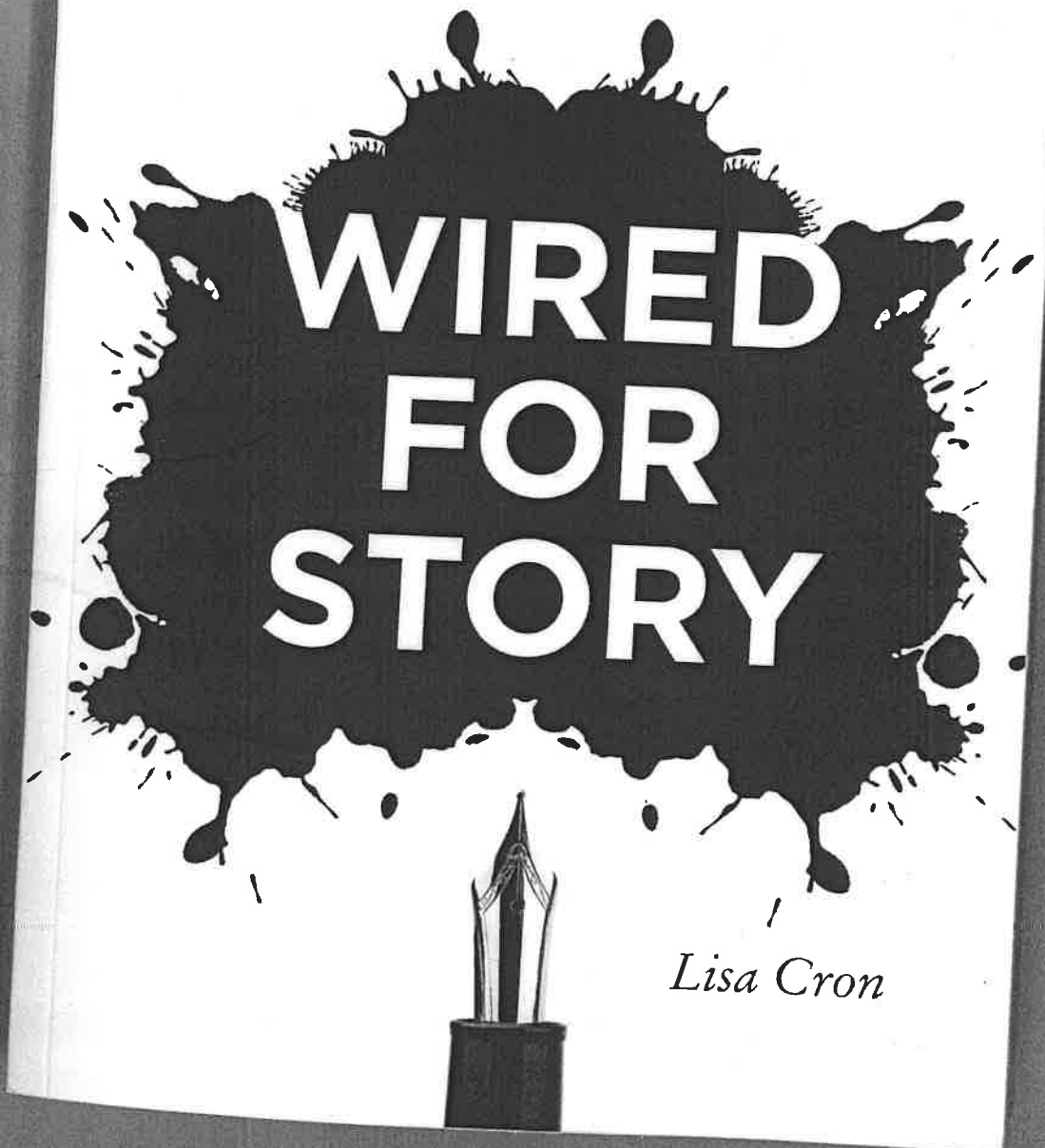
The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence



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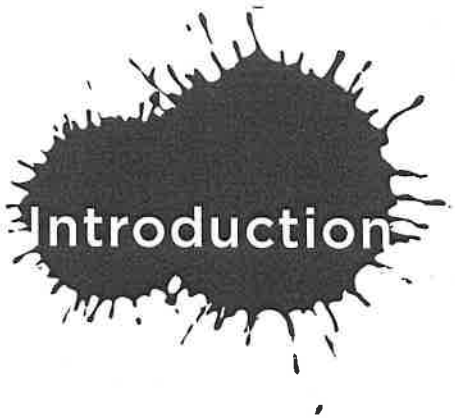

