



BRILLIANT BEGINNINGS

WHAT MAKES YOUR READERS KEEP

READING?

Why Book Beginnings

Matter

People say you can't judge a book by its cover. But most people do.

The same can be said for the first lines of a story, whether it's a picture book, novel, or anything in between.

Question

Have you ever stopped reading a book after
the first few pages?

Why?

As writers or illustrators, we can use techniques to create compelling opening lines to our stories.

Without a reason to keep reading, a child (or even adult!) will flip to the first page, scan it quickly, and put it right back on the shelf without moving on to the next page.

To grab a young reader's attention from the first lines, use a compelling hook like an unexpected statement, a touch of mystery, or vivid imagery. Start with a surprising event, a character's unique voice, or a snippet of action to immediately engage the reader.

**What is the best opening to a novel or picture book
you've ever seen?**

What made it so memorable?

**Luckily, there are some techniques we can employ
to help us craft brilliant beginnings.**

THE UNEXPECTED BEGINNING

This is where you have such an unexpected beginning that the reader can't help but read on to find out what on earth it's all about. This is also a great way to lean into humor in your books.

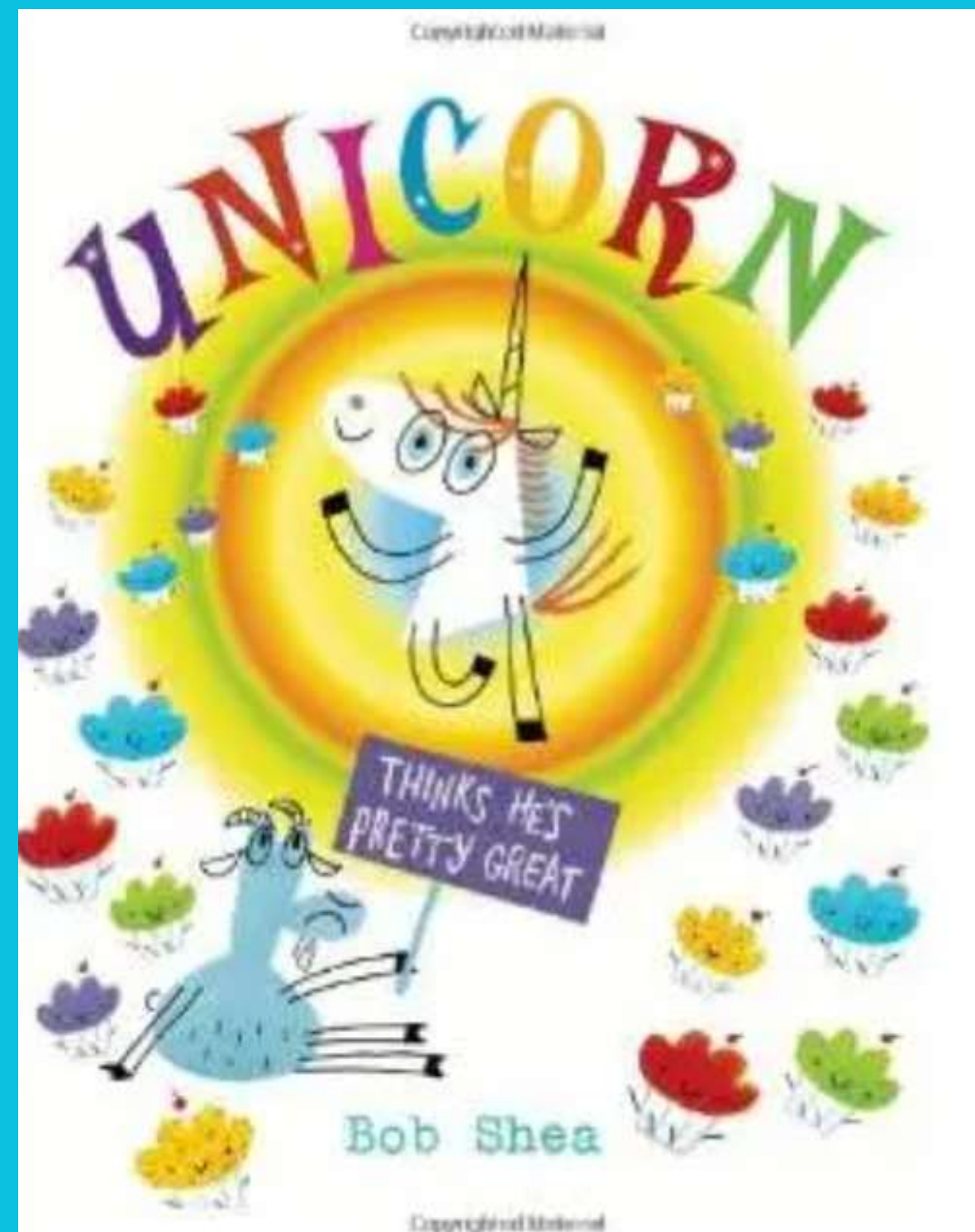
EXAMPLES:

