on those symbols of shelter and protection: the forgotten umbrella, of course, but also the parachute that the other children duck under. While the missing umbrella provides the first key uptick toward that rising action, it’s the parachute—encircling, enfolding, with children giggling beneath—that guided some of my own deeper understandings of the story and ultimately informed so much of the imagery, urgency and texture of the closing scenes.

As I see it, the beginnings and endings and middles of short fiction should ideally be inseparable— everything connected, nothing wasted, nothing extraneous.

While my own stories always fall short of ideals (isn’t that the case with all of us?), I hope that the first two pages of “Parallel Play”—slow beginning and all—at least

strive in these directions.

You can [read the full story here](#).



Art Taylor is the author of *On the Road with Del & Louise: A Novel in Stories*, winner of the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. He has won two additional Agatha Awards, an Anthony Award, a Macavity Award, and three consecutive Derringer Awards for his short fiction, and his work has appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories*. He also edited

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