

Well, Hi, Jim!

I was really pleased to learn that the prologue and first chapter of your novel-in-progress **Burned** had been selected for the Writing Show Makeover exercise. I admire your work and was intrigued by your story.

I am especially glad to be able to enter into a dialogue with you because the manuscript in its present form presents an unusual problem—a challenge that really has me hooked:

This is to find ways to **pace and structure the story** in the opening segments in a way that will keep the action moving forward and hold the reader's attention from there on. That is the “Big Stuff” question with your manuscript, one to which I have given a lot of thought. It will be interesting to me to see how you feel about suggestions I will make!

Here is how I would like to proceed:

First: For purposes of analysis, I am going to break the manuscript you have submitted—the Prologue and Chapter One--into four parts:

1. Prologue: **Explosion and fire**
2. Chapter One, part 1: **Sharon's lost weekend** which occurs eight months later
3. Chapter One, part 2: **Narrative background** to Jim and Sharon's marriage
4. Chapter One, part 3: **Return to the day of the fire**

I want to handle each of these separately, with commentary, treating each, for the time being, as a stand-alone entity.

Second: I am going to take what is now called the prologue and, for the moment, deal with that alone because I want to get the “Big Stuff”—the question of structure—covered before putting you to sleep with the less important “Small Stuff” in the other segments.

Third: I will go back to segments 2, 3, and 4 later with comments and some suggested line-editing. The format I have chosen is logically out of order as the manuscript is presently organized; nonetheless, I am dealing with these in the order in which I am going to recommend they appear (which is 4, 1, 3, 2).

So here goes with comments on the prologue segment, followed immediately with an idea and a rationale for re-ordering the material in the present manuscript in a way that I believe will keep the tension and forward motion of your story alive in the mind of the reader. This will deal primarily with 1) managing the story arc and 2) sustaining reader involvement.

PROLOGUE: SEGMENT 1 EXPLOSION AND FIRE

About the use of “prologue”

In contemporary fiction a “prologue” is the background to the story. This includes historical or other information that can orient the reader to the time and circumstances in which the story takes place but

does not contain elements essential to the tale itself. That is, a prologue tells the reader what he should know before something much more important happens.

I understand your sense of wanting to grab the reader with a dynamic opening (and so you do!) but the fire, it would appear, is not “background” but rather an event at the absolute center of your story—the galvanizing event from which all else flows. (Hence, the title itself: **Burned ?**)

That said, don’t give the “prologue” matter another thought. It is only semantics. Just know that the explosion and fire is integral to a revised or reconstructed first chapter.

To start with the text of this section itself: The goal here, Jim, is to tighten up, and tighten up again. This segment has to move as fast as the fire itself.

About participial phrases:

The explosion and fire is a devastating event, Jim—simply heart-stopping—and you write it very well indeed. Because you want to use every device in the writer’s handbook to keep this segment boiling with second-by-second action, let me point up some usages in your text that have the effect of actually slowing the action.

You want the reader to *experience* Jim’s panic and the rapidity with which the fire moves. To this end, participial phrases (generally, the verb forms ending in *ing*) are simply deadly in that these constructions move the action backward rather than forward, slow the narrative, and create distance between the reader and what is happening in real time to the character.

Jim is in the midst of a real crisis: not even a millisecond to spare here for planning or reflection. Your job as author is to keep that heart-stopping pace **by staying inside Jim’s experience.**

Here are examples of participials from the explosion and fire segment: “Staring in shock”; “After lightly touching his face”; “while closing his eyes”; “Swallowing hard”; “Pushing himself forward”; “Looking inside”; “While falling”; “while stepping back”; “Bumping into the doorway”; “Lowering his head”; “while removing the smoke-filled blanket.”

The ways to avoid these flat constructions are to choose active verbs, rearrange phrases, and cut back as far as possible on extraneous adjectives and adverbs—including, of course, the dread participials which function as adverbial phrases. To give you an example:

Here’s the original text:

Staring in shock at his charred arms, Jim’s senses ignited as the excruciating pain tore through his battered body. After lightly touching his throbbing face, he winced while closing his eyes. Swallowing hard, he lifted his arm, trying to loosen an aching shoulder.

