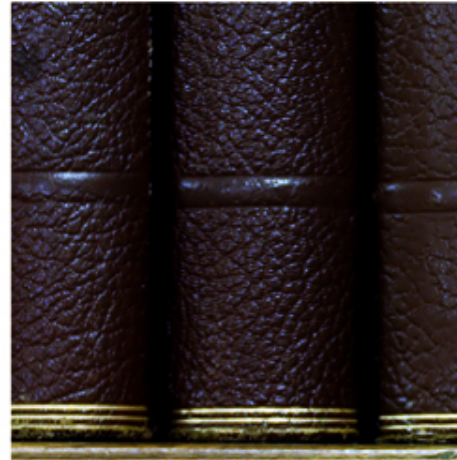
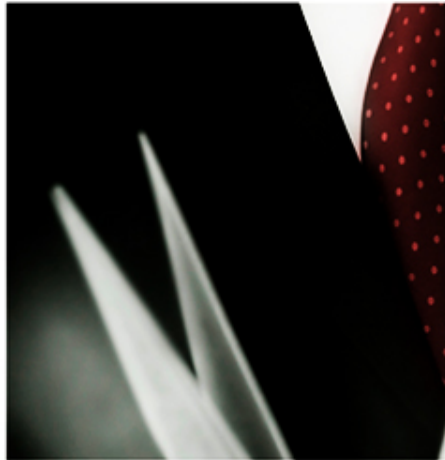


# READY, SET, GO

Creating a Compelling Beginning to Your Novel



# Take what you want and leave the rest!!!

- **There are no rules; there are tools and guidelines**
  - *What a writer ... "wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction...."when one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition."* — John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*



# Introduction

- The First Three Pages/Paragraphs
- The First Scene
- Handout available
  - [www.robinperini.com](http://www.robinperini.com)
  - “For Writers”, “Writers Notes by Robin”
- Presentation/Survey Results available
  - [www.robinperini.com](http://www.robinperini.com)
- Drawing for Book
  - Scene and Structure by Jack Bickham
  - First Five Pages by Noah Lukeman
  - GAME OF FEAR by Robin Perini





# The Opening First Three Pages

# The First Three Pages

- **An opening's job is to hook the reader into turning the page and becoming invested in the story so they keep turning the pages**
- **You don't have three chapters, or one chapter or even three pages. You have three paragraphs...one page if you're lucky.**



# Survey of Agents – Thanks

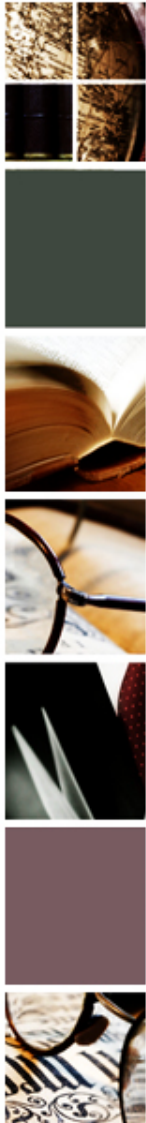
- 
- **Jill Marsal, Marsal Lyon Literary Agency**
  - **Laurie McLean, Fuse Literary**
  - **Sharene Martin-Brown of Wylie-Merrick Literary Agency**
  - **Alexandra Machinist, Linda Chester Literary Agency**
  - **Adele Horwitz, Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency, former editor**
  - **Elizabeth Pomada, Larsen-Pomada Literary Agency**

# Survey of Agents

- **How many pages do they read?**
  - Most know with > 90% certainty on page 1 if they do NOT want to read on
  - You have 1-3 pages, possibly up to 10; one agent in this survey will read up to 40 pages
- **What info do you want to see in first pages**
  - Characters and Conflict (Problem), High Concept, Voice, Set up Reader Expectations, Original/Unpredictable (Push boundaries, don't explode them)
- **Craft they wish authors would learn**
  - Character Arc/Story Arc (67%)
  - Plot (50%)
  - Conflict, Dialogue (33%)



