

Novel Openings: What Makes These Good?

Here are the openings from 20 excellent novels. Many of them are already classics. Have your students discuss why they might have impact on a reader.

1. **Call me Ishmael.** —Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851)
2. **A screaming comes across the sky.** —Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)
3. **It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.** —George Orwell, *1984* (1949)
4. **I am an invisible man.** —Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)
5. **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* (1859)
6. **The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.** —Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (1938)
7. **Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed.** —James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)
8. **Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.** —William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)
9. **Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu.** —Ha Jin, *Waiting* (1999)
10. **All this happened, more or less.** —Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969)
11. **They shoot the white girl first.** —Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (1998)
12. **Dr. Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature.** —Anita Brookner, *The Debut* (1981)
13. **Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.** —Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
14. **It was the day my grandmother exploded.** —Iain M. Banks, *The Crow Road* (1992)
15. **It was a pleasure to burn.** —Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)
16. **In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.** —F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
17. **It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York.** —Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963)
18. **He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.** —Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900)
19. **In the town, there were two mutes and they were always together.** —Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)
20. **The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting.** —Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)

Three powerful "hooks" from young adult novels:

- "Where's poppa going with the axe?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.** —E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (1952)
- There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.** —C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952)
- Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.** —J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997)