

Jude Cook on Byron Easy

Beginning Byron Easy

For a writer, the problem of beginning is, paradoxically, more like the problem of ending. The great dilemma of when – and how – to call time on all prior, failed attempts. Those false starts and bum-steers that litter or plague every writer's so-called career (and, if it is a first book, he doesn't have one yet). At what point can he definitively say to the world: 'Hi. Here I am. Please give me a paragraph's grace, because, despite the oppressive weight of 400 years of soaring prose from Cervantes to Thackeray to David Foster Wallace, I'm going to have a go myself'? Only when he can confidently announce the above will he be able to put an end to stuff he secretly hopes will one day be appended to his Collected Works under 'Juvenilia'.

Naturally, a beginning shouldn't be seen as merely a gauntlet set down by the greats. An artist must first have something to say, as Kandinsky warned, axiomatically (and this, also, is worth bearing in mind before you pick up the pen). It's how to say what you have to say that forms the crux of the problem. The overall tone or mode or register, let alone fundamental questions of exposition, or first-person versus third, et cetera. The opening line is a bell that has to be struck from the very first word. Heaney, in the introduction to his translation of Beowulf, called this 'finding the enabling note'. And the musical metaphor is apt. Start off in the wrong key, and it's all downhill from there.

Like the famous deathbed line (Nelson's, Larkin's), the famous first line also exerts an anxiety of influence. There was no possibility of taking a walk that . . . If I am out of my mind, it's . . . All happy. You get the picture. Judging by the preceding examples, a quiet or neutral tone seems the best option. But thinking about it too much can be paralyzing. The original first line of Byron Easy was: 'I must never get my hands on a gun'. I remember where I was when I wrote it. I was lying on a wine-spattered futon in a Crouch End attic room, not dissimilar to the one Byron almost immolates in the novel. At the time I was working in a recording studio and not earning much money. I wish I could say I was sharing a hipbath with Vicky Licorish, as Jeanette Winterson states in her introduction to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, but I have nothing so glamorously demi-monde to offer. However, a roll-up cigarette was most certainly dwindling in my pub-stolen Bass ashtray. A January rain was spitting inimically against the sash window. And I was flushed with the adrenalin of beginning. On balance, I was pretty proud of the line. I felt I had located the voice; had ended all my previous failed attempts to hear it. What's more, this opening salvo was – rather self-consciously, as I knew Byron Easy was to be a failed poet – a pentameter. I must never get my hands on a gun. I imagined this was mighty clever until, many years later, my agent drew a crisp blue line through it, yawning that she had 'read it all before.' And she was correct. It's

the opening line of a third-rate thriller.

Thus began the long process of revision. The beginning pages of a novel are always the ones that endure the most stringent re-writing, and Byron Easy was no exception. Looking at the present opening pages again, they are almost unrecognisable from those of the Crouch End days. They seem more a palimpsest, a mosaic formed from the competing demands of establishing character, incident, narrative momentum, and, of course, voice. In the end, I settled for 'My name is Byron Easy'. Logical, perhaps, with the book being an eponymous novel (although that title changed over time too. One working handle was Station to Station. Second-hand, yes, but not as egregious as Trimalchio in West Egg). Announcing the protagonist in the first line has precedent, of course. Call me Ishmael. Although, frustratingly, little is made of this spellbinding narrator's name in the remaining 500 pages of Melville's epic. And maybe, looking back, too much is made of mine. It's easy to get carried away when juvenilia is still shackling one's ankles. No matter. I had solved the problem of beginning, and (not quite the same thing in terms of becoming a novelist) of making a start.

BYRON EASY in Crouch End (Byron Crouchback?)

The worst thing a writer can do, while in the act, is imagine the paragraph they're struggling with between stout crimson hardcovers on a shiny Waterstone's table — that heart-stoppingly glamorous moment of seeing the finished artefact sitting there, ticking intelligently; a literary time-bomb, waiting to explode in the face of an unsuspecting public. To become self-conscious about the future of the work is fatal. Just get it down, the mad voice insists, inwardly. The same goes for the writing process, or one's authorial environment. However, it is a little-discussed fact that where one writes can profoundly influence a novel. At the moment, I have a very strict and controlled regime. Alarm, 6.10 am. Blind trudge to the living-room desk, 6.30. An oil drum of tea. Commence reading back the previous day's work, 7.30 . . . Helplessly peruse a paragraph of Nabokov, Turgenev, Alice Munro — succulent breakfast sweetmeats, 7.40 . . .

Then, at some point, inspiration will take one up on its wings, and actual writing will get done. Until 9.30 am, when it's time (for this author at least) to think about making a living as a tutor of English Lit. But it's a satisfyingly predictable and ordered routine — undergone at the same desk, six days a week. Trollope would have patted me on the head.