# Survey of Agents – Mistakes Authors Make

- 
- **Most common reasons for story not working**
    - Poor writing (including grammar, misspellings)
    - Boring (lengthy narrative, too much backstory/ background, repetitive – ideas, phrases, words)
    - No voice
    - No dramatic tension, no hook, no pace
    - No story
    - Telling, not showing (putting reader at a distance)

**“I need a strong sense of character and conflict. Those two elements of fiction alone will sell a book.”**




# Survey of Booksellers

- **Top 3 Reasons Readers Purchase**
  - Author (100%)
  - Back Blurb (83%)
  - Cover (67%)
- **50-70% of readers read/skim first page**

# Survey of Readers

- **Top 3 Reasons Readers Purchase**
  - Author \*
  - Back Blurb \*
  - Cover, First page
- **66% read first page before purchasing**
- **What do you want to know in the opening?**
  - Character to care about
  - Type of book (genre, tone, etc.)
  - Who/what to root for

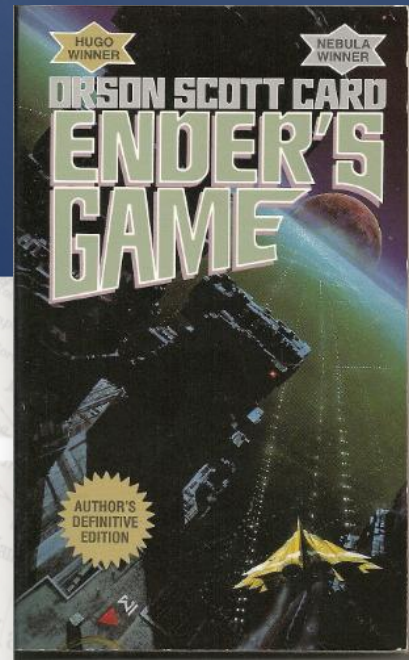
# Hook the Reader

- 
- Types of Hooks
    - Beginning Hooks (openings, scenes, chapters)
    - Ending Hooks
      - First page, third page, scene, chapter, book
  - Categories of Hooks
    - Threat of Danger (Emotional or Physical)
    - Shock Factor
    - Ending Question
    - Ending Prediction
  - Let's look at some hooks!



# Dialogue Only

## Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card



"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."

"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. TOO willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"

"If we have to."

"I thought you said you liked the kid."

"If the buggers get him, they'll make me look like his favorite uncle."

"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."

# Elements of a Great Opening

Use as many as possible

- **Set your tone and maintain it**
- **Set reader expectations**
- **Introduce your theme early, and explore it on different levels throughout the book**
- **Create a question in the reader's mind**
- **Intensity**
- **Compelling Situation**
- **MOTIVATE, MOTIVATE, MOTIVATE**
- **Make it concise: what does your reader REALLY need to know?**

# Elements to a Great Opening

- **Characters**
  - Readers must fall in love with OR want to be your character.
    - Emotional bonding with the first character they meet (Imprinting)
      - How to handle imprinting if the first character introduced is not the hero or heroine.
  - Let the reader know who to root for/against immediately
  - Who, what, where, when and how must be introduced immediately
  - Character goal must be introduced immediately
- If your characters don't care, why should we?






# Dialogue Only

## Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- How



"I've watched through his eyes, I've listened through his ears, and I tell you he's the one. Or at least as close as we're going to get."

"That's what you said about the brother."

"The brother tested out impossible. For other reasons. Nothing to do with his ability."

"Same with the sister. And there are doubts about him. He's too malleable. Too willing to submerge himself in someone else's will."

"Not if the other person is his enemy."

"So what do we do? Surround him with enemies all the time?"

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"I thought you said you liked the kid."