Here is a suggestion for tightening up the action here:

Jim stared in shock at his charred arms. An excruciating pain tore through his battered body jolting his senses into full awareness. He touched his throbbing face, wiped debris from his eyes, and raised his arm to loosen an aching shoulder.

Here's an example of "staying within the character's experience." The paragraph that followed the one quoted above reads:

Anna's terrifying screams intensified. *I must get to my daughter.* "I'm coming sweetheart. Daddy's coming." He struggled to his feet as a burst of adrenalin numbed the intense pain.

Rather than state that Anna's screams intensified (a construction that may or may not involve Jim), you want to provide that information **as it affected Jim**; that is, **as Jim experienced it**. For example,

Anna's terrified screams brought him to his feet with a burst of adrenalin that numbed the intense pain. *I must get to my daughter.* "I'm coming sweetheart. Daddy's coming!"

Make every word count

I think you can do more throughout the manuscript, but especially in this segment, to tighten up by finding the one right word, eliminating unnecessary or extraneous words and phrases, and to being alert to clichéd usages. **In short, to make every word count.**

Here are some words and phrases you might take another look at:

"knocking him unconscious"—verges on cliché. Perhaps better to say that the force of the blast "stunned" him.

"He watched in misery ..."—Extraneous: It would be unlikely that having "caught a glimpse of the living room" Jim would stand and watch. "... as various family pictures adorning the large bookcase disintegrated one by one in the blaze."—Wordy: Maybe something as simple as "At the edge of his vision he saw family pictures in the living room ignite and disintegrate in flame."

"searing inferno"—clichéd; an "inescapable death trap"—redundant.

Here are another three words you can cut as they do not add to the action: "nearby," "Finally," "worthless."

And here are some phrases that are unnecessary or seem overwritten:

1. Often the simplest word, however ordinary, works better than a more labored phrase which causes the reader to pause by calling attention to itself. Consider "...as the thick smoke continued to displace the life-giving oxygen with its poisonous vapor": How about something like "as the fire and thick smoke sucked oxygen from the air."

2. Similarly, you do not need to supply what could be called "stage directions" detailing every step in an action. You write "With one hand, he reached up and pulled over the wall unit. It crashed to the floor spewing toys and pictures about. He raced over to the partially opened window and struggled to lift it higher but years of accumulated dirt left it stuck in that position."

(Note that you have already described the position of the wall unit and the window behind it.) So you could heighten the action to something like "Jim pulled over the wall unit, which crashed to the floor spewing toys and books around. He struggled to lift the window but it was sealed by years of disuse."

3. And in the next paragraph you write, “He snatched a musical snow globe from the floor and threw it with all his might [cliched phrase]. When it smashed the window, the loud rupture hurled glass everywhere.” This could be shortened to something like “He snatched up a musical snow globe from the floor and hurled it against the window, sending shards of broken glass flying.”
4. You write “Loud crackling and popping noises were prevalent throughout the house as the fire roared in full force ravaging everything in its path.”—“were prevalent” is a very passive way of describing the sounds of a raging fire. Try something shorter such as “Flaming furnishings and draperies crackled and popped as the fire roared in full force through the front rooms of the house.
5. “caused by the instant release of toxic air” can be cut or re-written to eliminate the explanation of the “cause” and the stilted phrase “toxic air.”
6. “Faint sounds of wailing sirens could be heard off in the distance ...” could be shortened to “The wail of sirens could be heard in the distance ...
7. Change “came running” to “ran”; cut “concerned” from “concerned neighbors”—(Of course they were concerned—here’s a beat-up smoke-blackened guy lying on the lawn holding a baby. The reader will know the neighbors were *concerned* without being told.)
8. “one of Jim’s neighbors yelled” can be cut to “a neighbor yelled.”
9. “acted as a decongestant to clear his chronic sinus problems.” I understand the reason for this information. We find that out in segment 4 which deals with the minutes before the explosion and fire. But you can leave the sinus problems out here. The concept of a “decongestant” seems altogether trivial in the midst of a life and death crisis. We’ll get to it in the segment on the hour before the explosion when Jim’s breathing problems are very relevant. At this point, after the explosion, they no longer matter.
10. “The ever-increasing repulsive odor of burnt skin” would have more impact without “ever-increasing,” an adverbial denoting a span of time: “The smell of burnt skin ...” is enough, or the “sharp smell of burnt skin.”
11. Here’s your problem phrase: “Anna’s body quivered as she stared at her father with lifeless eyes.” I now know that the baby is **not** dead, but the phrase “lifeless eyes” leads the reader to think she is. Maybe you could re-word to something like “with dark pupils eclipsing the deep blue of her eyes.”