PICTURE BOOKS:

Unicorn Thinks He's Pretty Great by Bob Shea

**BOOK OPENS WITH SUCH A FANTASICAL EVENT, WE
NEED TO LEARN MORE:**

**“THINGS ARE A LOT DIFFERENT AROUND HERE SINCE THAT
UNICORN MOVED IN.”**



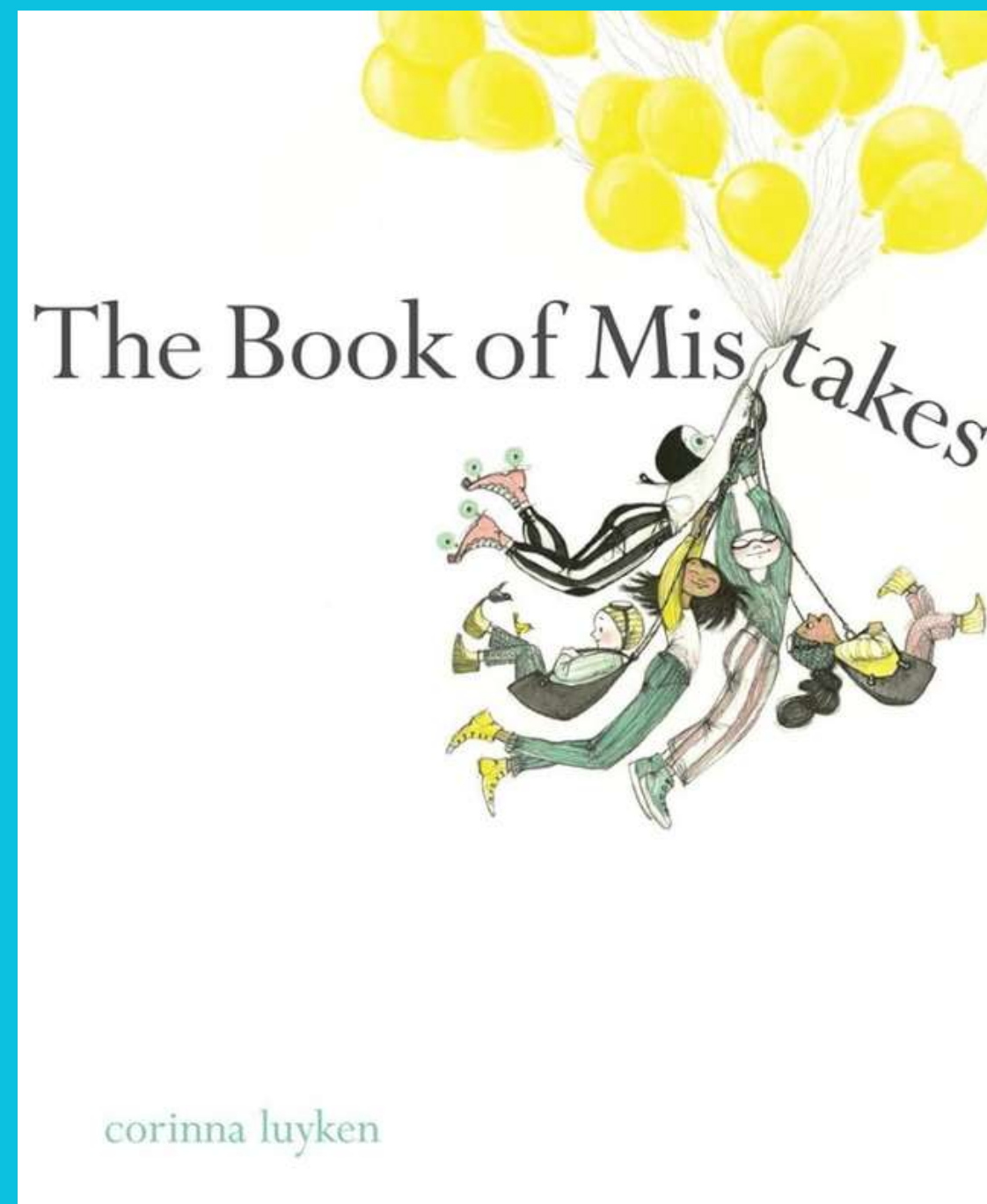
**EVERYONE WILL BE CURIOUS TO LEARN WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A UNICORN MOVES INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD. ALSO, WHO IS TELLING THE STORY?
That's why we keep reading.**