Once upon a time really smart people were completely convinced the world was flat. Then they learned that it wasn't. But they were still pretty sure the sun revolved around the Earth . . . until that theory went bust, too. For an even longer period of time, smart people have believed story is just a form of entertainment. They've thought that beyond the immense pleasure it bestows—the ephemeral joy and deep sense of satisfaction a good story leaves us with—story itself serves no necessary purpose. Sure, our lives from time immemorial would have been far drabber without it, but we'd have survived just fine.

Wrong again.

Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution—more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to. Story is what enabled us to imagine what might happen in the future, and so prepare for it—a feat no other species can lay claim to, opposable thumbs or not.[1] Story is what makes us human, not just metaphorically but literally. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature's way of seducing us into paying attention to it.[2]

In other words, we're wired to turn to story to teach us the way of the world. So if your eyes glazed over back in high school when your history teacher painstakingly recited the entire succession of German monarchs, beginning with Charles the Fat, Son of Louis the German, who ruled from 881 to 887, who could blame you? Turns out you're only, gloriously, human.

Thus it's no surprise that when given a choice, people prefer fiction to nonfiction—they'd rather read a historical novel than a history book, watch a movie than a dry documentary.[3] It's not because we're lazy sots but because our neural circuitry is designed to crave story. The rush of intoxication a good story triggers doesn't make us closet hedonists—it makes us willing pupils, primed to absorb the myriad lessons each story imparts.[4]

This information is a game changer for writers. Research has helped decode the secret blueprint for story that's hardwired in the reader's brain, thereby lifting the veil on what, specifically, the brain is hungry for in every story it encounters. Even more exciting, it turns out that a powerful story can have a hand in rewiring the reader's brain—helping instill empathy, for instance[5]—which is why writers are, and have always been, among the most powerful people in the world.

Writers can change the way people think simply by giving them a glimpse of life through their characters' eyes. They can transport readers to places they've never been, catapult them into situations they've only dreamed of, and reveal subtle universal truths that just might alter their entire perception of reality. In ways large and small, writers help people make it through the night. And that's not too shabby.

But there's a catch. For a story to captivate a reader, it must continually meet his or her hardwired expectations. This is no doubt what prompted Jorge Luis Borges to note, "Art is fire plus algebra."[6] Let me explain.

Fire is absolutely crucial to writing; it's the very first ingredient of every story. Passion is what drives us to write, filling us with the

exhilarating sense that we have something to say, something that will make a difference.

But to write a story capable of instantly engaging readers, passion alone isn't enough. Writers often mistakenly believe that all they need to craft a successful story is the fire—the burning desire, the creative spark, the killer idea that startles you awake in the middle of the night. They dive into their story with gusto, not realizing that every word they write is most likely doomed to failure because they forgot to factor in the second half of the equation: the algebra.

In this, Borges intuitively knew what cognitive psychology and neuroscience has since revealed: there is an implicit framework that must underlie a story in order for that passion, that fire, to ignite the reader's brain. Stories without it go unread; stories with it are capable of knocking the socks off someone who's barefoot.

Why do writers often have trouble embracing the notion that there is more to creating a story than having a good idea and a way with words? Because the ease with which we surrender to the stories we *read* tends to cloud our understanding of stories we *write*. We have an innate belief that we know what makes a good story—after all, we can quickly recognize a bad one. When we do, we scoff and slip the book back onto the shelf. We roll our eyes and walk out of the movie theater. We take a deep breath and pray for Uncle Albert to stop nattering on about his Civil War reenactment. We won't put up with a bad story for three seconds.

We recognize a good story just as quickly. It's something we've been able to do since we were about three, and we've been addicted to stories in one form or another ever since. So if we're hardwired to spot a good story from the very first sentence, how is it possible that we don't know how to *write* one?

