

The Red Pencil: Tom Behr's Blood Brothers

By Cindy Vallar

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind polished, finished manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Tom Behr's *Blood Brothers* (CreateSpace, 2011).

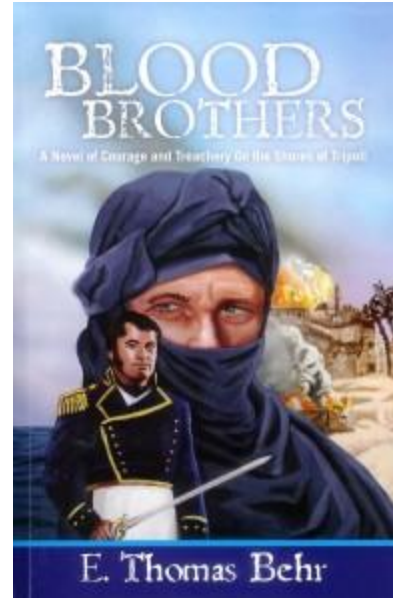
It

It was

It was a dark

It was a dark and stormy night.

After considerable pacing and final completion of the opening sentence of his future masterpiece, Snoopy declares, "Good writing is hard work!"¹ This assertion is what every historical novelist quickly learns, especially when tackling the first sentence (not to mention the first paragraph and page). The opening is so important that it has a name – the hook – because it not only begins the novel, but also appears on the book jacket, in your query letter to an agent, and on your promotions for the novel. The better the hook, the more intrigued the reader becomes and the faster you engage him/her, the more likely he/she will read your historical novel.



What differentiates a hook like Snoopy's from a great opening sentence that entices the reader? It must make readers care about the character(s) and the story's outcome. It contains a revelation that urges them to discover the story's resolution. It poses a question to lure the reader into finding out the answer. Why is this important? Think about how long it takes a potential buyer to decide which book to read next. He selects a book from the shelf. He scans the book's blurb, then opens the novel. After reading the first page, he decides. That's how long you have to capture your audience.

Most Americans learn The Marines' Hymn in school, but rarely are we taught the history of the events recounted in this song. "To the shores of Tripoli," the second line, refers to the first time United States Marines fought on foreign soil. In 1803 Tripolitan corsairs captured the USS *Philadelphia* and her crew of 300. In 1804 President Thomas Jefferson sent William Eaton on a daring mission to rescue those captives with a handful of Marines. Tom Behr's historical novel recounts this adventure. "As a child, perhaps 10 or 11, I had read about Eaton's mission and Lear's treachery in Kenneth Roberts' novel *Lydia Bailey* and with a young boy's impulsive sense of right and wrong, knew that what we had done as a nation was 'wrong'. That sense of wanting to help readers think more deeply about America's use of power – especially in the Muslim world following the tragic decision to invade Iraq" – is what motivated Tom to write *Blood Brothers*.

The original draft, written in 2005, opened with this sentence:

The boy sat in the secret hollow of a huge red oak, feeling the roughness of the jagged bark merge into his bare skin.

It's a good sentence, but it lacks the essential hook.

Peter Behr, Tom's twin and one of his four editors, read that early version. His experience as a journalist and former business editor of the *Washington Post* led Pete to suggest "that I get right into the major plot thread of Eaton's mission, in part to help readers unfamiliar with the history (most readers, I suspect) understand why Eaton was involved in Tripoli in the first place." Which Tom did, transferring the opening of the novel from the Mohawk Valley in North America to Malta.

They met in a dark tavern, in the warren of small, mean streets that had sprung up outside the city walls in the Floriana district.

This version hints at what may happen, but it still lacks the effectiveness of a good hook. "I hammered and chipped away at the opening sentence for weeks. . . . My editors challenged me to, in effect, 'turn the movie camera on,' so I captured not just the sound of the dialogue but the visual images as well." In the published version of *Blood Brothers* Tom succeeds in doing what his editors suggested as well as incorporating the essential elements of a good hook.

If I needed someone to slit a throat or steal a purse, Eaton thought, I would come here to find him.

When I first read this opening sentence, I wondered what would happen. I wanted to know why William Eaton would be in such a dangerous place. In other words, Tom "dumps the reader into a crisis, engages him or her emotionally, and . . . starts the questioning process."²

As I mentioned earlier, the first sentence is most important, but so is the first paragraph and the first page. If you haven't captured the reader or the agent by then, you're unlikely to gain a new fan or representation that leads to a publishing contract. So what was Tom's opening paragraph in the original version of *Blood Brothers*?

The boy sat in the secret hollow of a huge red oak, feeling the roughness of the jagged bark merge into his bare skin. He let his mind empty out, becoming quiet and open to the forest around him. A beetle, foraging for food, crossed over onto his leg. He felt the pull and release of its tiny claws on his skin as it worked its way across his body to move further up the trunk. As he quieted, the sounds of the forest around him began to come to life, the way the morning sunrise gradually turns dark shadows and unrecognizable shapes into bright, familiar clarity.

This is the reader's first introduction to one of the brothers – Henry Doyle. "I had been reading a lot about the Mohawks and the Iroquois nation, without really thinking about writing a novel. One morning, I woke from my sleep with the image of the young Henry Doyle, sitting in the huge red oak (actually the 250-year-old oak in the woods behind our house), watching the gathering at Johnson Hall and wondering who his father was. *Blood Brothers* began with Henry entering my consciousness and saying 'tell my story.'"