All the above quibbles over words definitely are not to say that this segment did not leave me breathless and on the edge of my chair. It did! I think, however, that if you keep it in immediate real time and entirely within the frame of Jim’s point of view, or, in this case, what Jim directly experiences, you will have a dynamite (no pun intended) piece of fiction. Great work!

THE BIG STUFF: PACE AND STRUCTURE

The problem

I know you want to grab the reader in the first paragraphs of the novel—and that you certainly have

done!—but the corollary is that you also want to **keep the reader** reading on. As the material is now organized, that may be a problem.

Let me quickly summarize the four segments we are dealing with to illustrate the kind of puzzle you are asking the reader to deal with:

The manuscript, as it is now organized, begins (as prologue) with the dramatic event—the explosion and fire—where the reader comes to know (and care about) Jim.

The text (Chapter One) then jumps abruptly ahead eight months in time to introduce an entirely new character, Sharon, who to this point has been known to the reader only by name. There is nothing at all wrong with the characterization of Sharon—very good really. The trouble is that the reader does not yet have any point of reference to let him identify with Sharon.

The Sharon segment also throws the story off course by bringing up an entirely new sub-plot: Sharon’s absence of memory of events at a party the previous Saturday night. This story line is dropped too soon. The reader is cheated of clues to the resolution of the Saturday night mystery because, leaving Sharon in the cab, the text now jumps back eight months to events that occurred immediately **before** the fire.

The transition here is a line of interior monologue where Sharon reflects on what her life had been before “one fateful day everything changed.” The scene then shifts, *not in Sharon’s voice as the transition would indicate*, but to a third-person omniscient point of view, present tense, account of the day “when everything changed.”

This structure of scenes and segments has left the reader hanging and dissatisfied—and perhaps even a little confused. There are three settings, three different time periods, and three points of view—without continuity of event or time among them. This is a lot to ask of the reader in the opening pages, even the opening chapters, of a novel.

(Stephen King makes quite a fuss in his book **On Writing** about making matters as easy as possible for the reader: “The reader must always be your main concern,” he says. He goes on to twist the knife by adding “without Constant Reader you are just a voice quacking in the void.” That may be going a bit too far. But we get what he means.)

The old-fashioned model

Many thousands of words have been written on the subject of the first line of a novel, the first paragraph, the first page, the first five pages (an entire book on that one); but all boil down to one thing: A good first paragraph will let the reader know right up front what the book is going to be about, who it concerns, what that character wants, and why we should care about him or her. At best it will also indicate where the story is happening and when.

Once the reader has become involved with the characters and the story gets rolling, the writer can risk flashbacks but only if they connect to the present action. Lisa Lenard-Cook in her new book **The Mind of Your Story** (which I highly recommend) has a succinct way of putting this: She refers to tempo and structure as “your story’s ever-ticking present.” That’s a very useful concept—once you get the hang of it.

Here's my suggestion:

I have juggled the elements of the preface and first chapter of **Burned** into a number of combinations, hoping to follow your intention of opening with a startling event—the explosion and fire. But in the end, Jim, I come back to the tried and true: An approach that I think that really does work, and works well. Maybe give it a try and see how it feels to you?