Once again, evolutionary history provides the answer. Story originated as a method of bringing us together to share specific information that might be lifesaving. *Hey bud, don't eat those shiny red berries*

unless you wanna croak like the Neanderthal next door; here's what happened. . . . Stories were simple, relevant, and not so different from a little thing we like to call gossip. When written language evolved eons later, story was free to expand beyond the local news and immediate concerns of the community. That meant readers—with hardwired expectations in place—had to be drawn to the story on its own merits. While no doubt there were always masterful storytellers, there's a huge difference between sharing a juicy bit of gossip about crazy Cousin Rachel and pounding out the Great American Novel.

Fair enough, but since most aspiring writers love to read, wouldn't all those fabulous books they wolf down give them a first-class lesson in what hooks a reader?

Nope.

Evolution dictates that the first job of any good story is to completely anesthetize the part of our brain that questions how it is creating such a compelling illusion of reality. After all, a good story doesn't *feel* like an illusion. What it feels like is life. Literally. A recent brain-imaging study reported in *Psychological Science* reveals that the regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we're engrossed in a compelling narrative.[7] That's what accounts for the vivid mental images and the visceral reactions we feel when we can't stop reading, even though it's past midnight and we have to be up at dawn. When a story enthralls us, we are inside of it, feeling what the protagonist feels, experiencing it as if it were indeed happening to us, and the last thing we're focusing on is the mechanics of the thing.

So it's no surprise that we tend to be utterly oblivious to the fact that beneath every captivating story, there is an intricate mesh of interconnected elements holding it together, allowing it to build with seemingly effortless precision. This often fools us into thinking we know exactly what has us hooked—things like beautiful metaphors, authentic-sounding dialogue, an interesting character—when, in fact, despite how engaging those things appear to be in and of themselves, it turns out

they're secondary. What has us hooked is something else altogether, something that underlies them, secretly bringing them to life: *story*, as our brain understands it.

It's only by stopping to analyze what we're unconsciously responding to when we read a story—what has *actually* snagged our brain's attention—that we can then write a story that will grab the reader's brain. This is true whether you're writing a literary novel, hard-boiled mystery, or supernatural teen romance. Although readers have their own personal taste when it comes to the type of novel they're drawn to, unless that story meets their hardwired expectations, it stays on the shelf.

To make sure that doesn't happen to your story, this book is organized into twelve chapters, each zeroing in on an aspect of how the brain works, its corresponding revelation about story, and the nuts and bolts of how to actualize it in your work. Each chapter ends with a checklist you can apply to your work at any stage: before you begin writing, at the end of every writing day, at the end of a scene or a chapter, or at 2:00 a.m. when you wake up in a cold sweat, convinced that your story may be the worst thing anyone has written, ever. (It's not; trust me.) Do this, and I guarantee your work will stay on track and have an excellent chance of making people who aren't even related to you want to read it.

The only caveat is that you have to be as honest about your story as you would be about a novel you pick up in a bookstore, or a movie you begin watching with one finger still poised on the remote. The idea is to pinpoint where each trouble spot lies and then remedy it before it spreads like a weed, undermining your entire narrative. It's a lot more fun than it sounds, because there's nothing more exhilarating than watching your work improve until your readers are so engrossed in it that they forget that it's a story at all.

1

HOW TO HOOK THE READER

COGNITIVE SECRET:

We think in story, which allows us to envision the future.

STORY SECRET:

From the very first sentence, the reader must want to know what happens next.

I find that most people know what a story is until they sit down to write one.

—FLANNERY O'CONNOR

IN THE SECOND IT TAKES YOU to read this sentence, your senses are showering you with over 11,000,000 pieces of information. Your conscious mind is capable of registering about forty of them. And when it comes to actually paying attention? On a good day, you can process seven bits of data at a time. On a bad day, five.[1] On one of *those* days? More like minus three.

And yet, you're not only making your way in a complex world just fine, you're preparing to write a story about someone navigating a world of your creation. So how important can any of those other 10,999,960 bits of information really be?

Very, as it turns out—which is why, although we don't register them consciously, our brain is busy noting, analyzing, and deciding whether they're something irrelevant (like the fact that the sky is still blue) or something we need to pay attention to (like the sound of a horn blaring as we meander across the street, lost in thought about the hunky guy who just moved in next door).