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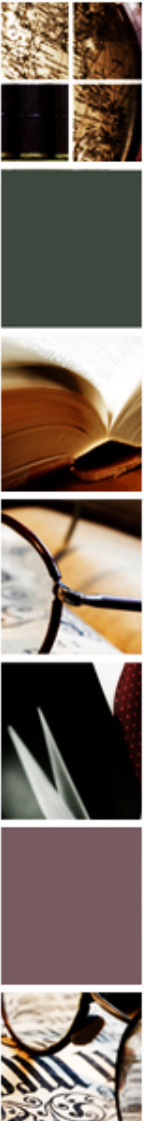
"All right. We're saving the world, after all. Take him."

TYPE of Hook – Threat of Danger, Shock Factor

# Third person Internal Dialogue

## Naked in Death by J.D. Robb

- Genre type
- Tone/Imagery
- Backstory – Emotional component
- Internal Conflict



She woke in the dark. Through the slats on the window shades, the first murky hint of dawn slipped, slanting shadowy bars over the bed. It was like waking in a cell.

For a moment, she simply lay there, shuddering, imprisoned, while the dream faded. After ten years on the force, Eve still had dreams.

Six hours before, she'd killed a man, had watched death creep into his eyes. It wasn't the first time she'd exercised maximum force, or dreamed. She'd learned to accept the action and the consequences.

But it was the child that haunted her. The child she hadn't been in time to save. The child whose screams had echoed in the dreams with her own.

TYPE of Hook – Shock Factor

# Openings Should be Used to Set Up Conflict


- **Bickering is NOT conflict**
- **Conflict must reside WITHIN the character**
- **Conflict is a struggle between deeply held belief systems**
- **Balance out internal, external and relationship conflicts**
- **The heroine's goal is NOT to fall in love**
  - Give your main characters their own story
- **Introduce new story questions before answering the other ones**





# Raven's Prey by Jayne Ann Krentz w/a Stephanie James

- External Conflict
- Who to root for
- Probable romantic hero



Perhaps he was merely an adventuresome tourist who had drifted into the obscure **little Mexican town** in search of some action. Perhaps he had wandered into the cantina for the same reason **she** had: **to get a bite to eat** and have a bottle of the local beer. Perhaps he was a perfectly innocuous male who, when he realized there was another **North American** in the cantina, would come over to her table to chat.

Then again, **perhaps he was her executioner.**

Type of Hook – Ending Prediction, Ending Question

# Internal Dialogue

## Dance with the Devil by Sherrilyn Kenyon

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- How

### *New Orleans, The Day After Mardi Gras*

Zarek leaned back in his seat as the helicopter took off. He was going home to Alaska.

No doubt he would die there.

If Artemis didn't kill him, he was sure Dionysus would.

The god of wine and excess had been most explicit in his displeasure over Zarek's betrayal and in what he intended to do to Zarek as punishment.

For Sunshine Runningwolf's happiness, Zarek had crossed a god who was sure to make him suffer even worse horrors than those in his human past.

Not that he cared. There wasn't much in life or death that Zarek had ever cared about.

Type of Hook – Ending Prediction, Shock Factor

# Is this a hook?

It was a cold and rainy day.  
Lyssa Cafferty walked down the  
street going home for the  
evening.



# Writing so Readers Care: Use S-P-I-C-E-D

- Specificity (including senses)
- Powerful Verbs, etc.
- Image-making and picture-forming words
- Compelling Dialogue (Inner/Spoken)
- Ending Hooks (And Openings) aka Surprises!
- Deep Point of View



# Secret Obsession (August 2014)

**S**pecificity


**P**ower Words

**I**magery

**C**ompelling  
Dialogue

**E**nd Hooks

**D**eep POV



The **sting** of frozen rain **pricked** Lyssa Cafferty's cheeks, **another attack** couldn't prevent. She hurried from the L station toward her small Chicago apartment. **If only she could pull her hood over her head, duck down and avoid the** **piercing** **needles of ice on her face,** but then she'd lose her peripheral vision.

