

How to Start Your Book in the Right Place – Fiction Example

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By Jennie Nash

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping. **[We don't know what the reaping is, but we know that it's something to be feared. This is a big day, a bad day. This is the day where the story must start.]**

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Prim, curled up on her side, cocooned in my mother's body, their cheeks pressed together. In sleep, my mother looks younger, still worn but not so beaten-down. Prim's face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named. My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me. **[We know from this description that the narrator has a family she loves. They have been through some kind of trouble. All this is backstory but it is not an info dump. It is part and parcel of how the narrator sees the world. We get a sense from it what she cares about. The narrator still seems to believe her sister can be spared from the trouble her mother has suffered. Thus, we know what is at stake. Thus, this is not "gearing up" or "ramping up." This is good storytelling.]**

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. **[Trust is a major theme of this novel. This little snippet of backstory about the cat is not random. It is a mini-version of the entire story.]** Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. **[The narrator is responsible for feeding her family. The reader is now really wondering what is going on here...]** But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

Entrails. No hissing. This is the closest we will ever come to love. **[A statement about what this narrator most wants in the world. Love. Real love. Not love based on mere survival.]**

I swing my legs off the bed and slide into my hunting boots. Supple leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab my forage bag. **[The narrator, who we now assume is a young girl, is heading out alone by herself on this big bad day. We want to know why and we have begun to worry for her – in other words, we care. And we’re not even at the end of page 2]** On the table, under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little goat cheese wrapped in basil leaves. Prim’s gift to me on reaping day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slip outside. **[Despite this dire situation, this family is full of love. They have something to lose.]**

Our part of District 12, nicknamed the Seam, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces. **[This is a grim place...]** But today the black cinder streets are empty. Shutters on the squat gray houses are closed. The reaping isn’t until two. May as well sleep in. If you can. **[But something about to happen makes it even grimmer...]**

Our house is almost at the edge of the Seam. I only have to pass a few gates to reach the scruffy field called the Meadow. Separating the Meadow from the woods, in fact enclosing all of District 12, is a high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it’s supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods — packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, bears — that used to threaten our streets. But since we’re lucky to get two or three hours of electricity in the evenings, it’s usually safe to touch. Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live. Right now, it’s silent as a stone. **[All of this is information we need about the world, yes, but it is presented 100% from the narrator’s POV. She describes what the edge and the fence is in theory, and then describe what it is to her in reality- not a deterrent at all. And then she explains her relationship to it – she has total disdain for it. It is “silent as a stone.”]** Concealed by a clump of bushes, I flatten out on my belly and slide under a two-foot stretch that’s been loose for years. **[Backstory as context – whatever is happened has been happening for awhile.]** There are several other weak spots in the fence, but this one is so close to home I almost always enter the woods here. **[She knows this world inside and out. She is a savvy hunter.]**

As soon as I’m in the trees, I retrieve a bow and sheath of arrows from a hollow log. Electrified or not, the fence has been successful at keeping the flesh-eaters out of District 12. Inside the woods they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow. But there’s also food if you know how to find it. My father knew and he taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run. **[More backstory but again, in context and wholly from her POV. The author doesn’t just say, ‘There**

are orphans and people died and it takes skill to survive here.' She lets the character speak of what this situation means to her.]

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons. But most are not bold enough to venture out with just a knife. **[She is brave.]** My bow is a rarity, crafted by my father along with a few others that I keep well hidden in the woods, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. **[And sly.]** My father could have made good money selling them, but if the officials found out he would have been publicly executed for inciting a rebellion. Most of the Peacekeepers turn a blind eye to the few of us who hunt because they're as hungry for fresh meat as anybody is. **[Detail about the world, but they are personal.]** In fact, they're among our