First and last

A few weeks ago, *The Guardian* published its 10 best first lines in fiction.¹ 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 lit crit 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 Environs'. 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'?

If the first sentence is the most important, perhaps the next most important is the hand-on-doorknob last sentence, when the patient may disclose that she has given up hope: 'O God, You've done enough, You've

robbed me of enough, I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone forever'. (Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair*). Or that she hasn't: 'Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt'. (Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*).

The last sentence may provide the clue that solves a puzzle offered earlier, as in 'Sorry I forgot to give you the mayonnaise'. (Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*). This makes no sense if you have forgotten his earlier comment, 'I always wanted to write a chapter that ended with the word mayonnaise'. Keep paying attention.

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

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