Open Chapter One with segment 4—the hour before the fire (skipping segment 3, which I call your “notebook”). Then continue from there to the explosion and fire. That is, you **begin** the chapter quietly and **end** with a bang, rather than the other way around. Sharon’s story (segment 2) becomes a new chapter. There are a several reasons why I like this:

1) In this way, you involve the reader immediately in the characters themselves, Jim and Sharon, who are both attractive and likeable. Changes in themselves and their relationship, I think, is what the book is going to be about.

2) The scene with Jim and baby Anna is especially appealing—who couldn’t identify with that!—and the humor in Jim’s baby conversation is wonderful. Similarly, the TV football material is excellent. Been there, done that! The reader is hooked by these pages.

3) The segment itself is short, probably about 1,500 words when you edit it down.

And 4) there is enough careful foreshadowing to pique the reader’s curiosity.

You will want to write new opening paragraphs. What follows is an idea of how you might structure something like that. (A formula kind of idea only; what I write, of course, is not what or how you would write. And I made up the details of place. You would get that straight.)

Sunday began much like any other lazy weekend morning for Jim and Sharon [last name] and their baby daughter, Anastasia—Anna for short.

Their rented house on the fringe of San Diego’s Mission Bay district had been built, together with hundreds like it, in the construction boom that followed World War II. The house was small, but it suited the couple. The color of the stuccoed exterior had long since faded to nothing under the onslaught of the Southern California sun, but if the house was drab, the effect was overshadowed by brilliant, flame-red clouds of bougainvillea that spilled over the fences and into their tiny front yard.

Sharon was happy here, and happy, too, that she had been able to leave her accounting job, for a while at least, to stay home and care for her baby. Later, maybe, when Anna was a little older, she would return to work and she and Jim could look for a larger place—perhaps even think of buying.

This November morning promised a good day ahead for Jim. His team, the San Diego Chargers, was playing the Raiders that afternoon, one of the best games on the schedule for Jim and his brother, who lived in Oakland. The two of them always had a wager when their favorite teams played each other. Just a few bucks to make it interesting, but, more importantly, each wanted the bragging rights.

Sharon had finished up the breakfast dishes and was putting Anna down for her late morning nap, when her friend Katie phoned. Katie had a son, Scott, who was the same age, to the day, as Anna. Though Sharon and Katie had long been friends, the coincidence of their babies' births had created an even stronger bond.

"I have a free afternoon," Katie said. "Don is going to be home today to watch Scott, and I have the car. Any chance you and I—just the two of us, no kids allowed—could sneak away for a walk and a bite of lunch somewhere?"

"I'll have to check with Jim, but it looks good." Sharon said. "Today's a big TV football day, so he will be here for sure. Could you pick me up about 12:30?"

From there you go on, as you have it, to the scenes of Katie and Sharon talking about the crib (as I will suggest below), Jim settling in for the big game, beginning the process of warming a bottle, his conversation with Anna and the diaper change, return to the kitchen ... and BOOM, the explosion and fire up to the end of that segment with Jim on the lawn. End of Chapter One. Your story's "ever ticking present" is intact.

The sample paragraphs I tried out above accomplish several things: The reader meets the young couple, Jim and Sharon; the setting is established; we know that Sharon has left her job to be a stay-at-home-mom, so money is tight; and Jim is a "regular guy." We also know what they want, to raise their child(ren) and have their own home. There is a brief foreshadowing that something is about to happen ("Sunday began like any other ...").

At the end of the chapter the reader **experiences** the event that shatters that dream. From there, I expect, Jim, your novel will be the story of how Jim and Sharon recover their life (or, maybe don't—only you know that).

SEGMENT 3: CHAPTER ONE THE DAY OF THE FIRE

This is a key segment—the material that I believe should be the first pages of the book.

For now, I am going to take a different approach and do a line-edit to show how this segment might be tightened up. This involves copying the text of this section. Forgive me for taking liberties with your well prepared Times Roman manuscript—just for this experiment—by rendering it single spaced, putting it in a Courier font to differentiate it from other text, and (because of some glitch in the programming) losing paragraph indents.