She couldn't afford to allow comfort to trump safety.

Not now. Not ever.

# Craft Tip: Watch Out

- 's/he felt,'
- 's/he thought,'
- 's/he saw,'
- 's/he wondered,'
- 's/he realized...






# Activating an Opening

- Title
  - CHRISTMAS CONSPIRACY
- Log Line
  - N/A
- First Line
  - A gut wrenching howl sounded from somewhere down the prison's hallway. Another prisoner on the wrong end of an interrogation. A barked question. A moan of agony.

# VERSION 1

## (The Thinking it Through On Paper Draft)



*A gut wrenching howl sounded from somewhere down the prison's hallway. Another prisoner on the wrong end of an interrogation. A barked question. A moan of agony.*

*Daniel Adams winced in sympathy. He hated how these old stone passageways echoed every scream. He recognized this guy's resistance, though. Daniel didn't know what the man had done, but the prisoner at the far end of the hallway had been questioned and brutalized every day since Daniel had been there. However long that was.*

*Close to the breaking point. He could tell because it wouldn't take much more for him to tell them everything*

# VERSION 2

## (Honing in on More Important Details)



*"We start again," the voice said, the English nearly perfect. "Why did King Leopold hire Logan Carmichael to go to Texas?"*

*A gut-wrenching howl echoed through the prison's stone passageway. Daniel flinched, beaten and bound to a chair, awaiting his own daily interrogation by the sadist.*

*"Traitor," the unknown prisoner down the hall challenged.*

*"Silence! I have more than one way of getting this information, and you are not that important to me. The so-called security expert should be disgraced for not preventing the massacre in the throne room, not trusted with more assignments." A whip cracked across flesh. "What has Carmichael been commanded to do?"*



# VERSION 3 – Final Version

## (Active Writing Utilizing Deep Point of View)



“We start again,” the voice echoed down the hall, sliding through the bars to reach Daniel.

He hated the perfect English accent, could feel himself sweat awaiting his own daily interrogation.

“Why did King Leopold hire Logan Carmichael again?”

A gut-wrenching howl echoed through the prison’s stone passageway. Daniel flinched. If only he could manage to escape, but beaten and bound to a chair, he was at the sadist’s mercy.

“Traitor,” the unknown prisoner down the hall challenged.

“Silence! I have more than one way of getting this information, and you are not that important to me. The so-called security expert should be disgraced for not preventing the massacre in the throne room, not trusted with more assignments.” A whip cracked across flesh. “What has Carmichael been commanded to do?”

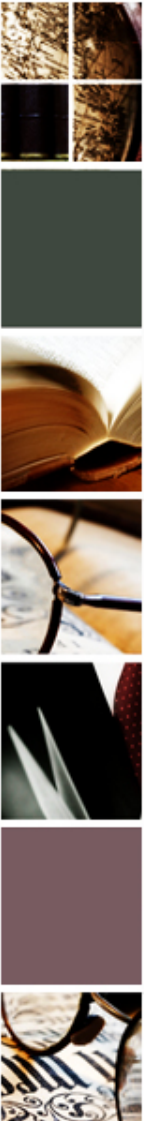
Daniel tried to force his eyes open, but they’d swollen shut, and dried blood sealed the lids tight. He yanked on his ropes. A warm trail of liquid coursed over his hands and fingers. Maybe he just imagined the sensation. He’d lost feeling in his arms hours ago and his shoulders had gone numb.

# Activating an Opening

- Title
  - COWBOY IN THE CROSSFIRE
- Log Line
  - N/A
- First Line
  - A gut wrenching howl sounded from somewhere down the prison's hallway. Another prisoner on the wrong end of an interrogation. A barked question. A moan of agony.

