

How To Be A Happy Hooker Written by :: Kristen Painter

Keep your fishnets on; this article isn't about what you think.

"Call me Ishmael." Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

Ishmael and I have two things in common. We're both trying to catch a big fish. And we're both using a hook. That, however, is where I jump ship.

My hook is of the literary variety and the fish I'm trying to catch swims in a much different body of water: the sharky streets of New York City. You see I'm after an agent. Although if I caught an editor, I wouldn't throw her back. And if you're an unpubbed author, I'm guessing you feel the same way. Let's sharpen our hooks together, shall we? The elusive agent fish can be a slippery one, so a sharp hook is the best hook.

A great hook can help you capture that great fish. Or in this case, an agent's attention. Engaging the agent is truly key because getting an agent's attention can mean the difference between selling and not selling, contract and no contract. Mickey Spillane said, "The first page sells the book. The last page sells your next book." Mickey's a world class fisherman, so he knows what he's talking about. His book *The Long Wait* sold three million copies in one week. Yes, those are the correct numbers.

As writers we have very little time to make a very big impression on an agent. In a typical week, a successful agent might get 200 submissions. How do you make yourself stand out in that school of hungry minnows? With a glitteringly sharp opening hook.

So what's the purpose of an opening hook? It's simple, really. It should build enough expectation to keep the reader reading. Once that's accomplished, a sale won't be far behind. (Provided the rest of your book isn't chum, of course.)

But how does a hook do that? There are several ways: by putting questions in the reader's mind, by introducing one of the main characters, and by hinting at conflict. A hook may only do one of these, but the best hooks will do a combination of these (think of these as additional barbs to keep that reader firmly attached to your work).

A great hook will often drop you in the middle of the action, sometimes with a few lines of interesting dialogue. It will also leave you wanting more – a great hook doesn't give too much away, just enough to keep you reading.

That's quite a feat for one line to accomplish, but then a hook doesn't have to be just one line. The hook can be several lines or even several paragraphs. Having said that, let's look at some of the types of hooks.

The Layered Hook.

Articles

Here are three examples of Layered Hooks:

"Midnight. The witching hour some say. Since it was 12:07 am and I was standing over a dead body, I had to agree." Gena Showalter, *Awaken Me Darkly*

-Starting off with a dead body always makes for a great hook. We also get a taste of the heroine's attitude in this opening bit. Love it!

"Ruby drops of blood spattered the fair cheeks and wheat-colored braids of Chieftain Alrik Gunn's new bride. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

And the most deceitful.

Had he not been restrained by her clansmen, he would have slipped his hands around her pale throat and squeezed until the last breath left her conniving, false-hearted body." Kadie Prince, *Out Of The Ashes*

-Those are the first three paragraphs of my second as-yet-unpublished book, *Out Of The Ashes*. Are you curious as to why his new bride has blood spattered across her face and why he'd like to strangle her? You should be, if the hook is doing its job. (I'll tell you this much, the two are definitely related.)

Of course, that first line has hook elements on it's own – a new bride with blood on her face. But layer in the next few sentences and it gets a bit more interesting. Doesn't it make you want to read on? It does? Good! Can you call the agent currently looking at my stuff and tell them that? Thanks. I'll be sure to leave a spot for you on the dedication page.

"The world had teeth and it could bite you with them anytime it wanted. Trisha McFarland discovered this when she was nine years old. At ten o'clock on a morning in early June she was sitting in the back seat of her mother's Dodge Caravan, wearing her blue Red Sox batting practice jersey (the one with 36 GORDON on the back) and playing with Mona, her doll. At 10:30 she was lost in the woods. By 11 she was trying not to be terrified, trying not to let herself think, 'This is serious, this is very serious.' Trying not to think that sometimes when people got lost in the woods they got seriously hurt. Sometimes they died." Stephen King, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*

-Very few authors can hit the heights of creepy like Stephen King. The first line is a great hook but by the time you read the last one, you've got so many questions in your head you can't help but read on. How did she get lost in the woods between 10:30 and 11?

He also introduces us to his character and gives us enough info about her that we are already sympathetic. Who wouldn't want to know what happens to this little girl who likes baseball and plays with dolls? And how does she know that sometimes people die when they get lost in the woods? What has happened in her life to give her that knowledge?

The One Line Hook

This beast can be a bit trickier. After all you've only got one line to work with so word choice is important. One Line Hooks also come in various forms. Here are some great examples of the various kinds of One Line Hooks:

A. The Action Hook

"Ryan was nearly killed twice in half an hour." Tom Clancy, *Patriot Games*
-Introduces a character and conflict and raises questions of who was trying to kill him, why were they trying to kill him and how did he manage not to get killed.

B. The Dialogue Hook

"Be kind to dragons, for thou art crunchy when roasted and taste good with ketchup."
Sherrilyn Kenyon, *Dragonswan*
-Character introduction and questions. Who's speaking, the dragon? Dragons can talk? And how does the dragon know we're crunchy when roasted and taste good with ketchup...personal experience? Great stuff! This hook also uses the unusual (a dragon) to capture your attention. Is it just me or does the dragon seem related to Simi? (If you don't read Kenyon, this won't make any sense to you.)

C. The Setting/Mood Hook

"Rain fell like tiny silver teardrops from the tired sky. Somewhere behind a bank of clouds lay the sun, too weak to cast a shadow on the ground below." Kristin Hannah, *On Mystic Lake*
-This is a tough one to pull off well. Be careful you don't fall into the same trap Snoopy did and begin every manuscript with "It was a dark and stormy night..." That's not going to attract any fish. Just flies. A setting or mood hook has to capture the reader and draw them into the scene. It must also fit the tone of the book. I can guarantee you *On Mystic Lake* is not a comedy.

D. The Character Hook

"There once was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb and he almost deserved it." C. S. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
-How does he almost deserve it? Aren't you dying to know more?

"The girl was just plain amazing with the knife." Julie Garwood, *Mercy*
-Is she amazing with the knife in a good way or has she just carved up a body? What's she doing with a knife in the first place? Makes you want to read further, doesn't it?

'Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.' Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*
-Scarlett's got to be quite a woman if she's not beautiful but keeps men from realizing it.

Articles

Let's recap. Great hooks start in the action (perhaps with dialogue), ask a question, introduce a character, introduce conflict and build anticipation for what's to come. To quote James Scott Bell, "Act first, explain later. Begin with a character in action and conflict. You don't have to give a lot of information up front. Readers will stay with a character in action and conflict for a good long time."

One last note: don't start with a false hook. By this I mean don't start the story with a werewolf bicycling past in a mini-skirt and tube top only to reveal two paragraphs later that it was just a dream. Don't use a gimmick just for shock value. Your readers will know what you've done and they'll resent it.

Now go take a look at your opening line and see how it measures up. After all, you do want to catch a big fish, don't you?