EXAMPLES:

PICTURE BOOKS:

“The Book of Mistakes by Corinna Luyken

**“One eye was bigger than the other. That was a mistake.
The weird frog-cat-cow thing? It made an excellent bush.
And the inky smudges...”**



**The story begins not with an accidental ink blot on a blank page.
From this single "mistake," an entire artistic journey unfolds,
showing the readers how errors can lead to creativity.**

EXAMPLES:

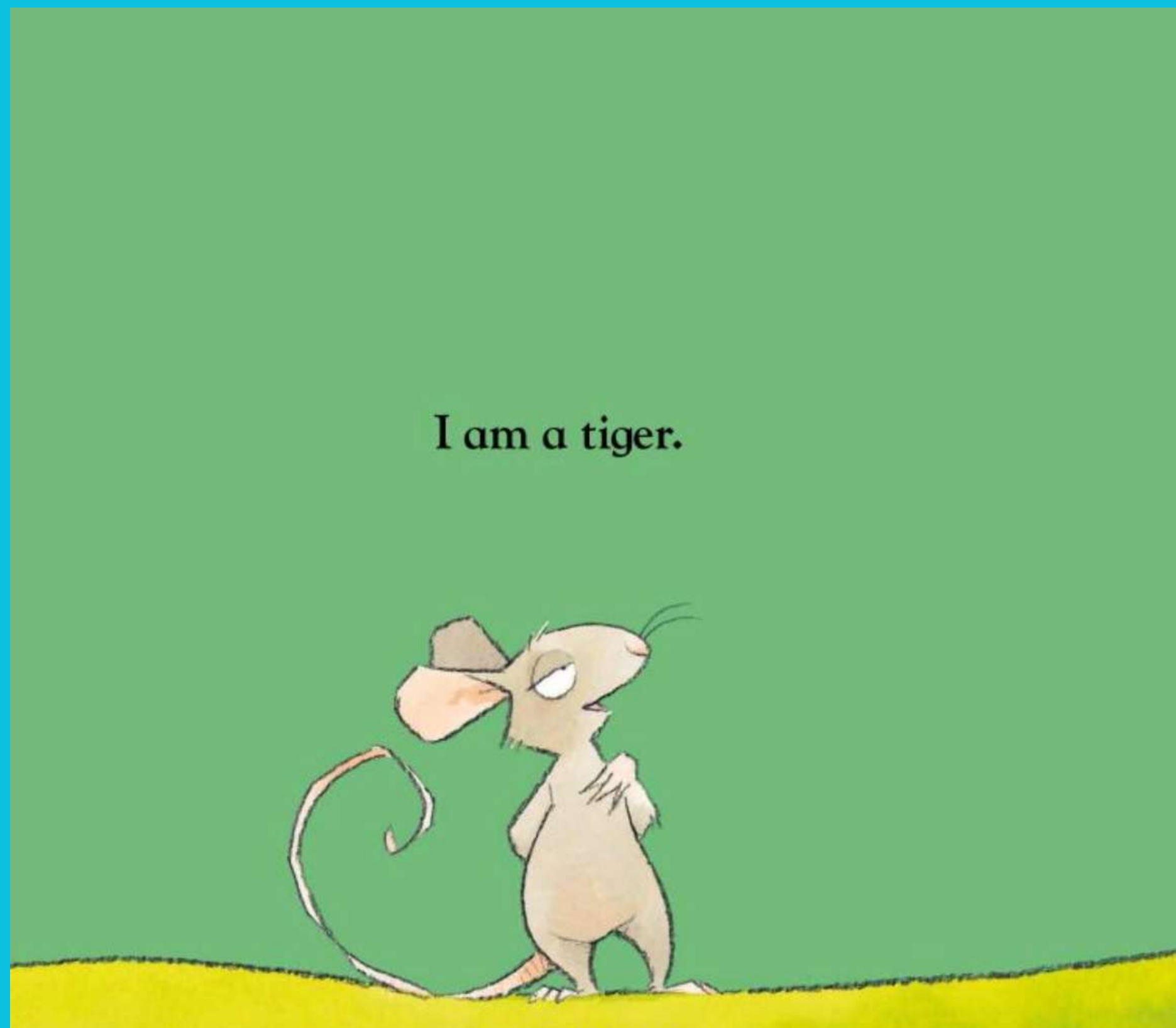
PICTURE BOOKS:

I am a Tiger

by Karl Newson & illustrated by Ross Collins

**BOOK OPENS WITH THE PERFECTLY INCONGRUOUS PICTURE
OF A MOUSE WITH THE SINGLE LINE:**

“I AM A TIGER.”



EVEN THE YOUNGEST READERS WILL KNOW THAT THIS IS CLEARLY A MOUSE. NOT A TIGER.

SO, WHY DOES HE THINK HE'S A TIGER?

That's why we keep reading.

EXAMPLES:

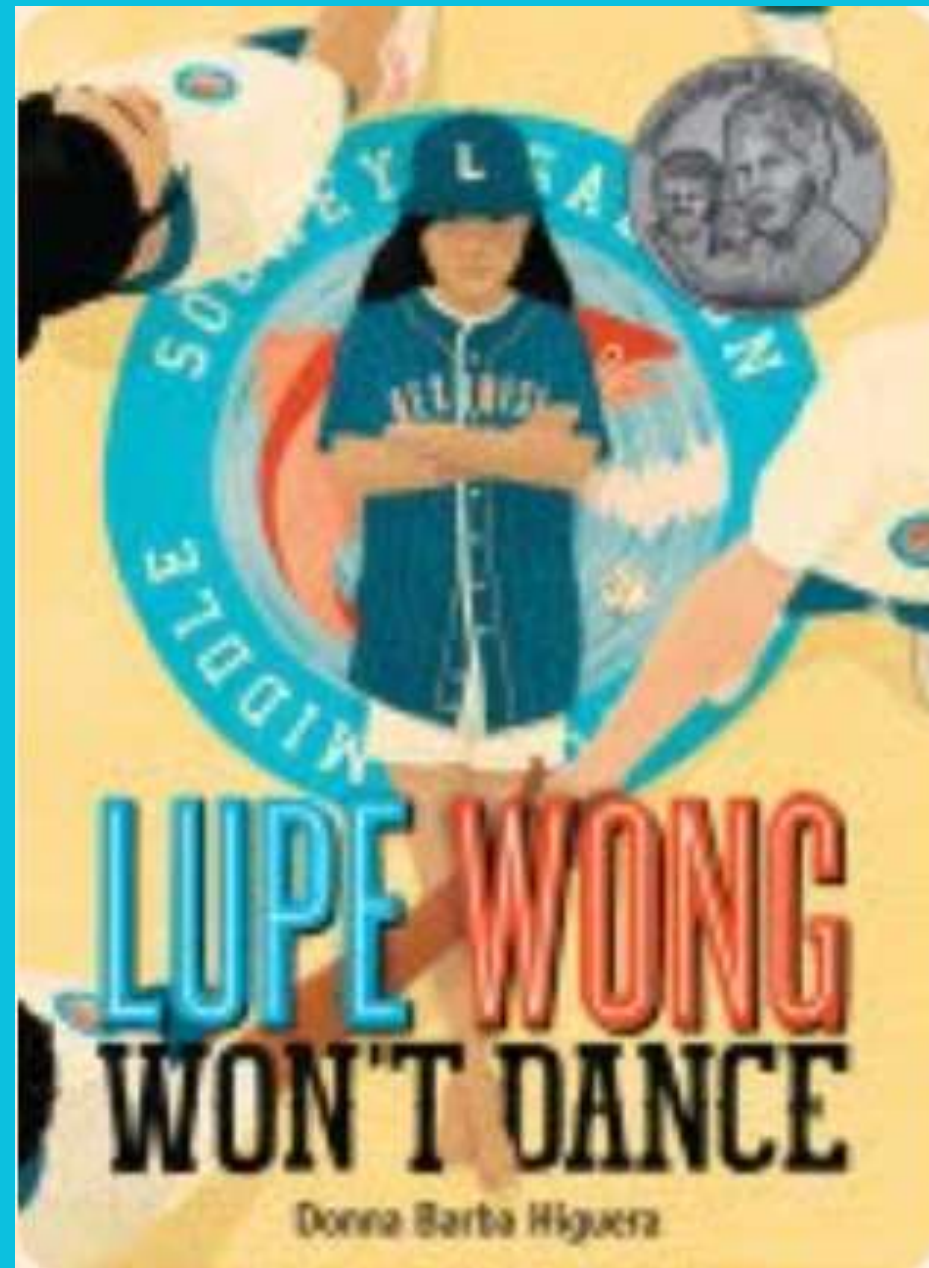
NOVELS:

Lupe Wong Can't Dance

by Donna Barba Higuera

BOOK OPENS WITH AN OUTRAGEOUS FIRST LINE.

**“MY GYM SHORTS BURROW INTO MY BUTT CRACK LIKE A
FRIGHTENED GROUNDHOG.”**



This opening is a completely unexpected way to open a story, but it shows the reader a good deal about the character's voice and gives us an immediate sense of place from the very first sentence of the novel.

EXAMPLES:

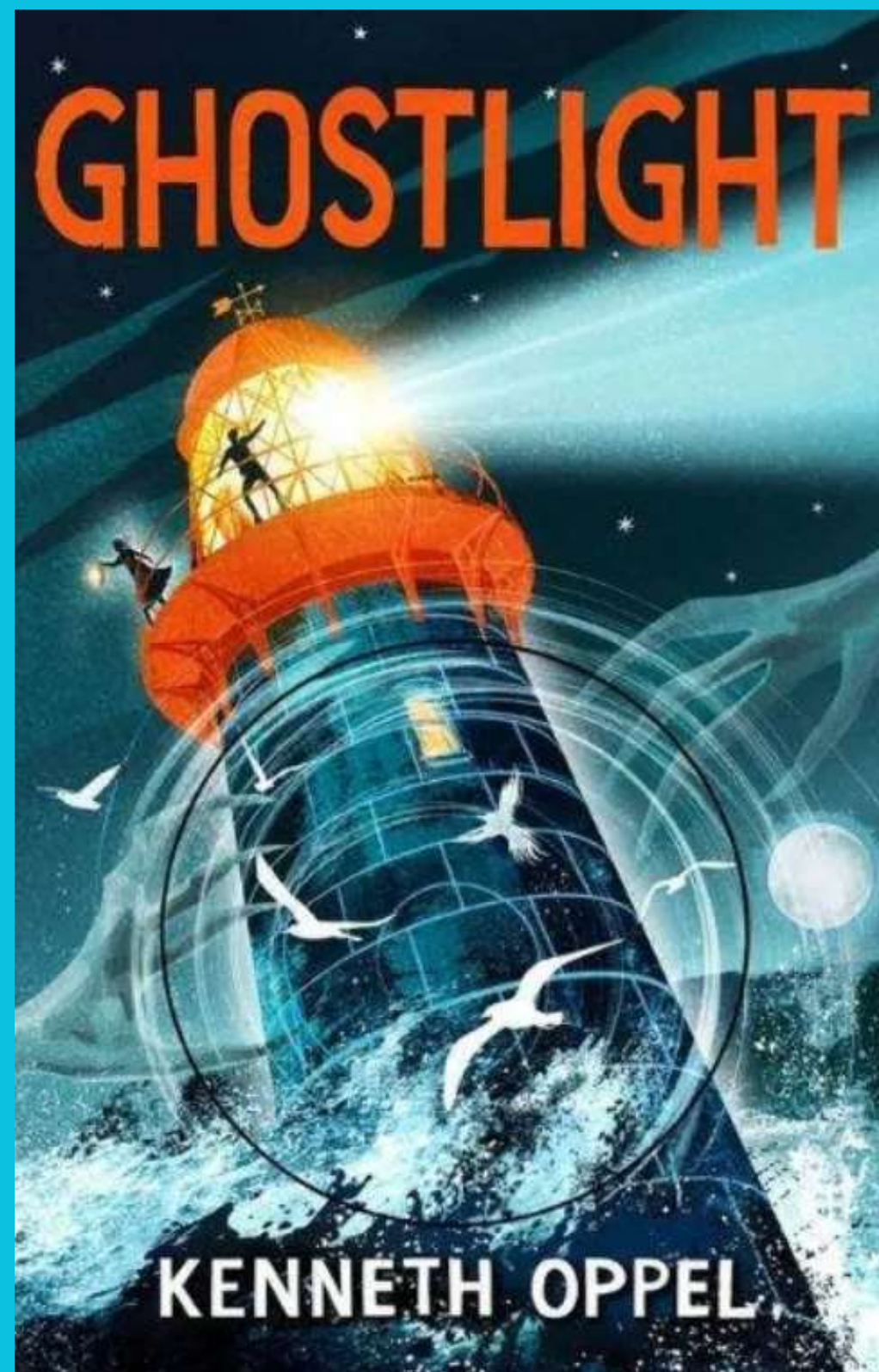
NOVELS:

Ghostlight

by Kenneth OPPEL

**BOOK OPENS WITH A STATEMENT THAT IS COMPLETELY
UNEXPECTED FOR A MIDDLE-GRADE GIRL'S REALITY:**

**“REBECCA STRAND WAS SIXTEEN THE FIRST TIME SHE SAW
HER FATHER KILL A GHOST.”**



WHY DID HER FATHER KILL A GHOST? HOW DOES SOMEONE EVEN GO ABOUT THAT FEAT? WERE THEY IN DANGER FROM THE GHOST? WE DON'T KNOW. But we're curious enough to find out that we'll read past the opening to get some answers.

**DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE STORY WITH AN
UNEXPECTED BEGINNING?**

BEGINNING WITH A PROBLEM/CONFLICT

This is where a book's opening clearly sets up a problem, allowing the reader to picture the conflict that will ensue. They keep reading because they want to know how (or if!) it will be resolved by the characters.

EXAMPLES:

PICTURE BOOK:

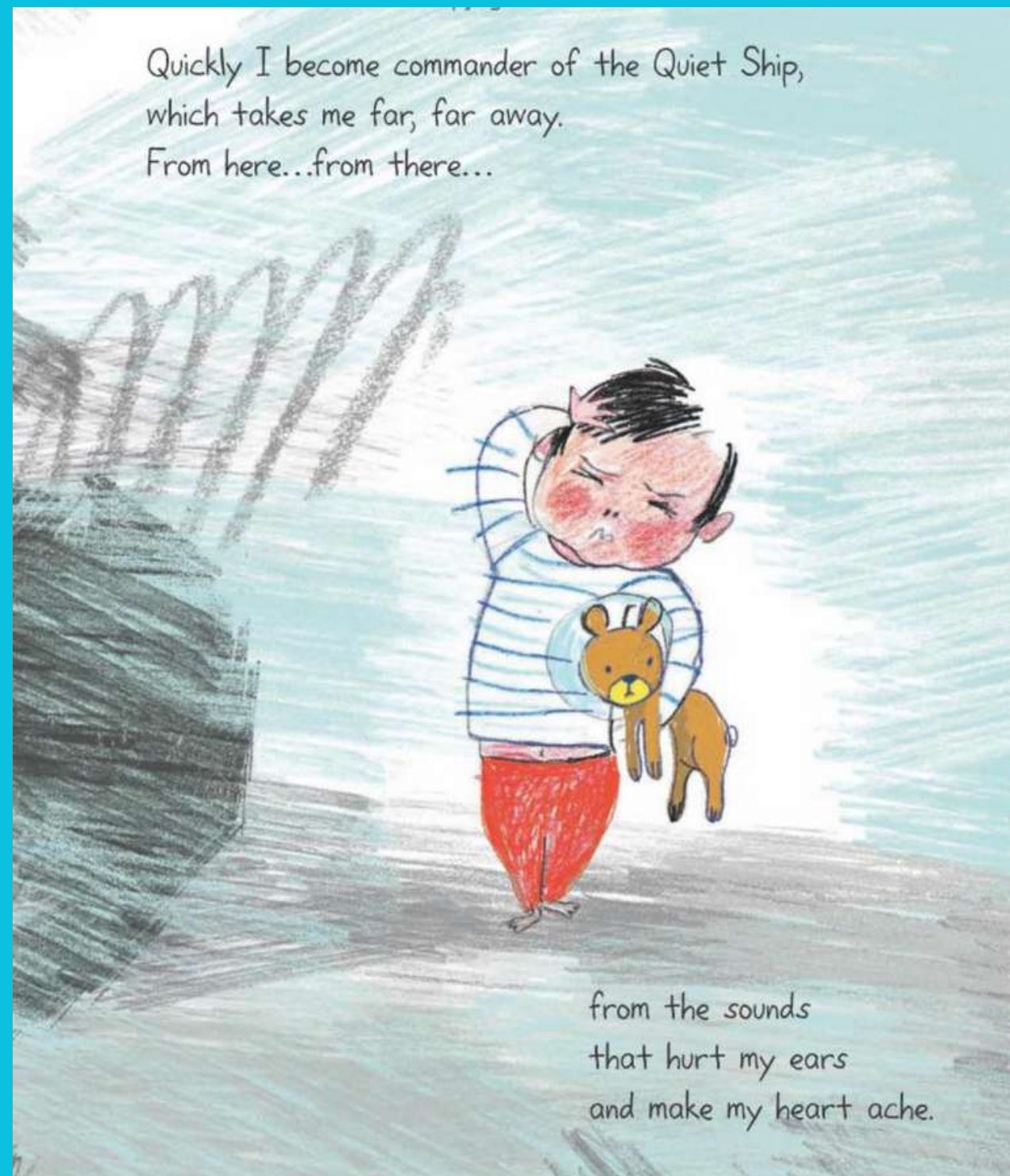
My Quiet Ship: When They Argue

by Hallee Adelman (Author), Sonia Sánchez (Illustrator)

**The book OPENS WITH A CLEAR PROBLEM THAT LEAVES US
WANTING TO KNOW HOW IT'S GOING TO BE FIXED.**

“WHENEVER I HEAR THE YELLING, I RUN TO THE spot.”

Quickly I become commander of the Quiet Ship,
which takes me far, far away.
From here...from there...



from the sounds
that hurt my ears
and make my heart ache.

THIS IS SADLY RECOGNIZABLE IN MANY HOMES. WE'RE INTERESTED ENOUGH TO KEEP READING TO SEE HOW THIS YOUNG CHILD USES THIS COPING MECHANISM OF BEING THE CAPTAIN OF HIS OWN SHIP TO ESCAPE THE LOUD ANGRY SOUNDS COMING FROM HIS PARENTS.

EXAMPLES:

PICTURE BOOK:

We Found a Hat

by Jon Klassen

**The book OPENS WITH A CLEAR PROBLEM THAT ALMOST
HAS TO LEAD TO SOME KIND OF CONFLICT IN ORDER TO
RESOLVE:**