In contrast, my debut novel BYRON EASY was penned all over the place — like one of those road albums (Led Zep II, say) where each track is recorded and mixed in a different studio. I always feel one can tell: can detect the different textures, spot the joins. The wide, plane-tree-planted streets of Crouch End, N8, were the backdrop for the writing of the first chapter of the book, along with chunks of the second and third. So far, so conventional. There probably isn't a living room in Crouch that hasn't had a novel attempted in it over the years. And I liked my two years of living there — maybe the lack of a tube station, the village vibe, informed the fiction. There's something hopeful and energetic and concentrated about that first chapter. After this idyll, the rest of the book was written on a helter-skelter ride through different locations. A streaking GNER train for the railway sequences (literally looking out of the window, pen in hand). A Brockley back bedroom, belonging to a girlfriend, for Byron's back story (covering up what I was scribbling, like Austen, every time she came noseying in). The august library at UCL — oddly enough, some of the more erotic passages were forged here. Boredom? Or all that dry-as-dust learning making one horny? Other pages were whipped off in notebooks on the way to gigs; in the bath; in stolen moments at eccentric times of the day. Finally, the book was completed on an ailing PC in the Walthamstow flat where I still live; facing a cancelled piece of brickwork to maximise concentration; endlessly reworking the last chapters. It's a wonder any of it adds up. If you happen to be considering a novel, don't try this at home. Office space, regular hours, and an en-suite Jacuzzi is the way to go.

Yet, looking back, nothing can beat the unfettered freedom of those Crouch End pages. The occasional luxury of writing all day until dusk fell; then looking down from an attic window, Larkin-style, onto the heads of people waiting for the W7 bus; a sunset honouring the green glass of Alexandra Place. And all of it stored in the memory banks, ready to force my hand across the virgin page the following morning.

Imaginary Homelands

Usually, by the mid-point of a novel a writer realises the root of his protagonist's problems lie, in the Freudian sense, in his childhood. Or at least in his early home life. If he hasn't returned there by chapter two (the usual location

for the 'back-story' to be trotted out) he will do so by the middle. This is also the point where his energies are flagging, his wife has left him, and the money has run out — his lunchtime beans-on-toast is served sans toast (and very soon sans beans, sans hope, sans everything). This is fortuitous, as a return to an imaginary homeland gives a novelist a great surge of energy — it certainly did in the case of BYRON EASY, of which more later. As soon as an author steps into the Narnian interior, the pen flies across the page. It seems so much richer than the present. Naturally, as with the opening lines of a novel, a return home is not without its attendant problems — for most, this centres around the problem of autobiography. A large number of writers have dispensed with making up people and situations and opted for the truth — often with startling results. Proust's Combray; Kureishi's Bromley; Roth's Newark. Why invent a mythical hometown when the actual one offers so many possibilities? Why stick your imaginary toad in a synthetic garden when the real one is still so vivid?

For this author, not quite the same thing happened. Byron Easy's Hamford is a mythical town in the Hertfordshire commuter belt (a kenning of Ham, OE for home; and Ford, the suffix that denotes a town lies by water, hence: 'home on the river'). Admittedly it does bear a resemblance to an amalgamation of real Hertfordshire satellite towns, those Hicksville nowhere-villes where one's own 'forgotten boredom' is played out. At this point the writer longs to have been brought up on the Gangetic plains, or among the wind-torn towers of Chicago — anywhere but a place where a Greggs bakery and an antique market provide the best cultural options on a Saturday afternoon (and it was pleasing that the name Hamford took on connotations of 'hammy' the more I used it). Many nineteenth-century novelists found the made-up-real-place a reliable option: Austen's fictional Meryton (Harpenden?) in *Pride and Prejudice*; Hardy's thinly-disguised Dorchester in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. For me, once I found my protagonist back in Metroland, he immediately had to visit his grandmother, as I discovered that it's the places that stand behind home that give it a sense of illusory permanence. Those day-trips to the seaside, or to relatives, that extend for an aeon, after which one always returns, centrifugally. These excursions stand in opposition to the experience of adult life, where the movement so often seems entropic: a series of rented rooms, or your own house if you're lucky. And this house is always an attempt to recreate that first home — a longing for heimat, or simple nostalgia, in the original sense of the word (from Gk nostos 'return home' + algos 'pain' — homepain, the pain of never being able to go back).

For me, once I came to write about Byron Easy's childhood and his visits to Grandma Chloe, I found I couldn't stop: I wanted him to return there for the whole book. At the time, I was writing on an old PC in a back bedroom, facing the wall; necessarily as the inward eye doesn't need distraction of passing ice-cream vans, or street-hassle, or the tawdry reality of one's present day 'home'. The usual head-scratching dilemmas of which adjectives or adverbs to use (or whether to avoid them altogether), or how a sentence should run, evaporated as intense recollections of Byron's past — emotional, visual, olfactory — swarmed onto the blank page. In this sense, the novelist's problem of mid-project doldrums, of what your editor will brightly refer to as 'maintaining momentum' (for which read sanity, bank balance, coherent syntax) can be solved by sending your characters back to the streets they once thought of as their own. The novelist begins to take on the role of analyst, listening to his protagonist's tale of his formative years for clues that will elucidate his present disgraceful behaviour. What's more, he quickly finds the specific becomes weirdly universal, as every reader has a place they couldn't wait to get away from — or return to, if only in their imagination.