# VERSION 1

## (The Thinking it Through On Paper Draft)



*Four-foot long icicles and Texas didn't go together.*

*Blake Reynolds paced the wooden floor, nerves wound tighter than an over-cinched saddle. Sleet pounded the roof, hammering the century-old ranch house with what the Weather Channel had termed the worst ice storm in decades. He'd issued an order hours ago for folks in the county to hunker down until further notice. Below freezing temperatures and unrelenting ice made travel hazardous. Blake tilted the brim of his hat back as he glanced at the silent police radio sitting silent on the oak sideboard. "Guess we're lucky it's quiet, huh Leo."*

*A whine escaped the Lab-mix, curled on the rug next to the fire. "Or not."*

*Being alone with his thoughts didn't suit Blake well. The sparse room gave him no distraction, but at least he hadn't unpacked enough in the eighteen months he'd been back to make running from memories any tougher than normal.*



# VERSION 2

## (Starting Earlier)



*"Mommy, please don't die."*

*Banging sleet echoed like a drum off the car's roof. Amanda Hawthorne struggled in and out of consciousness as a small, icy-cold hand patted her face.*

*"The bad men might come back."*

*Oh, God. Had they been found again?*

*"Ethan?" Her heart thudded, and she twisted toward his voice. She had to get her son to safety. Knifelike pain sliced across her flank. "Oh. She crumpled in her seat, pressing hard against the gunshot wound on her right side. Wet and sticky. It had started bleeding again.*

*Biting her lip against the throbbing, she pasted a confident smile on her face and looked toward her five-year-old. "You okay, little man?"*

# VERSION 3 – Final Version

## (Active Writing Utilizing Deep Point of View)



A wicked gust of winter wind buffeted Amanda Hawthorne toward the front entrance of her brother's home. She wrapped her flimsy coat tighter around her body and lowered her head. Another cold blast nearly knocked her down. Even the weather fought to keep her out of Vince's house. Well, this freak ice storm wouldn't win, and neither would her brother. He'd be furious, but she was staying. Just until she found another job.

She breathed in, hoping to kill the perpetual french-fry smell that permeated her clothes from her final shift at Jimmy's Chicken Shack. She could've lived with the odor and her aching feet, but she couldn't take his octopus hands, his foul breath or his large body trapping her against the wall in his storage room. She shuddered at the memory. She wouldn't go back. But first, she had to face Vince.

With a deep breath, she unlocked the door. "Big brother, I've got bad news. You may have houseguests for a while—"

Her voice trailed off. The photos that had lined the entryway hall lay shattered on the tile floor. The small table near the doorway teetered on its side, crushed.


"Vince?" Her heart thumped like a panicked rabbit. She ran into the living room. The place was in shambles. "Ethan?" Oh, God. Where was her son?

# Thanks to those who provided samples

- **Love is a Game - Example**
- **Title**
- **Log Line**
- **First line**
- **First page**
- **General Comments**



# What I Saw

- 
- The Good
    - Good writing, and some great writing
    - Intriguing stories
  - Areas to improve
    - Find the drama
    - Specificity
    - Activate your writing
    - Give characters depth. We need to care.
    - Start in the right place
    - Travelling at the beginning is risky
    - Dump the backstory

# Love is a Game

Would we read  
page 2?

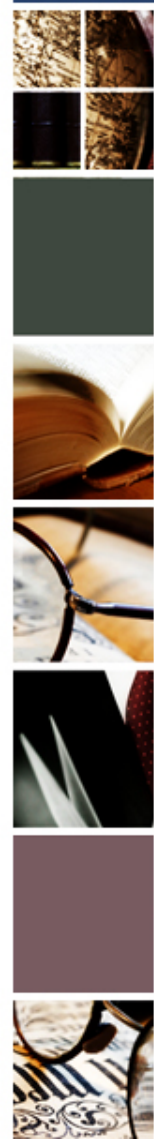
**Not yet...but...**

*Peter Rich barely noticed the sleepy little town as he drove through it. The fact that its business district was only two blocks long and there wasn't a traffic light in sight had little to do with it. The sign read "Buttercup Ridge - Home of the annual Buttercup Festival: population 631" and that was more than he needed or wanted to know. He'd been driving nearly twelve hours; he was tired and just wanted to get to Marty's cabin before the impending downpour. The quaint shops in the mountain village and the pretty park area running the length of the business district failed to impress him. The truth is, he didn't want to be here—wilderness wasn't his thing. He liked cities, especially his city, New York. That was the pulse of the country, where everything important happened. Looking around, he ran a hand through his overly long hair to the ends curling just over the collar of his shirt.. What could possibly happen here? "Damn Marty." He smacked the steering wheel.*

