

AgentInsight: The Surprising Truth About Prologues by Nupur Tustin

If you've heard it once, you've heard it a thousand times: agents hate prologues. Of all the ways to get an agent to reject you, including a prologue or an epilogue is the one strategy that never fails. Right?

"No," says Sandy Harding, who recently left her job as an editor at NAL to join Spencerhill Associates as an agent. "As an editor, and now as an agent, it's never once occurred to me to reject a manuscript simply because it started with a prologue or ended with an epilogue."

"It's so incredibly hard to write a captivating novel," Harding adds, "and the list of pitfalls for writers (including a lackluster tone, subject matter that is an amalgam of different genres, mundane plotting, a questionable sales track on old books) is endless. Surely it's too picky to adhere to a rather generic rule that books can't have prologues, isn't it?"

Surprisingly, most of the other agents on the panel share Harding's view.

"I personally don't mind prologues, if they add an interesting and integral layer to the narrative," says Rachel Ekstrom of the Irene Goodman Literary Agency.

Jill Marsal of the Marsal Lyon Literary Agency and Elizabeth Kracht of Kimberley Cameron & Associates agree.

"I don't like or dislike prologues or epilogues," Kracht says. "I think both serve their purpose when used correctly."

"It really depends on the book and the writer," adds Jessica Faust of BookEnds Literary Agency.

And even Margaret Bail from Inklings Literary Agency—the lone voice on the panel against prologues—admits that her dislike is personal: "Probably a result of having seen so many badly written, unnecessary prologues in my inbox."

"I actually never read them," she confides, "instead skipping right to the first chapter."

Of course, not every agent is quite so accommodating. Many of Ekstrom's colleagues, for instance, "feel very strongly that prologues and epilogues aren't necessary."

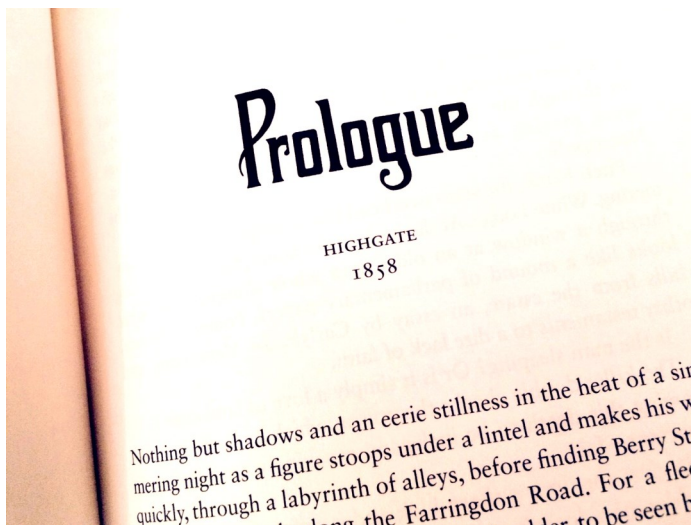


Photo by Lourdes Venard

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— Rachel Ekstrom, Irene Goodman Literary Agency

And even agents such as Kracht or some of Ekstrom's colleagues who aren't deterred by the presence of a prologue from taking on a project may recommend that their clients edit it out before the manuscript is submitted to a publisher.

Kracht offers an example of a freelance project she worked on recently. The author emailed her saying, "I have this prologue that wants to make a comeback in the manuscript. I've attached it. Would you mind taking a look?"

"Don't let it," was Kracht's response when she had read it.

"The reason," she explains, "is because the voice and tone of the prologue was not as engaging as the rest of her novel.

The prologue also served no purpose other than to give backstory of one of four POV [point-of-view] characters, which was no reason to set it apart. Since I'd had the advantage of seeing the entire project already, I knew the prologue wasn't necessary once I read it."

Kracht's example highlights an important reason why prologues fail to impress. Unnecessary backstory.

"One of the reasons prologues have become so frowned upon," Faust explains, "is because they're often used as information dumps, especially by beginning writers."