What's your brain's criterion for either leaving you in peace to daydream or demanding your immediate and total attention? It's simple. Your brain, along with every other living organism down to the humble amoeba, has one main goal: survival. Your subconscious brain—which neuroscientists refer to as the *adaptive* or *cognitive unconscious*—is a finely tuned instrument, instantly aware of what matters, what doesn't, why, and, hopefully, what you should do about it.[2] It knows you don't have the time to think, "Gee, what's that loud noise? Oh, it's a horn

honking; it must be coming from that great big SUV that's barreling straight at me. The driver was probably texting and didn't notice me until it was too late to stop. Maybe I should get out of the—"

Splat.

And so, to keep us from ending up as road kill, our brain devised a method of sifting through and interpreting all that information much, much faster than our slowpoke conscious mind is capable of. Although for most other animals that sort of innate reflex is where evolution called it a day, thus relegating their reactions to what neuroscientists aptly refer to as *zombie systems*, we humans got a little something extra.[3] Our brain developed a way to consciously navigate information so that, provided we have the time, we can decide on our own what to do next.

Story.

Here's how neuroscientist Antonio Damasio sums it up: "The problem of how to make all this wisdom understandable, transmissible, persuasive, enforceable—in a word, of how to make it stick—was faced and a solution found. Storytelling was the solution—storytelling is something brains do, naturally and implicitly. . . . [I]t should be no surprise that it pervades the entire fabric of human societies and cultures."[4]

We think in story. It's hardwired in our brain. It's how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us. Simply put, the brain constantly seeks meaning from all the input thrown at it, yanks out what's important for our survival on a need-to-know basis, and tells us a story about it, based on what it knows of our past experience with it, how we feel about it, and how it might affect us. Rather than recording everything on a first come, first served basis, our brain casts us as "the protagonist" and then edits our experience with cinema-like precision, creating logical interrelations, mapping connections between memories, ideas, and events for future reference.[5]

Story is the language of experience, whether it's ours, someone else's, or that of fictional characters. Other people's stories are as

important as the stories we tell ourselves. Because if all we ever had to go on was our own experience, we wouldn't make it out of onesies.

Now for the really important question—what does all this mean for us writers? It means that we can now decode what the brain (aka the reader) is *really* looking for in every story, beginning with the two key concepts that underlie all the cognitive secrets in this book:

1. Neuroscientists believe the reason our already overloaded brain devotes so much precious time and space to allowing us to get lost in a story is that without stories, we'd be toast. Stories allow us to simulate intense experiences without actually having to live through them. This was a matter of life and death back in the Stone Age, when if you waited for experience to teach you that the rustling in the bushes was actually a lion looking for lunch, you'd end up the main course. It's even more crucial now, because once we mastered the physical world, our brain evolved to tackle something far trickier: the social realm. Story evolved as a way to explore our own mind and the minds of others, as a sort of dress rehearsal for the future.[6] As a result, story helps us survive not only in the life-and-death physical sense but also in a life-well-lived social sense. Renowned cognitive scientist and Harvard professor Steven Pinker explains our need for story this way:

> Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them. What are the options if I were to suspect that my uncle killed my father, took his position, and married my mother? If my hapless older brother got no respect in the family, are there circumstances that might lead him to betray me? What's the worst that could happen if I were seduced by a client while my wife and daughter were away for the

weekend? What's the worst that could happen if I had an affair to spice up my boring life as the wife of a country doctor? How can I avoid a suicidal confrontation with raiders who want my land today without looking like a coward and thereby ceding it to them tomorrow? The answers are to be found in any bookstore or any video store. The cliché that life imitates art is true because the function of some kinds of art is for life to imitate it.[7]

2. Not only do we crave story, but we have very specific hardwired expectations for every story we read, even though—and here's the kicker—chances are next to nil that the average reader could tell you what those expectations are. If pressed, she'd be far more likely to refer to the magic of story, that certain *je ne sais quoi* that can't be quantified. And who could blame her? The real answer is rather counterintuitive: our expectations have everything to do with the story's ability to provide information on how we might safely navigate this earthly plane. To that end, we run them through our own very sophisticated subconscious sense of what a story is supposed to do: plunk someone with a clear goal into an increasingly difficult situation they then have to navigate. When a story meets our brain's criteria, we relax and slip into the protagonist's skin, eager to experience what his or her struggle feels like, without having to leave the comfort of home.

All this is incredibly useful for writers because it neatly defines what a story is—and what it's not. In this chapter, that's exactly what we'll examine: the four elements that make up what a story is; what we, as readers, are wired to expect when we dive into the first page of a book and try it on for size; and why even the most lyrical, beautiful writing by itself is as inviting as a big bowl of wax fruit.