# Love is a Game – Part 2

Would we read  
page 2?

~~Much Closer~~



*A bright flash of lightning preceded a deafening thunder. He swerved to narrowly miss being crushed beneath the trunk of a large tree that fell victim to the bolt of lightning. At the bottom of yet another hill, he peered along the left for a break in the trees that would indicate the driveway to the cabin. A large round object rolled down the hill toward him. As it neared, Peter made out the hideous features of a clown's head. He'd hated clowns ever since his mother ran off with one when he was four.*

*Rain pelted the windshield. As he turned on the wipers he noticed a brightly painted van stopped on the shoulder atop the next hill. Another lightning strike silhouetted the bottom half of a female form protruding from under the raised hood.*



# Reminder - Activate Your Writing

- **SPICED**
- Use powerful, picturing-forming and image-making words
- Evoke emotions with your word choices
- Excuse me, your research is showing....
- Interpreting scenes through the genre and the viewpoint characters' emotions
- Deep Point of View – critical to active and emotional writing



# Love is a Game – Part 3

Would we read  
page 2?

**Yes!**

*A bright flash of lightning scissored across the sky. Thunder cracked with a deafening clap. Peter Rich swerved to narrowly miss being crushed beneath the trunk of a large tree.*

*Keeping his job wasn't worth plunging off a cliff in the middle of nowhere.*

*The sky opened up and rain pelted the windshield. Terrific.*

*Visibility down to a few feet, he tapped the brakes and white-knuckled the steering wheel. His boss could keep his distraction-free cabin in the wilds of Vermont. The unemployment line in New York City looked damn good right now.*

*With a flick the wipers squeaked back and forth in a blur. The curve appeared out of nowhere. He jerked the steering wheel to round the bend. A brightly painted van appeared out of nowhere on the shoulder of the road.*

*Peter slammed his brakes and skidded to a stop. His heart thudded against his chest. Another lightning strike silhouetted the bottom half of a curvaceous female form protruding from under the raised hood.*

*Things were lookin' up. Maybe a few weeks in Buttercup Ridge wouldn't be the solitary confinement he'd expected.*



**COMMENTS AND THOUGHTS?**





# FIRST SCENE

# What's a Scene?

- Basic large building block of the structure of any long story
- Analogous to Cause and Effect; Stimulus and Response
- Scene – a segment of story action, written moment-by-moment, without summary, presented onstage in the story “now”. (It could be acted out on screen)



