A few weeks ago, The Guardian published its 10 best first lines in fiction. It included many classics. Who could fail to recall, for example, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair’. (Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities)

I was surprised that the list omitted what is perhaps the most famous first sentence of all, and certainly a coda for much of general practice: ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’. (Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina).

These are grand openings by any standards, although great books are as likely to begin with the prosaic: ‘In deck chairs all along the front the dark pink knees of Bradford businessmen nuzzled the sun’. (Pat Barker, The Ghost Road). A reminder, perhaps, of the innocent symptom that presages serious illness.

As all literature students know well, the very first line often gives us a small but perfectly formed version of the rest of the novel, as in ‘Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins; my sin, my soul’. (Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita).

How often, in a consultation, does the patient give us their hidden agenda in the opening stanza, even before they have sat down — and sometimes before we have started listening? I feel a research study coming on.

James Joyce began his comic novel Finnegan’s Wake part-way through a sentence: ‘a way a lone a last a loved a long the/river run, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environments’. He later explained that the work ends mid-sentence and begins midway through the same sentence. Is this, perhaps, the chaos narrative of the individual formerly known as the ‘poor historian’?

Or as James Joyce might have concluded, ‘A way a lone a last a loved a long the’.

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