

FIRST PAGE SURGERY EMOTIONAL DEPTH



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This opening stood out for me. The writing is strong, the narrative voice confident and full of character. It is concise and quirky, taking us down unexpected paths with assurance. We are pulled in, intrigued.

It quickly becomes apparent that the opening line is Carl's answer to someone asking whether he has ever done a heart transplant. The question is interestingly specific, and prompts Carl's whimsical thoughts to illustrate a situation we can easily visualise: two doctors at a sink in Hallington Hospital. Visual details are slipped in discreetly, anchoring us in the scene early on, which is important. If we had continued to stay in Carl's head for too long, we would lose interest.

Character is also subtly and quickly constructed. We know Carl is 38 years old and a surgeon from South Africa. We know that Dr Hughes is an intern. Carl is irritable with a slight air of arrogance and formality, while Dr Hughes is a little cheeky and irreverent. Due to the amount of space that Dr Hughes is given in this opening, I imagine he is not an irrelevant character – perhaps he will go on to play the role of a kind of sidekick to Carl? A clear dynamic is already established: they share a slight Holmes and

Watson vibe.

With Carl we also have a sense of his inner life. In sentences such as 'he'd never felt the urge to hold a human heart. Too tightly wound. Too much like a fist, itching to punch you the second you took your eyes off it', and 'too bloody rebellious. Beating, literally, to its own rhythm', a hint of tenderness breaks through the bluster and sarcasm. We get a sense that perhaps he is grappling with a past or present situation, with pain or heartbreak.

This leads us, in a delightfully indirect way, to the possibility of a story that explores emotions and feelings. This is interesting because stories about men don't always go into those spaces and layers. However Carl's references to his feelings are articulated indirectly through humour and whimsy, giving us the sense that though he is consumed by his feelings – making even an innocent question about a heart transplant about them – he is still unable to fully access and face his emotions. I wonder if the narrative will follow him on a journey towards his heart.

Of course this is all speculation, but it is these hinted-at layers that I found intriguing about this opening. My concern is that the initial confidence of the narrative voice might be an illusion, its strength founded on character, voice and interaction, without conflict and plot to give it direction. This will depend on whether the details of this opening were carefully selected with the rest of the novel in mind.

Given the conciseness of the rest of the writing, I found these lines a little flabby and vague: 'The emerald green scrub cap and mask gave Dr Hughes's grey eyes more-than-the-usual degree of... Carl wondered if at age 38 he could get away with using the word... mystique. In any case, the look was entirely too familiar and mischievous for a surgical intern in his first month.' I wasn't sure how the

Carl

NO. He'd never felt the urge to hold a human heart. Too tightly wound. Too much like a fist, itching to punch you the second you took your eyes off it.

Instead, he was bound to livers. Large, flat, dark, uninspiring slabs of flesh that caused little children to make faces whenever it appeared on their dinner plates. He liked that it had the ability to put up with night after night of binge drinking more patiently than a long-suffering wife. True, it wasn't nearly as sexy or romantic as the heart. It didn't find its way into every discipline from psychotherapy to creative writing. No one ever talked about intuitions being felt deep down in their liver. But – and he wasn't a gambling man – he preferred the odds of an organ with an altruistic nature, one that took a little, to make a lot.

The heart? Too bloody rebellious. Beating, literally, to its own rhythm.

Frankly, he just didn't trust the thing.

But to Dr Hughes, he simply said, 'No.'

'Really? Never?' Dr Hughes, using his right elbow to pump the soap dispenser onto the nail brush, gave Carl a disbelieving glance. The emerald green scrub cap and mask gave Dr Hughes's grey eyes more-than-the-usual degree of... Carl wondered if at age 38 he could get away with using the word... mystique. In any case, the look was entirely too familiar and mischievous for a surgical intern in his first month. 'I thought, you know, every surgeon, at one point wants to do heart transplants. I mean, it's the heart. And you being from South Africa and all... You guys practically invented the stuff.'

You guys? Stuff? From what online, barely-accredited institutions was Hallington Hospital finding these interns? □

green scrub and mask can give Dr Hughes an air of 'mystique'. I was also not sure what 'the look' is referring to – the green scrub and mask, or the expression on his face?

I found this to be an engaging first page. The focus on characterisation and voice is an effective way of pulling the reader in. However, if both Carl and Dr Hughes, and if the sense that Carl is grappling with something emotionally, are not central to the plot, I would suggest rethinking the opening so it takes us more immediately to the heart of the story. □

A well-crafted first page is vital to snag the attention of an agent, editor, competition judge or casual reader. To submit your first page, see p81. NB Our guest expert does not see the pitch.

a hint of tenderness breaks through the bluster and sarcasm

THE PITCH

► London-based surgeon Carl Kleinmans considers a pioneering liver transplant that may offer personal atonement for his own actions in South Africa in 1994. Carl's secret is hidden from even his partner Trevor, who is busy having an affair and keeping his brother, Bones, out of trouble on the Cape Flats. But when Bones arrives at Carl's mother's house in Johannesburg, the lives of everyone there take a dramatic turn. LISA ANNE JULIEN