

## Openings

I: I think the first page of a novel is very important, Linda. Do you agree?

L: The first page and also the blurb, I think, of a book. The first page, when you open it and you're standing flicking through books in a book shop and you think, "Should I buy this one?" What is it that gets you sort of really interested?

I: It varies from book to book, but I always... Let me put it this way: I'm willing not to get interested. If I read one page, two pages and I feel the book is completely dead to me, I put it to one side and I don't get a guilty conscience.

L: Even if the book's which other people have recommended.

I: That's right. Maybe I'll try it again later, because it could be something to do with the mood I'm in, how much time I have, this sort of thing. But I expect something to hook me and to get me to want to read more. And it should give it some idea of the characters or the setting or...

L: A little flavour of the book.

I: Have you got a good opening you could read to us to tell us about what you think is important?

L: Actually, I'm glad you asked, because I've got a book here which I read recently which is so difficult to describe that I'm recommending it to everyone. The title is *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. The author is John Boyne. The cover of the book is very plain — grey and pale blue stripes. And even just looking at the blurb at the back starts you thinking this is a very different kind of book because it says... "Usually we give some clues about the book on the cover, but in this case, we think it would spoil the reading of the book." And it says, a key sentence, it's about a nine-year-old boy, though it isn't a book for nine-year-olds. "And sooner or later you will arrive with Bruno at a fence. Fences like this exist all over the world. We hope you never have to cross such a fence." When I read that, I thought, "Goodness me. It said a lot very simply." Do you want me to give you the opening as well?

I: I'm longing to, after you said that.

L: Chapter One.

*One afternoon, when Bruno came home from school, he was surprised to find Maria, the family's maid – who always kept her head bowed and never looked up from the carpet – standing in his bedroom, pulling all his belongings out of the wardrobe and packing them in four large wooden crates, even the things he'd hidden at the back that belonged to him and were nobody's else's business.*

*'What are you doing?' he asked in as polite a tone as he could muster, for although he wasn't happy to come home and find someone going through his possessions, his mother had always told him that he was to treat Maria respectfully and not just imitate the way Father spoke to her. 'You take your hands off my things.'*

I: Looking down at the carpet at the beginning.

L: And you think, how does Bruno come to this extraordinary sort of existential fence from this point? And obviously as readers, we have many associations with striped pyjamas.

I: Well, possibly. I mean, it's a very domestic situation, isn't it. I mean, there's no... We don't know what's going to happen, of course, except that the family's going to move, apparently. But you're right. These little tensions seem...

L: It makes you start thinking. Is it just an ordinary story about a little boy who's in pyjamas? You think it could be. But on the other hand, the blurb at the back saying it's coming to a fence we hope you never cross indicates something quite traumatic. And the book develops from this beginning in a way which pulls you in.

I: Well, this novel obviously begins in medias res, doesn't it. There's no description of the town or village where they're living or anything like that. Very interesting. I think all in all, the first page of a novel is extremely important. Any novel is extremely important.

L: But is it the language or the setting or the characters which grab you, do you find?

I: I think it can vary. You want to feel that you can connect with something. The thrill, the excitement of turning the page. It's an important thing.

L: It is, yes.

I: I think.

L: I think also if you have an opening page which is just full of long descriptions, it's not going to hook you. I think that has to come later, don't you think?

I: Probably not, but I mean some books do begin like that. I mean some very famous books begin with descriptive passages. I mean, Hemingway, who was famous for his dialogue, began, for example, *A Farewell to Arms*, with this wonderful descriptive passage of the countryside and the soldiers marching through it, and so on and so forth, with the war in the background. It's very difficult to be dogmatic about this. And some... I think the start of a book can be somewhat provocative. It can kind of shock you even or surprise you or amuse you. There's one more novel whose first paragraph I'd like to share with you, Linda. And the novel is called *Behind the*

Scenes at the Museum, by Kate Atkinson, who's an English writer who's alive and well and writing today.

Chapter 1: 1951 Conception

*I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall. The clock once belonged to my great-grandmother (a woman called Alice) and its tired chime counts me into the world. I'm begun on the first stroke and finished on the last when my father rolls off my mother and is plunged into a dreamless sleep, thanks to the five pints of John Smith's Best Bitter he has drunk in the Punch Bowl with his friends, Walter and Bernard Belling. At the moment at which I moved from nothingness into being my mother was pretending to be asleep — as she often does at such moments. My father, however, is made of stern stuff and he didn't let that put him off.*