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Ekstrom refers to this as “throat-clearing before the true action of the story begins.”

And the information, Bail adds, is rarely necessary. It can just as easily be incorporated throughout the novel, if it’s even needed at all.

Although Ekstrom, Kracht, and Harding have nothing against prologues, they have not, they say, seen any that really work.

“In the nearly six years that I’ve been an agent,” Kracht says, “I’m not sure that I’ve seen a manuscript prologue that was necessary or worked. Hundreds of authors submit works with prologues, but often they are more suitable as a first chapter or simply being cut. If an author is using a prologue, this use should be because there is no other way to get across information that is crucial to understanding the story.”

Marsal offers some suggestions on when prologues and epilogues may be useful: when either the setting or time period of the action is significantly different from the rest of the story.

“If,” she elaborates, “the scene is distinct from the rest of the book because there is a jump in time or location or focus of characters, then an epilogue [or a prologue] is a way of calling attention to this for the reader. When things are continuous, in my view, those are the cases where a prologue and epilogue may not make sense.”

Prologues can also frequently be useful in mystery writing, says Bail. “Mystery writers,” she points out, “will often include a prologue which includes the crime itself to set the scene. I still don’t like these prologues, but they’re more acceptable in this genre.”

But prologues such as these, Harding explains, often lend themselves to misuse.

“I’ve seen writers use prologues as a hook, showing a heart-stopping murder in progress, and then in chapter one they step back three weeks and for the next 75 pages, nothing happens. That’s no good. I’ve read prologues that were written in a dramatic, searing voice, and then when chapter one started, the narrative voice was suddenly much quieter and the drama of the earlier voice never returned. That’s no good. I’ve read prologues that had little to do with the rest of the novel. That’s no good either.”

But “misuse,” she goes on to say, “isn’t a reason for no use.”

Although prologues can often be unnecessary, epilogues, in particular in mystery writing, can provide necessary closure.

“There are times,” Ekstrom says, “when you don’t want to tie your novel up in a bow, perhaps to reflect the messiness of life; possibly to leave your reader with some thematically important ambiguity. But, as a fan of crime fiction, I expect and appreciate some closure.”

“I actually kind of like them,” Bail says, “which I know seems kind

of odd given my strong feelings about prologues. By no means do I think epilogues necessary, and they should be used sparingly, but some stories warrant a nice, satisfying wrap-up, or the hint of something more to come.”

Both Ekstrom and Kracht provide examples of epilogues that provide a satisfying sense of closure.

“My client Rebecca Drake,” Ekstrom says, “has an epilogue in her forthcoming novel, *Only Ever You*, that reveals a deeper character complexity and adds another layer to the driving force of the plot.”

Kracht agrees that sometimes an epilogue may be crucial.

About Rita Gardner’s *Coconut Latitudes*, a memoir she edited, Kracht says: “It was very clear to me that the manuscript should stop when the author revisits her birthplace with her sister, who her family thought had been murdered—it was the most poetic and beautiful ending to a heart-wrenching story. But I also understood the reader would want to know what happened to her mother, sister, and abusive father (because I did!).”

Harding suggests that writers learn how to make effective use of prologues and epilogues.

“Use them for the purpose of furthering your story,” she says, “not because you have a bit of information you can’t bear to cut, or because you don’t know how to start your novel, or because your favorite author uses them. Use them with deliberate intent, and my bet is people will be praising your work.”

The other agents on the panel, however, recommend weaving the information into the larger narrative.

“I think when in doubt, skip the prologue,” advises Faust. “It’s the first impression an agent has of your book.”

“At this point,” says Kracht, “I view prologues like query letters in the sense that authors are often confused by them and don’t execute them well. If I’m not engaged by a prologue, I will move to the next chapter to see what I’m dealing with—to see if it is just a problem with the prologue.

“But,” she cautions, “you should never assume this is the case with every agent.”

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To suggest a topic for an upcoming column, please email Nupur Tustin at nupursen@gmail.com