So, What *Is* a Story?

Contrary to what many people think, a story is not just something that happens. If that were true, we could all cancel the cable, lug our Barcaloungers onto the front lawn, and be utterly entertained, 24/7, just watching the world go by. It would be idyllic for about ten minutes. Then we'd be climbing the walls, if only there were walls on the front lawn.

A story isn't simply something that happens *to* someone, either. If it were, we'd be utterly enthralled reading a stranger's earnestly rendered, heartfelt journal chronicling every trip she took to the grocery store, ever—and we're not.

A story isn't even something *dramatic* that happens to someone. Would you stay up all night reading about how bloodthirsty Gladiator A chased cutthroat Gladiator B around a dusty old arena for two hundred pages? I'm thinking no.

So what *is* a story? A story is how what happens affects someone who is trying to achieve what turns out to be a difficult goal, and how he or she changes as a result. Breaking it down in the soothingly familiar parlance of the writing world, this translates to

"What happens" is the **plot.**

"Someone" is the **protagonist.**

The "goal" is what's known as the **story question.**

And "how he or she changes" is **what the story itself is actually about.**

As counterintuitive as it may sound, a story is not about the plot or even what happens in it. Stories are about how we, rather than the world around us, change. They grab us only when they allow us to experience how it would feel to *navigate* the plot. Thus story, as we'll see throughout, is an internal journey, not an external one.

All the elements of a story are anchored in this very simple premise, and they work in unison to create what appears to the reader as reality, only sharper, clearer, and far more entertaining, because stories do what our cognitive unconscious does: filter out everything that would distract us from the situation at hand. In fact, stories do it better, because while in real life it's nearly impossible to filter out all the annoying little interruptions—like leaky faucets, dithering bosses, and cranky spouses—a story can tune them out entirely as it focuses in on the task at hand: *What does your protagonist have to confront in order to solve the problem you've so cleverly set up for her?* And that problem is what the reader is going to be hunting for from the get-go, because it's going to define everything that happens from the first sentence on.

What Rapidly Unraveling Situation Have You Plunked Me Into, Anyway?

Let's face it, we're all busy. Plus, most of us are plagued by that little voice in the back of our head constantly reminding us of what we really should be doing right now instead of whatever it is we're actually doing—especially when we take time out to do something as seemingly nonproductive as, um, read a novel. Which means that in order to distract us from the relentless demands of our immediate surroundings, a story has to grab our attention fast.[8] And, as neuroscience writer Jonah Lehrer says, nothing focuses the mind like surprise.[9] That means when we pick up a book, we're jonesing for the feeling that something out of the ordinary is happening. We crave the notion that we've come in at a crucial juncture in someone's life, and not a moment too soon. What intoxicates us is the hint that not only is trouble brewing, but it's longstanding and about to reach critical mass. This means that from the first sentence we need to catch sight of the breadcrumb trail that will lure us deeper into the thicket. I've heard it said that fiction (all stories, for that matter) can

be summed up by a single sentence—All is not as it seems—which means that what we're hoping for in that opening sentence is the sense that something is about to change (and not necessarily for the better).

Simply put, we are looking for a reason to care. So for a story to grab us, not only must something be happening, but also there must be a consequence we can anticipate. As neuroscience reveals, what draws us into a story and keeps us there is the firing of our dopamine neurons, signaling that intriguing information is on its way.[10] This means that whether it's an actual event unfolding or we meet the protagonist in the midst of an internal quandary or there's merely a hint that something's slightly "off" on the first page, there has to be a ball already in play. Not the preamble to the ball. Not all the stuff you have to know to really understand the ball. The ball itself. This is not to say the first ball must be the main ball—it can be the initial ball or even a starter ball. But on that first page, it has to feel like the only ball and it has to have our complete attention.

For instance, how about this—the first paragraph of Caroline Leavitt's *Girls In Trouble*—for a ball in play?