Jude

Cook Windmill interview - Featured Author

The Featured

Author piece will change every couple of weeks, each time showcasing a William Heinemann, Hutchinson or Windmill author. This may be broadly informed by publications, but not necessarily. At our regular meetings about the site we will also be examining sales opportunities and events that could decide when we use certain author's pieces on the site. All we need from you on this is some answers to the questions below (we have incorporated some questions that will be used for publicity purposes at the end). If you don't want to answer every question don't worry, answers can be as long or short as you like.

Why do you write?

Strangely,

I don't feel I have much choice in the matter. It's always been a compulsion since the age of 13, when I wrote my first novel and short stories.

In my 20s, I found I couldn't write fiction with the same easy facility – just poetry and songs. Then the prose eventually returned, like a muscle recovering from atrophy. Attempting some dramatic writing – screenplays and stage plays – helped enormously.

What's your inspiration for writing?

Hard

to pinpoint. To respond to the world by writing about it, by making music, pictures or sculpture about it, is the lot of the artist. A curse and a blessing. It's simultaneously the most selfish and altruistic act.

Far better just to enjoy life and consume other people's beautiful creations. Mostly, writing is, to use the cliché, ninety-nine per cent perspiration. But inspirations are everywhere. A seascape. A smile. A memory. Language itself.

What were you doing before you became a writer?

I was a musician and songwriter for the band Flamingoes, which I formed with my twin brother, James Cook. We released two albums twelve-years apart: Plastic Jewels (1995), and Street Noise Invades the House (2007). I'm very proud of both of them.

Who are your literary idols?

Bellow, Roth, Larkin, Plath, Dickens, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Fitzgerald, Woolf, Kawabata, Franzen, Hollinghurst, Amis, Kureishi, Zadie Smith . . . and I'd better add Byron.

And non-literary idols?

Dylan, Scott Walker, Bergman, Kieslowski, Almodovar, Charlie Kaufman, Mike Leigh, Barack Obama, Tony Benn.

Favourite book?

Vanity
Fair

Favourite film?

Hannah
and her Sisters (closely followed by Sideways, Withnail & I and Happy Go-Lucky)

Favourite band/album/song (pick any, or all three)?

Today
the band is The Smiths/ Album: Big Moon Ritual by Chris Robinson
Brotherhood/ Song: Bowie, 'When You Rock n' Roll With Me'

What have been the landmark moments in your life to date?

Moving
to London. Getting a recording
contract. And, many years later,
signing a book deal.

Where are you right now?

At my
living-room table, which is also my writing desk.

Your guiltiest pleasure?

A hot
bath on a Sunday morning; Joni's Hejira playing from the next
room.

What do you do to relax?

Play
the ukulele. Read poetry.

Approximately how many books do you own?

Must
be well over 1,500 by now.

Where were you born?

Hitchin,
Hertfordshire. Not the place's fault.

Fantasy Dinner party. Who would be your four guests and why?

Lord
Byron, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and Keats. No explanation needed.

Tell us about a book you own that you've never read.

Four
books. Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria
Quartet. I've had them for
years in the classic Faber covers.
I'm waiting for a long illness.

Cats or dogs?

Cats,
of course.

Any bad habits?

Looking,
but not listening.

Hunter S. Thompson used to type out *The Great Gatsby*
to know what it felt like to write it. What would be your choice?

Humboldt's
Gift

How many places have you lived?

This
is my tenth address in London.

If you could be anywhere now, where would it be and who with?

In
Florence, with my Huckleberry friend.

What are your writing habits?

Six
days a week the alarm awakes me at 6.10am. Then to the dark desk, to read back the previous day's work, or bits of research, or other people's fiction. By 7.30, I am usually in the act of writing . . . and finished by 9.30. One to two hours of intense creativity I consider a result. But sometimes I only get a paragraph or a couple of usable sentences. Then I pace out the rest of the day in my private pool, or reading Celine . . . Actually, I have to go to work, teaching English lit. They tell me this will change.

What are you reading now?

Willa
Cather's My Antonia; Grayzel's A History of the Jews; and Fiona Sampson's wonderful book Beyond the Lyric. Oh, and Palin's Python diaries.

What and where is your favourite bookshop?

Skoob,
Bloomsbury.

Who is largely undiscovered and should be read?

Cape
have a couple of terrific short story writers: Alexander MacLeod and Andrew Porter.

Where is your favourite place to read?

On
the tartan travel rug that is my bedspread.