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Beginning *Monster School*:
Some author thought processes on creating the perfect start to a novel

D C Green

Rome wasn’t written about in a day. The hardest part about writing *Monster School* was figuring out where to commence my story. I wanted to have the best possible start to my new novel, not least because I’d heard many publishers reject the majority of manuscripts they receive from hopeful authors without even progressing to the second page. So I knew my first page needed to perform multiple tasks simultaneously, while also being utterly blemish-free and creating a powerful urge to turn to page two.

The simplest option would have been to begin with a massive info-dump before starting the actual story. With such a prologue, I could easily have explained the history, geography and socio-monstrous spread of my city of four million monsters. But I abhorred that easy option because it was obvious, dull and lacked a personal hook to entice readers to continue. I also feared such a deluge of information could easily have overwhelmed or confused my younger readers, and hence, caused them to stop reading. Instead, I brainstormed several possible non-dump story starts and settled with the literally most explosive…

In the crowded Market Square, a cyborg assassin fires his explosive arm at the distant human royals. The royal balcony explodes. Mummy police dive on the assassin, arresting him. Only then do we learn the murdered royals were robotic substitutes; the flesh and blood originals being far too valuable and vulnerable to risk appearing in public.

I liked this start for a number of reasons: it was action-packed and in *media res*, showed a range of interesting monsters and underlined the constant threat level to the tiny human population of Monstro City. But still I scrapped it.

Why? This beginning featured characters that would never be seen again; so I still needed to introduce my major characters. Worse, an assassination attempt didn’t tie in to the end of the story or to my major themes. Back to the drawing board.

After numerous rewrites, grumblings and scrappings, I finally began my story with the following three paragraphs:

‘My name is Thomas Regus. I’m a prisoner in two castles. One was built by giant ants; one constructed of lies. I had to escape both.’

I liked this opening the best so far. Yet to proceed further, these lines had to withstand a bombardment of essential introduction questions. Did this beginning provide a strong hook to entice readers to read on? Did we meet the major character and learn of his goal(s)? Was potential conflict established? Did the opening summarise the greater story in microcosm? Did it raise questions in the readers’ minds? (Two castles? Huh??)

All the answers seemed to be ‘Yes’!

Thus, via his thoughts, we meet the lonely human boy, Prince Thomas. My plan was to steadily expand the story from the prince’s mind to his immediate surroundings and gradually into the greater world of Monstro City beyond his protective ant-built walls. By proceeding at such a slow but steady pace, I hoped to allow time for readers to digest the complexities of Monstro City in easily-digestible chunks while meeting each of the amazing characters, one by one. So, in the explosive seventh paragraph, with a mighty ‘THOOOOM!’, Thomas’s ogre bodyguard Erica crashes into his story. (An ogre bodyguard? Huh??)
Erica is my second favourite monster. I usually don’t enjoy slowing my narrative to describe characters (though such descriptions are, of course, vital). But I find detailing monsters to be almost as much fun as writing action or humour. I also believe every description should have at least a little ‘wow’ factor – and raise more questions. Thus, to paragraph ten (easily the longest so far):

‘My ogre loomed three metres tall, her body covered in chain mail, her noggin rounder than Lord Boron’s belly, her eyes suspicious slits. On her hips, swords, knives and ancient guns jiggled and clanked. In her massive right hand, she clutched her trusty crossbow. In her left, she balanced two uneven plates of steaming food.’

Two paragraphs later, Thomas attacks Erica. I consider action the life-blood of children’s stories and hoped my readers would be wondering, ‘Whoa! Is this fight serious or playful? Is this the first step to Thomas escaping his first castle?’

From that point, I enlarged the scope of the story, bringing in information only where needed, while constantly ramping up the stakes and conflict levels. Towards the end of the first chapter, readers vividly learn why Thomas requires such a powerful bodyguard. He is attacked through his bathroom mirror by a hideous and deadly monster that I will leave a mystery for now.

By the time I’d finished the final draft of my first chapter, there were dozens of bloodied and inadequate drafts crammed into my computer’s trashcan. All the while I wondered: would my fussy editing and rewriting pay off? It certainly seemed to when my (then unpublished) manuscript won first place in the Adult Category of the Writing Classes for Kids and Adults Fantasy Writing Competition and placed runner-up in the 8th Kathleen Julia Bates Memorial Writing Competition.

Then the wonderful Paul Collins of Ford Street Publishing accepted not only Monster School for publication but also the next two books in my trilogy, City of Monsters.

Happy rewriting!

DC Green is an acclaimed children’s author and award-winning surf journalist. His new novel, Monster School, has been hailed by Ian Irvine as ‘a wild, wise-cracking ride’. Featuring amazingly monstrous artwork by Danny Willis, Monster School is available in good bookstores or online at www.fordstreetpublishing.com. For more DC stuff, check out dcgreenyarns.blogspot.com or the ‘DC Green Author’ Facebook page.
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