> Sara's pains are coming ten minutes apart now. Every time one comes, she jolts herself against the side of the car, trying to disappear. Everything outside is whizzing past her from the car window because Jack, her father, is speeding, something she's never seen him do before. Sara grips the armrest, her knuckles white. She presses her back against the seat and digs her feet into the floor, as if any moment she will fly from the car. *Stop*, she wants to say. *Slow down. Stop.* But she can't form the words, can't make her mouth work properly. Can't do anything except wait in terror for the next pain. Jack hunches over the wheel, beeping his horn though there isn't much traffic. His face is reflected in the rearview mirror, but he doesn't look at her. Instead, he can't seem to keep himself from looking at Abby, Sara's mother, who is sitting in the back with Sara. His face is unreadable.[11]

Trouble brewing? Yep. Longstanding trouble? At least nine months, probably longer. Can't you feel the momentum? It pulls you forward, even as it grounds you in the unfolding moment. You want to know not only what happens next but also what led to what's happening right now. Who's the father? Was it consensual? Was she raped? Thus your curiosity is engaged, and you read on without consciously having made the decision to do so.

What Does *That* Mean?

As readers we eagerly probe each piece of information for significance, constantly wondering, "What is this meant to tell me?" It's said people can go forty days without food, three days without water, and about thirty-five seconds without finding meaning in something—truth is, thirty-five seconds is an eternity compared to the warp speed with which our subconscious brain rips through data. It's a biological imperative: we are always on the hunt for meaning—not in the metaphysical "What is the true nature of reality?" sense but in the far more primal, very specific sense of: *Joe left without his usual morning coffee; I wonder why? Betty is always on time; how come she's half an hour late? That annoying dog next door barks its head off every morning; why is it so quiet today?*

We are always looking for the *why* beneath what's happening on the surface. Not only because our survival might depend on it, but because it's exhilarating. It makes us feel something—namely, curiosity. Having our curiosity piqued is visceral. And it leads to something even more potent: the anticipation of knowledge we're now hungry for, a sensation caused by that pleasurable rush of dopamine. Because being curious is necessary for survival (*What's that rustling in the bushes?*), nature encourages it. And what better way to encourage curiosity than to make it feel good? This is why, once your curiosity is roused as a reader, you have an emotional, vested interest in finding out what happens next.

And bingo! You feel that delicious sense of urgency (hello dopamine!) that all good stories instantly ignite.

Do You Want an Interpreter with That?

So what happens when you can't anticipate what might happen next, when you can't even make sense of what's happening *now*? Usually you decide to find something else to read, pronto. I've often thrown up my hands in frustration when reading a well-intentioned manuscript, wishing it came with an interpreter. I could feel the author's burning intent; I knew she was trying to tell me something important. Trouble was, I had no idea what.

Think of how exasperating it is in the real world when someone begins a long rambling story:

> Did I tell you about Fred? He was supposed to come over last night, but it was raining, and like a dolt I forgot to shut my windows and my new couch got soaked. I paid a fortune for it. I'm worried that now it'll mildew like the old clothes in my grandma's attic. She's so dingy, but I can't blame her. She's over a hundred. I hope I have her genes. She was never sick a day in her life, but lately I've begun to wonder because my joints hurt every time it rains. Boy, they sure were aching last night while I was waiting for Fred. . . .

By now you're probably nervously jiggling your foot and thinking, *What are you talking about and why should I care?* That is, if you're still listening. It's the same with the first page of a story. If we don't have a sense of what's happening and why it matters to the protagonist, we're not going to read it. After all, have you ever gone into a bookstore, pulled a novel off the shelf, read the first few pages and thought, *You know, this is kind of dull, and I don't really care about*

these people, but I'm sure the author tried really hard and probably has something important to say, so I'm going to buy it, read it, and recommend it to all my friends?

Nope. You're beautifully, brutally heartless. I'm betting you never give the author's hard work or good intentions a second thought. And that's as it should be. As a reader, you owe the writer absolutely nothing. You read their book solely at your own pleasure, where it stands or falls on its own merit. If you don't like it, you simply slip it back onto the shelf and slide out another.

What are you hunting for on that first page? Are you consciously analyzing each sentence one by one? Are you aware of what triggers the finely calibrated tipping point when you decide to either read the book or look for another? Of course not. That is, not consciously. In the same way you don't have to think about which muscles you need to move in order to blink, choosing a book is a perfectly coordinated reflex orchestrated by your cognitive unconscious. It's muscle memory—except in this case, the "muscle" in question is the brain.

Okay, let's say that the first sentence has indeed grabbed you. What's next?

What Is This Story About?