My reason for copying out the segment as a whole is to let other readers see how well you write, how you have created a totally sympathetic character in Jim, and how the explosion and fire segment has been set up. (You will see that the material in the first paragraphs has been incorporated in my suggestion for re-writing the opening, as has the material on Jim's interest in the Chargers and the wager with his brother, but I leave it here as you wrote it.)

~~One Sunday afternoon,~~ Sharon's best friend, Katie Moss dropped by and suggested ~~just~~ the two of them go out for lunch. . . . Although Sharon and Katie saw each other almost daily, they seldom shared time together alone. . . .

~~Sharon felt hesitant at first, but Jim convinced her otherwise.~~
"Go ahead out and have some lunch," Jim said. "It'll be fun, and you deserve some quality time for yourself. You're stuck here every day with Anna."

Sharon placed her hand on Katie's arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Okay, let's do it. Give me a minute to change, and I'll be right with you."

~~While she changed, Katie engaged Jim in some small talk.~~ [Katie turned to Jim and asked,] "Is Anna sleeping?"

"Like a baby," he replied. ~~with a sheepish grin. They locked eyes for a moment and then~~ Both of them laughed out loud. Jim clapped his hands, [in mock appreciation of his clever remark.] ~~applauding his subtle, yet clever humor.~~

"What's Don doing?" [he asked.]

[In attributing dialogue, "said" works best 98.9 percent of the time. The other 1.1 percent is "asked" or "answered," and some very few other exceptions.]

"Oh, you know my husband. He has to play golf at least one day every weekend--thinks it's good therapy." [it's, not its]

~~Jim rolled his eyes.~~ "Do you agree?"

Katie shook her head. "It's only good therapy if he plays well, and I might add, that isn't very often." They laughed again.

[Above you mentioned that Katie turned to Jim to make "small talk." By adding, twice, the information that they "laughed" at the weak jokes, you are **showing (not telling)** that this is small talk, and a bit awkward at that. That's good.]

Sharon peeked out from the bedroom. "Do you think I'll need a light sweater, Katie?"

"No, it's really nice outside."

"Okay, let me check Anna before we leave."

Katie followed ~~her~~ [Sharon] through the kitchen and into the baby's room. The living room and Anna's room were adjacent to the big country-style kitchen. A regular doorway separated Anna's room from the kitchen, but there wasn't a wall between the kitchen and living room. The joining of the living room carpeting and the kitchen tile provided the distinguishable separation between the two large rooms. Being an older home, the floor plan seemed odd and old-fashioned, and probably why their home was

affordable.

[I understand why you are providing the layout of the house, but it isn't necessary. You might say in the first sentence in this paragraph that "Katie followed Sharon through the **open** kitchen and into the baby's room." That's enough to suggest the open floor plan of kitchen and living room. The remainder of the paragraph slows the action.]

Jim switched on their new forty-five inch big screen television set and settled into his favorite easy chair to watch a professional football game. They didn't watch much television, but Jim loved sports and ~~always~~ wanted a big screen, so Sharon reluctantly agreed. Today, the Raiders were playing the Chargers. ~~and since~~ Jim's brother lived in Oakland, [and] they always had a wager when their favorite teams played one another. Just a few bucks to make it interesting, but more importantly, each ~~of them~~ wanted the bragging rights.

Sharon and Katie were engrossed in girl talk as they made their way from Anna's room to the front door.

[There is an overlooked opportunity here, Jim. I suggest you take the paragraph below, where Anna's room and crib are described, and move it up to this place. You can then create a scene—after the brief description of the wallpaper and Raggedy Ann motif—where, through dialogue, Katie admires the crib and Sharon tells the story of finding it at a garage sale, refinishing it, creating the lacy skirt, and making their handiwork a centerpiece of their home. The story of the crib is important both to establishing setting of a young couple in a happy marriage, delighted with their infant daughter, but also to add (as you intended) poignancy to the fire scene where the crib burns to ashes. Still, best told through the voice of your character.]