“WE FOUND A HAT. WE FOUND IT together. But there is only one



THIS IS SUCH A RELATABLE PROBLEM THAT THE READER IS ALREADY ANTICIPATING WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN FROM THESE OPENING LINES. WILL THEY FIGHT OVER IT? WILL THEY COMPETE FOR IT? WILL ONE OF THEM STEAL IT? WE'RE INTERESTED ENOUGH TO KEEP READING. DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW THE BOOK ENDS?

EXAMPLES:

NOVELS:

The Wild Robot

by Peter Brown

TOOK OPENS WITH A SHIP SINKING IN A STORM:

“OUR STORY BEGINS ON THE OCEAN, WITH WIND AND RAIN AND

THUNDER

and lightning and waves...

in the middle of the chaos, a cargo ship was sinking down, down,

down to the ocean floor.”



**A SHIP SINKING IN A STORM ON THE OCEAN IS CERTAINLY A PROBLEM WITH
BOUNDLESS**

**opportunities for conflict to arise. Survival. Competition for scarce resources.
Rescue attempts. And so much more. But we want to know what happens.**

BEGIN WITH CHARACTER VOICE

This is where a book's opening gives the reader insights into what makes the characters tick. Reveals something about the protagonist that will become important later in the story. Remember: A story doesn't have to be told in first-person POV to get a sense of the protagonist voice.

EXAMPLES:
PICTURE BOOKS

Mars: Earthlings Welcome

by Stacy McAnulty, illustrated by Stevie Lewis

“Hello inhabitants of Earth—or, as she calls herself, Planet Awesome. I’m formally inviting you to visit me. Planet Marvelous!”



FROM THE VERY FIRST PAGE, WE GET A SENSE THAT MARS HAS A HIGH OPINION OF HERSELF! BUT IT MAKES US WANT TO READ MORE. WILL THERE BE OBSTACLES THAT MAKE HER DOUBT HERSELF?