The unspoken question that's now bouncing around in your brain is this: *What is this book about?*

Sounds like a big question. It is, which is why we'll be exploring it in depth in the next chapter. So *can* you answer it on the first page? Rarely. After all, when you meet someone new, can you know everything there is to know about that person on the first date? Absolutely not. Can you feel like you do? Absolutely. Story, likewise. And to that end, here are the three basic things readers relentlessly hunt for as they read that first page:

1. Whose story is it?
2. What's happening here?
3. What's at stake?

Let's examine these three elements and how they work in tandem to answer the question.

WHOSE STORY IS IT?

Everyone knows a story needs a main character, otherwise known as the protagonist—even ensemble pieces tend to have one central character. No need to discuss it, right? But here's something writers often don't know: in a story, what the reader feels is driven by what the protagonist feels. Story is visceral. We climb inside the protagonist's skin and become sensate, feeling what he feels. Otherwise we have no port of entry, no point of view through which to see, evaluate, and experience the world the author has plunked us into.

In short, without a protagonist, everything is neutral, and as we'll see in chapter 3, in a story (as in life) there's no such thing as neutral. Which means we need to meet the protagonist as soon as possible—hopefully, in the first paragraph.

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?

It stands to reason, then, that something must be happening—beginning on the first page—that the protagonist is affected by. Something that gives us a glimpse of the "big picture." As John Irving once said, "Whenever possible, tell the whole story of the novel in the first sentence."[12] Glib? Yeah, okay. But a worthy goal to shoot for.

The big picture cues us to the problem the protagonist will spend the story struggling with. For instance, in a classic romantic comedy it's *Will boy get girl?* Thus we gauge every event against that one question.

Does it help him get closer to her or does it hurt his prospects? And, often, is she really the right girl for him?

Which brings us to the third thing that readers are hunting for on that first page, the thing that, together with the first two, ignites the all-important sense of urgency:

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

What hangs in the balance? Where's the conflict? Conflict is story's lifeblood—another seeming no-brainer. But there's a bit of helpful fine print that often goes unread. We're not talking about just any conflict, but conflict *that is specific to the protagonist's quest*. From the first sentence, readers morph into bloodhounds, relentlessly trying to sniff out what is at stake here and how will it impact the protagonist. Sure, they're not quite certain what his or her quest is yet, but that's what they're hoping to find out by asking these questions. Point being—something must be at stake, beginning on the first page.

The Obvious Question

Can all three of these things be there on the first page? You bet. In 2007, literary theorist Stanley Fish published an editorial in the *New York Times* that answers just that question. He was rushing through an airport with only minutes to spare and nothing to read. He decided to dash into the bookstore and choose a book based solely on its first sentence. Here is the winner, from Elizabeth George's *What Came Before He Shot Her*:

> "Joel Campbell, eleven years old at the time, began his descent into murder with a bus ride."

Imagine that: all three questions were answered in a single sentence.

1. **Whose story is it?** Joel Campbell's.
2. **What's happening here?** He's on a bus, which has somehow triggered what will result in murder. (Talk about "all is not as it seems"!)
3. **What is at stake?** Joel's life, someone else's life, and who knows what else.

Who wouldn't read on to find out? The fact that Joel is going to be involved in a murder not only gives us an idea of what the book is about, it provides the context—the yardstick—by which we are then able to measure the significance and emotional meaning of everything that "comes before he shoots her."

Which is important, because after that first sentence, the novel follows the hapless, brave, poverty-stricken Joel through inner-city London for well over six hundred pages before the murder in question. But along the way we're riveted, weighing everything against what we know is going to happen, always wondering if *this* is the event that will catapult Joel into his fate, and analyzing why each twist and turn pushes him toward the inevitable murder.

Here's something even more interesting: without that opening sentence, *What Came Before He Shot* her would be a very, very different story. Things would happen, but we'd have no real idea what they were building toward. So, regardless of how well written it is (and it *is*), it wouldn't be nearly as engaging. Why?

Because, as neuropsychiatrist Richard Restak writes, "Within the brain, things are always evaluated within a specific context."[13] It is context that bestows meaning, and it is meaning that your brain is wired to sniff out. After all, if stories are simulations that our brains plumb for useful information in case we ever find ourselves in a similar situation, we sort of need to know what the situation *is*.