[In short back and forth dialogue, she can also tell the story of finding un-used baby-girl clothes at the same garage sale, but don't overdo that part. It doesn't matter that the owner had only boy grandchildren. In this way, you avoid the action-slowness flat narrative, while adding some additional characterization to Sharon, and perhaps Katie, also, who might comment that she wished that she, too, had a little girl to dress up.]

Before leaving, Sharon turned back toward her husband. "Good-bye, honey. Anna's still asleep, but you can feed her when she wakes up. There's a bottle in the fridge."

Jim waved good-bye without looking up. "Have a good time, you two. I love you."

Sharon blew a kiss in his direction. "I love you, too."

Jim peeked around the television set and gave a sly grin. "I was talking to, Katie," he said [with assumed seriousness.] ~~while pretended to be serious.~~

Sharon ~~and Katie~~ [agreement problem with the singular pronoun "she"] laughed as she closed the door.

~~After~~ A few minutes into the game, Jim heard his daughter stirring in her crib. Anna seldom cried when she awoke from her afternoon nap. She would just entertain herself by playing with her stuffed animal and talking gibberish. Anna couldn't say many words, but she was fast building a repertoire of funny sounds and squeals. Sometimes she would pull herself up by holding on to the crib rail. It would take her several attempts, but once standing, she would babble away as if she were bragging about her triumph. At nine months old, it wouldn't be long before she could walk on her own and learn more words.

~~Jim decided to check in on her, so~~ Without taking his eyes off the television, [Jim] he got up and walked backward toward [Anna's] her room [to check on her.] He paused for a moment at the doorway [waiting for] ~~until~~ a commercial break and then rushed inside. [Great images here!]

"Is Daddy's little girl awake?" he asked in baby talk.

[The following paragraph is the one that I suggest you move up and re-write as a dialogue between Sharon and Anna in the baby's room.]

[Anna's room was decorated in a feminine, infant theme. The light pink wallpaper was garnished with colorful Raggedy Ann dolls, each one a different size and in a different pose. The old-fashioned, solid wooden crib was situated in the middle of the room. Jim found it at a garage sale and with his woodworking skills, knew he could transform it into a classic piece of furniture. Sharon provided the final feminine touches with a new mattress and a lacy skirt surrounding the bottom part of the crib. When they finished, it turned out to be the main conversation piece in the house. Also at the garage sale, Jim bought a number of brand new infant outfits and sleepwear. The elderly lady selling the clothes said they were purchased many years ago for her own baby daughter, but she never used them. She stored them in her old cedar chest, hoping some day to have a granddaughter, but unfortunately her daughter delivered all boys.]

[With regard to the above paragraph, remember the writerly rule that it just doesn't work to insert background information in present-tense text. When this is done the information "floats," slowing the story.

Jim ~~stood by the edge of~~ [leaned over] Anna's crib and smiled as he admired his daughter. "Are you hungry?" he asked, ~~while~~ raising his eyebrows, half expecting a response. Without getting an answer, he cocked his head to think. "How about having a nice, thick, juicy steak?" He patted his stomach. "No, you had that yesterday." His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. "I know, how about a pizza?"

[I love this word play with the baby. Very nice, and very good characterization.]

Anna grinned her one-tooth smile and [responded with] ~~blurted out a few~~ funny [happy] squeals.

He translated her gibberish. "You want a beer too, huh? Okay, I'll be back in a jiffy."

~~While watching~~ [Keeping one eye on] the game from the kitchen, Jim switched on a stove burner and adjusted it to a low flame. Opening the refrigerator door to retrieve her bottle, he spotted some leftover fried chicken. *Maybe I'll join my daughter and have some lunch, too.*

Just then, the ~~football~~ announcer yelled, "He's got it! He's on the forty, the thirty, the twenty!"

Jim tossed the plate ~~full~~ of chicken onto the kitchen counter and raced into the living room. As he rushed past the stove, he unknowingly caused the burner flame to extinguish. [I think you can make this both more subtle and more urgent. Try something like "He bolted to the living room—not seeing the burner flame extinguish in his rush past the stove."]