# A Scene Starts with Character

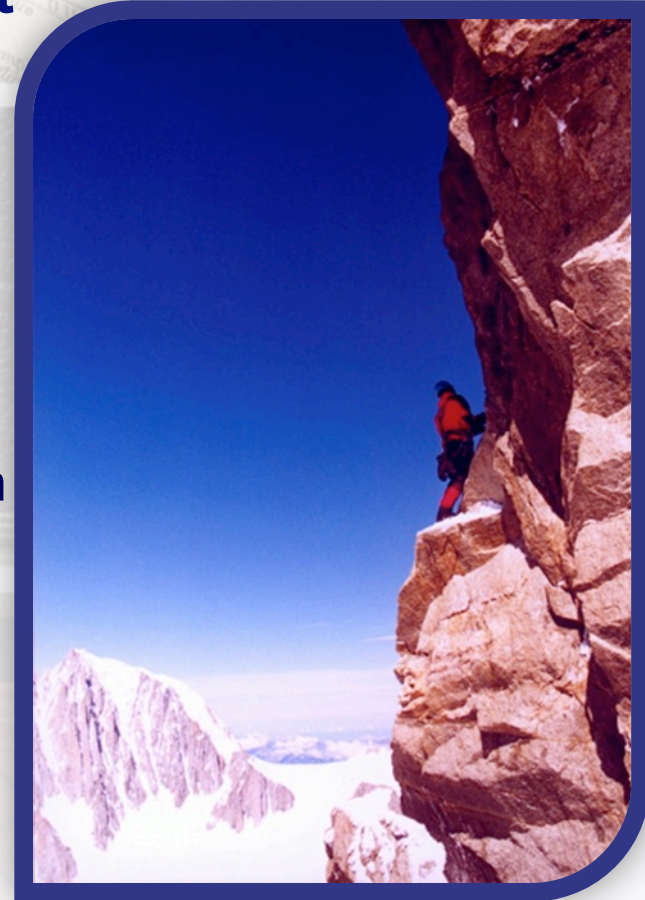
- Create Characters Readers Care About
- Put them in jeopardy (physical and/or emotional)
  - Make it personal (not just a world in danger, Grandma lives there)
  - Isolate the character so choices are limited
- GMC
  - Goal: How much a character cares about his goal is in direct proportion too how much the reader will care (Laura DeVries)
  - Motivation – why he wants it and what makes it important
  - Conflict – what's stopping him from getting it and what are the stakes (what terrible consequences will result if he doesn't get it?)
- Character Arc
- Surprise the Reader





# Purpose of a Scene

- **Take a character through conflict**
  - Things get worse...or they get better
  - Scene has
    - GOAL – CONFLICT – DISASTER
- **Response to a scene**
  - Sequel
    - EMOTION – QUANDARY –  
DECISION – ACTION
  - New events/scenes stem from emotion
- **The mistakes people make**
  - Writing scene without emotion.
  - Writing scene without conflict.
  - Writing scene without an arc
  - Writing a scene without purpose/goal
  - Writing a scene that isn't compelling.
  - Writing a backstory heavy scene where significant detail are based on research, not emotion



# The Key to Any Scene - Emotion

- Actions don't drive the story.  
Actions drive emotions.  
**Emotions** drive the story!

## Motivated Drama



# Arc of the Scene

- **Polarity of Arcs**
- **Types of Arcs**
  - Character, Scene, Chapter, Turning Points, Book

**Hope**



**Despair**



# Create a Scene

- Scene
  - Goal
  - Conflict
  - Disaster
- Sequel
  - Emotion
  - Quandary
  - Decision
  - Action



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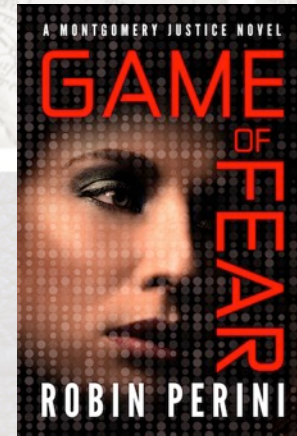
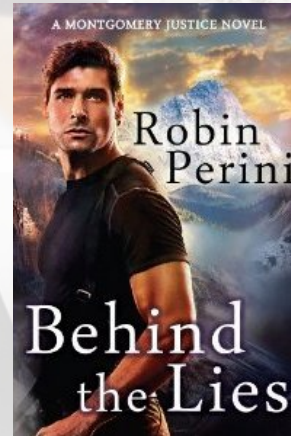
# Conclusion

- **Trust your instincts**
- **Hook ‘em in**
  - **SPICED**
- **Don’t let them go**
  - **Scene and Sequel**

**“There is only one type of story in the world-YOUR story.”**  
**– Ray Bradbury**



# Q&A and Drawing



[www.robinperini.com](http://www.robinperini.com)