This passage provides an interesting glimpse into Henry's life, but it's backstory. Since this novel is really a story about Eaton and the first time the United States invaded foreign soil, it's not a good hook. That's why readers of the final version of the novel don't encounter this introduction to Henry until chapter four.

In the course of writing this novel, Tom selected four close friends to review his writing. Aside from Peter Behr (mentioned earlier), these included "Pete's daughter Alex Behr, a professional editor and award-winning fiction writer; Priit Vesilind, for years a highly-acclaimed writer for *National Geographic*; and Michael Peterman of Trent University (Canada), also an editor and writer." Tom

heeded their advice and “switched the focus to Eaton . . . to establish the basic plot threat of Eaton’s mission, get immediately into action, and to create more mystery around Henry Doyle. Readers learn about his past after they experience him in Malta.” The second version of the opening paragraphs became:

They met in a dark tavern, in the warren of small, mean streets that had sprung up outside the city walls in the Floriana district. The first to arrive, as planned, were General Eaton and Colonel Leitensdorfer.

They were joined shortly by Leitensdorfer’s contact, a British intelligence agent. He greeted the Colonel cordially.

“Colonel, a pleasure, I’m sure.”

Then he turned to the General. “And you would, I assume, be General Eaton?”

When Tom and I first discussed *Blood Brothers*, he shared the following with me: “If I have learned one lesson as a first time fiction writer, it is the value of feedback: to recognize the errors, clumsiness and undeveloped opportunities that my closeness to the work (and inexperience) kept me from seeing.

“The revisions reflect the combined strengths and limitations of how I write. Typically I will wake in the morning with a chapter or section clearly in my mind (I turn the next day’s assignment over to my subconscious when I go to sleep. I hear what I want to write as a movie script – the dialogue tends to flow immediately (I also probably read too much Hemingway at an early age.)

“As you’ll see, I intend the successive additions to serve a number of purposes: to create a clear, emotionally-charged sense of place, to provide more insight into the character’s thoughts and feelings beneath their dialogue, and to tighten the tension between characters and the suspense of the plot.”

This is what Tom succeeds in doing in the published version of Chapter 1.

If I needed someone to slit a throat or steal a purse, Eaton thought, I would come here to find him.

William Eaton had arrived early for that evening’s rendezvous with the British agent, Burton Grey. Grey had picked a bad place for their meeting – the Sedum Tavern – in a bad part of Valletta harbor. In the daytime, the square was a fish market. At night, other things were bought and sold.

The lengthening shadows cast by a fading sun played across the centuries-old weathered stone buildings fronted by awning-covered stalls. Eaton stood, unnoticed, in a boarded-up doorway, his cloak pulled tight against the damp cold rolling in from the harbor. With the approach of twilight, merchants were shuttering their shops and their customers were fleeing the square. Eaton watched as patrons entered the tavern: sailors from the ships of twelve nations crowding Valletta’s harbor, dock workers, pick pockets, thugs, cutthroats, and whores. A bright-eyed rat looked up from his supper of fish scraps on the shop table next to Eaton. Eaton nodded a greeting: paying a visit to your two-legged cousins, I suppose? Above the doorway,

rust stains like dried blood streaked downward over the stone from a crude iron hook in the wall. I wonder what has hung on that hook, Eaton thought. Fish—or men?

Eaton looked at his watch, then eased quietly from his hiding place into the tavern and stood in darkness near the door.

In four paragraphs, Tom manages to hook the reader. He makes you care. He entices you. He makes you wonder what is to come. In the subsequent pages of this first chapter, he introduces Henry Doyle, but cloaks him in mystery. “He fades in and out of view like a wraith, and kills quickly, without compunction or mercy. This change sets up the reader’s questions: ‘Who the hell is this guy Doyle?’ ‘Why is he involved?’ and ‘Can the Americans trust him?’” These are the questions the hook intends, and we keep reading because we’re intrigued to learn the answers.

Although Tom taught English for two decades, “my students taught me more than I ever taught them.” He majored in English at Colgate University, earned a Master’s degree in American Literature from the Bread Loaf School of English (Middlebury College), and a Doctorate in English Renaissance and 18th-century Literature from Princeton University. He and his wife divide their time between renovating a 1730’s farmhouse in New Jersey and summering in Nova Scotia. He wrote *Blood Brothers* “because I wanted to confront the truth of things” and when he decided to self-publish the novel, he sagely consulted several trusted editors who guided him in crafting a story that “captivates the reader and brings to life this remarkable undertaking, providing a gripping tale as intricately woven as a spider’s web.”³

Notes:

1. Charles Schulz’s lovable beagle actually borrowed his opening sentence from Edward George Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford*, which was published in 1830. More than a century later, this memorable worst first line, which contains fifty-nine words, serves as the inspiration for San Jose State University English Department’s Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest where entrants compose “the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels.”

2. Sandra Kischuk, “Literary Hooks,” *Writer’s Toolbox* (accessed 24 December 2011); available from <http://sandrakischuk.com/writers-toolbox/literary-hooks>.

3. I reviewed *Blood Brothers* for the October 2011 issue of *Pirates and Privateers*. Tom’s [website](#) includes a video trailer of the book, the history behind his novel, and its first eight chapters.