"All right!" he exclaimed as the Chargers ~~were about to score a touchdown.~~ [relentlessly moved toward the end zone.] Jim imitated a running back dodging would-be tacklers, ~~while witnessing~~ [eyes glued to his team's] the final ten-yard sprint down the sideline. He leaped into the air, [and] pretended to share high fives with his imaginary fellow teammates. [Really good stuff here!]

~~After calming down and~~ Returning to his easy chair, he watched the ~~various~~ replays, each one showing the touchdown from a different camera angle. They were all in super slow motion so he could relish the moment. "That's an easy five bucks I'm going to win from my brother," he boasted.

When the television announcers finished their accolades and cut away for the usual lengthy commercials, [Jim] ~~he took the opportunity~~ [returned to the kitchen] to finish preparing lunch. Passing by Anna's room, he heard her fussing. *Oh no, I bet she needs changing.*

Playfully ~~waving~~ [fanning] the air with his hand, he asked, "Did you stinky-poo?" He had to ask because of his chronic sinus problems, which sometimes left him at a distinct ~~dis~~advantage when [it came to whether he or Sharon would be the first to notice that the baby needed changing.] ~~Sharon and he were trying to decide who should change her.~~

Jim ~~picked up Anna~~ [lifted Anna from her crib] and carried her over to the changing ~~area~~ [table]. "Well, I think we'd better get you cleaned up before we do lunch together. Daddy can't smell, but I bet you can."

She clapped her hands and smiled when he started to remove her diaper.

Jim removed the baby powder, wipe towels, diaper, and a toy from the shelf. "Thank goodness Mommy is neat and organized, so Daddy could easily find everything. Here, play with the rattle while Daddy changes you."

[He] ~~Jim~~ turned his head while removing Anna's diaper. "Whoa, what did you eat?" he asked with a wrinkled face. ~~"Daddy's glad he can't smell this mess," he said while choking back his gag reflex.~~

[Yellow highlight is to suggest varying the wording to eliminate repetition. The point about Jim's faulty sense of smell has been made. More

would be overkill. The reader gets the point ... or will soon. Good tension building here!]

~~After wiping~~ [He wiped her behind and] aligned the fresh diaper under her bottom. "Okay, Daddy has a fifty-fifty chance of getting this on right." Halfway [~~one word, not half way~~] through and noticing the Velcro part was on backwards, he stopped and shook his head. "Sorry sweetheart," he said with a pitiful smile. "I got it wrong. We're going to have to do it over, but at least Daddy didn't say any bad words this time." She laughed as he tickled her tummy with his finger.]

[The above paragraph is fun, but I feel you can drop it. Don't dilute the tension now with a throw-away paragraph. But you can use the "bad words" line in the paragraph below.]

"There, all finished. It's not a perfect fit like Mommy does, but [it looks like] ~~at least it's~~ [we got it] on straight. [~~At least Daddy didn't say any bad words this time,~~"] ~~I bet you smell good now,~~" he said, ~~while~~ lightly tossing Anna in the air. She giggled when he caught her. He tossed her a few more times before putting her back into the crib. "Now, I'll get us some lunch."

Returning to the kitchen, he stared at the empty stove top. *I thought I [already put water on to warm a bottle].* ~~already~~. He scratched his head. *I guess I forgot.*

All this time, noxious gas ~~continued to~~ oozed from the unlit burner, [but Jim] ~~filling the kitchen with its lethal vapors. On this particular day, Jim couldn't smell anything and was oblivious to the fumes accumulating everywhere.~~

[He] ~~Jim~~ opened the refrigerator and removed one of Anna's bottles, ~~As he moved toward the stove, he checked~~ [checking] to make sure the lid was on tight. ~~The pots and pans were stored in the cupboard to the right side of the stove.~~ [He took a pan from the cupboard and] ~~After removing a pan, he started~~ [turned] toward the sink to fill it with water, but first stopped to turn on a burner. The igniter touched off the accumulated gas and a huge explosion rocked the house.

This, then, is followed immediately by the fire and explosion segment (the "prologue") in the original text.

