

'You might be locked in a world not of your own making ... but you still have a claim on how it is shaped. You still have responsibilities.'

Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (1995)

Poem of the week

Bodybuilders' Contest **Wisława Szymborska**

From scalp to sole, all muscles in slow motion.
The ocean of his torso drips with lotion.
The king of all is he who preens and wrestles
with sinews twisted into monstrous pretzels.

Onstage he grapples with a grizzly bear
the deadlier for not really being there.
Three unseen panthers are in turn laid low
each with one smoothly choreographed blow.

He grunts while showing his poses and paces.
His back alone has twenty different faces.
The mammoth fist he raises as he wins
is tribute to the force of vitamins.

Disgust with political leaders is nothing new. Here's the Roman poet Catullus, writing in Latin at the time of Julius Caesar more than two thousand years ago.

What is it, Catullus? Why do you put off dying?
Nonius the wart sits in the curule chair,
Vatinius swears falsely by his consulship:
what is it, Catullus? Why put off dying?



A curule chair

Beginnings and endings

Many authors regard first and last lines as the most challenging ones to write. Stephen King says *'There's one thing I'm sure about. An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this.'*

What about last lines: should they wrap up a story or leave things for the reader to wonder about?

Are the following openers or final lines:

1. 'The knife came down, missing him by inches, and he took off'
2. 'Now what the hell ya suppose is eating them two guys?'
3. 'Don't nobody believe nothing these days'
4. 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'
5. 'All this happened, more or less'
6. 'This is not a story to pass on'
7. 'There was no possibility of taking a walk that day'
8. 'It was the day my grandmother exploded'
9. 'It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody'
10. 'The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which'

Oliver's Evolution

His parents had not meant to abuse him; they had meant to love him and did love him. But Oliver had come late in their little pack of offspring, at a time when the challenge of child-rearing was wearing thin, and he proved susceptible to mishaps. A big foetus, cramped in his mother's womb, he was born with in-turned feet, and learned to crawl with corrective casts up to his ankles. When they were at last removed, he cried in terror because he thought those heavy plaster boots scraping and bumping along the floor had been part of himself.

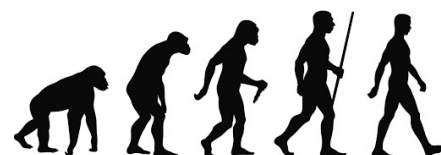
One day in his infancy they found him on their dressing-room floor with a box of mothballs, some of which were wet with saliva; in retrospect they wondered if there had really been a need to rush him to the hospital and have his poor little stomach pumped. His face was gray-green afterwards. The following summer, when he had learned to walk, his parents had unthinkingly swum away off the beach together, striving for romantic harmony the morning after a late party and an alcoholic quarrel, and were quite unaware until they saw the lifeguard racing along the beach, that Oliver had toddled after them and had been floating on his face for what might have been, given a less alert lifeguard, a fatal couple of minutes. This time his face was blue and he coughed for hours.

He was the least complaining of their children. He did not blame his parents when neither they nor the school authorities detected his 'sleepy' right eye in time for therapy, with the result that when he closed that eye everything looked intractably fuzzy. Just the sight of the boy holding a schoolbook at a curious angle to the light made his father want to weep, impotently.

And it happened that he was just the wrong, vulnerable age when his parents went through their separation and divorce. His older brothers were off in boarding school and college, embarked on manhood, free of family. His younger sister was small enough to find the new arrangements – the meals in restaurants with her father, the friendly men who appeared to take her mother out – exciting. But Oliver at thirteen felt the weight of the household descend upon him; he made his mother's sense of abandonment his own. Again, his father impotently grieved. It was he and not the boy who was at fault really when the bad grades began to come in from day school, and then from college, and Oliver broke his arm falling down the frat stairs or leaping, by another account of the confused incident, from a girl's dormitory window. Not one but several family automobiles met a ruinous end with him at the wheel, though with no more injury, as it happened, than contused knees and loosened front teeth. The teeth grew firm again, thank God, for his innocent smile slowly spreading across his face as the full humour of his newest misadventure dawned was one of his best features. His teeth were small and round and widely spaced – baby teeth.

Then he married, which seemed yet another mishap, to go with the late nights, abandoned jobs, and fallen-through opportunities of his life as a young adult. The girl, Alicia, was as accident-prone as he, given to substance abuse and unwanted pregnancies. Her emotional disturbances left herself and others bruised. By comparison, Oliver was solid and surefooted, and she looked up to him. This was the key. What we expect of others, they endeavour to provide. He held on to a job, and she held on to her pregnancies. You should see him now, with their two children, a fair little girl and a dark-haired boy. Oliver has grown broad and holds the two of them at once. They are birds in a nest. He is a tree, a sheltering boulder. He is a protector of the weak.

John Updike



ANSWERS

Beginnings and Endings

1. ending: Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*
2. ending: John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*
3. opening: Jason Reynolds, *Long Way Down*
4. opening: L P Hartley, *The Go-Between*
5. opening: Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*

6. ending: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
7. opening: Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*
8. opening: Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*
9. ending: JD Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*
10. ending: George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