By giving us a glimpse of the big picture, George provides a yardstick that allows us to decode the meaning of everything that befalls Joel. Such yardsticks are like a mathematical proof—they let the reader anticipate what things are adding up to. Which makes them even more useful for the intrepid writer, because a story's yardstick mercilessly reveals those passages that don't seem to add up at all, unmasking them as the one thing you want to banish from your story at all costs.

The Boring Parts

Elmore Leonard famously said that a story is real life with the boring parts left out. Think of the boring parts as anything that doesn't relate to or affect your protagonist's quest. Every single thing in a story—including subplots, weather, setting, even tone—must have a clear impact on what the reader is dying to know: *Will the protagonist achieve her goal? What will it cost her in the process? How will it change her in the end?* What hooks us, and keeps us reading, is the dopamine-fueled desire to know what happens next. Without that, nothing else matters.

But what about stunning prose? you may ask. *What about poetic imagery?*

Throughout this book we'll be doing a lot of myth-busting, exploring why so many of the most hallowed writing maxims are often more likely to lead you in the wrong direction than the right. And this, my friends, is a great myth to start with.

MYTH: Beautiful Writing Trumps All

REALITY: Storytelling Trumps Beautiful Writing, Every Time

Few notions are more damaging to writers than the popular belief that writing a successful story is a matter of learning to "write well." Who could argue with that? It sounds so logical, so obvious. What would the alternative be—learning to write poorly? Ironically, writing

poorly can be far less damaging than you'd think. That is, *if you can tell a story.*

The problem with this, along with numerous other writing myths, is that it misses the point. In this case, "writing well" is taken to mean the use of beautiful language, vibrant imagery, authentic-sounding dialogue, insightful metaphors, interesting characters, and a whole lot of really vivid sensory details dribbled in along the way.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Who'd want to read a novel without it?

How about the millions of readers of *The Da Vinci Code*? Regardless of how beloved his books may be, no one says author Dan Brown is a great writer. Perhaps most succinct, and scathing, is fellow author Philip Pullman's assessment that Brown's prose is "flat, stunted and ugly," and that his books are full of "completely flat and two-dimensional characters . . . talking in utterly implausible ways to one another."[14]

So why is *The Da Vinci Code* one of the best-selling novels of all time? Because, from the very first page, readers are dying to know what happens next. And that's what matters most. A story must have the ability to engender a sense of urgency from the first sentence. Everything else—fabulous characters, great dialogue, vivid imagery, luscious language—is gravy.

This is not to disparage great writing in any way. I love a beautifully crafted sentence as much as the next person. But make no mistake: learning to "write well" is not synonymous with learning to write a story. And of the two, writing well is secondary. Because if the reader doesn't want to know what happens next, so what if it's well written? In the trade, such exquisitely rendered, story-less novels are often referred to as a beautifully written "*Who cares?*"

Now that we know what hooks a reader on the first page, the question is, how do you craft a story that actually does it? Like everything in life, it's easier said than done, which is why it's the question we'll spend the rest of the book answering.

CHAPTER 1: CHECKPOINT ✓

Do we know whose story it is? There must be someone through whose eyes we are viewing the world we've been plunked into—aka the protagonist. Think of your protagonist as the reader's surrogate in the world that you, the writer, are creating.

Is something happening, beginning on the first page? Don't just set the stage for later conflict. Jump right in with something that will affect the protagonist and so make the reader hungry to find out what the consequence will be. After all, unless something is already happening, how can we want to know what happens next?

Is there conflict in what's happening? Will the conflict have a direct impact on the protagonist's quest, even though your reader might not yet know what that quest is?

Is something at stake on the first page? And, as important, is your reader aware of what it is?

Is there a sense that "all is not as it seems"? This is especially important if the protagonist isn't introduced in the first few pages, in which case it pays to ask: Is there a growing sense of focused foreboding that'll keep the reader hooked until the protagonist appears in the not-too-distant future?

Can we glimpse enough of the "big picture" to have that all-important yardstick? It's the "big picture" that gives readers perspective and conveys the point of each scene, enabling them to add things up. If we don't know where the story is going, how can we tell if it's moving at all?

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HOW TO ZERO IN ON YOUR POINT

COGNITIVE SECRET:

When the brain focuses its full attention on something, it filters out all unnecessary information.

STORY SECRET:

To hold the brain's attention, everything in a story must be there on a need-to-know basis.