SEGMENT 2: CHAPTER ONE NARRATIVE BACKGROUND

This was unexpected! The hour before the explosion segment opened with two typescript pages of background. We told in straight narrative—no action, no dialogue—something about Sharon's education, her job history, meeting and marrying Jim, and happily having a daughter together. Then we are told she has a friend, Kate, with a son, Scott, the same age as baby Anna. Kate is, up-beat, high energy, a handywoman, and yet feminine. Sharon and Kate became "fast friends."

Many novelists, I am told, keep a notebook in which they create a detailed profile of their characters: physical characteristics, family history, personality traits, favorite colors, what kind of car they drive, that sort of thing.

That's what I think you have the beginning of here, Jim. This narration and what you should probably be adding to it, is your "character notebook": facts and characteristics that you will **build into the story** as you develop the characters through dialogue, actions, insights into how other characters view each, and all that is involved in "**show, don't tell.**"

So, for the time being, just put this segment aside. But keep these notes handy. You will use them in other forms as the story unfolds.

SEGMENT 1: CHAPTER ONE SHARON'S LOST WEEKEND

Chapter One, technically the opening of the book itself, introduces Sharon, living alone in an apartment. The time period at this point is undefined, but we learn later that it is eight months after the day of the fire.

In my suggested re-structuring of the material Sharon's eight-month-later story becomes a new Chapter Two.

This is a well written and well conceived segment. We learn that Sharon awakes hung over and befuddled about the events of what she remembers to have been the previous night.

A mystery that captures and holds the reader's attention is introduced in the next scene where Sharon discovers that she has slept through an entire day and another night. Let me say here, Jim, that you handle dialogue and attribution very well indeed as Sharon takes the call from her office mate.

In the third scene, Sharon, rushing to get to the office, has an encounter with a lecherous cab driver. At this point, while the transitions between the three scenes in this section are well done, I do not yet see the relevance of the amount of space given to the cab driver. I suspect that the scene, if it is necessary at all, could be cut to a very few lines. Even if the cab driver does become relevant later, his presence in the story can be foreshadowed here in far fewer words.

Sharon's story and the mystery of the lost weekend, which was just beginning to build real tension and suspense, crashes and loses momentum when she steps into the cab. While the mystery does not need to be answered here—clearly that is a going to become part of the larger drama of the novel—nonetheless, as a reader I felt I had been led to the edge of a cliff and left just standing there.

I feel that you will want to build out this chapter to include at the very least Sharon's arrival at her office where work mates were also present at the party and where you can round out at least the basic known facts of the "lost weekend" events.

Again, make every word count:

The writer's rules-of-thumb that I noted in the commentary above, in the explosion and fire segment, pertain here, though with less urgency. Still, note these usages—wordiness, repetition, extraneous phrases, clichés, and stage directing: I feel that if you were to eliminate or re-write some of these usages, the flow of this segment would be improved.

To point out some of these perhaps unnecessary words and phrases, I offer a short list here. You can do a “search” function to find the places. Take up your blue pencil and give it a try to see what you think.

~~window~~ blinds

some/ some—repetition

neck, so—no comma needed

reached inside—stage direction, not needed

revitalizing liquid—stilted

passion; chocolate—punctuation s.b. passion: chocolate or passion, chocolate

pearly-white smile—cliché

After lifting a towel—stage direction

rivaling fingernails on a blackboard—tired metaphor

Seeing part of his face—extraneous

whiff of his manliness—“manliness” is ambiguous; a word that evokes romance-novel euphemisms

After tolerating it for awhile—could be “Sharon found the noise intolerable.” Note that “awhile” s.b. “a while.”

fateful day—cliché

...

That's about it, Jim. I hope that you may find some of my thoughts on your chapter(s) useful as you do revisions. Let me end with another reference to Lisa Lenard-Cook's book **The Mind of Your Story** in which she quotes novelist Frank Yerby who said “A good novel is made with the knife, not the pen.”

I look forward to talking with you!

Ann Paden

May 2008