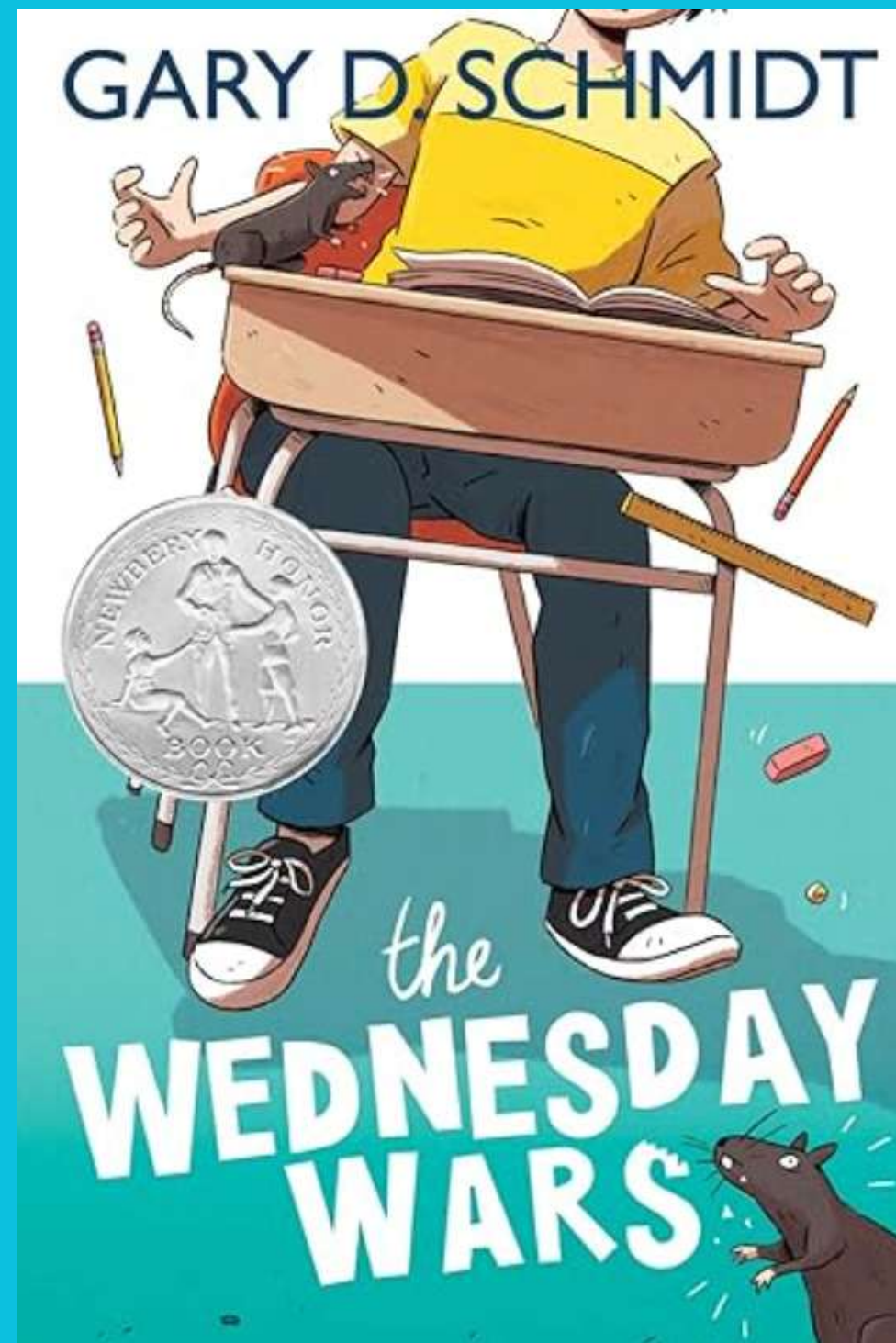
EXAMPLES:

NOVELS:

The Wednesday Wars by Gary D. Schmidt

BOOK OPENS WITH A STRONG IMPRESSION (WHETHER TRUE OR FALSE) BY THE PROTAGONIST:

“OF ALL THE KIDS IN THE SEVENTH GRADE AT CAMILLO JUNIOR HIGH, THERE WAS ONE KID THAT MRS. BAKER HATED WITH HEAT WHITER THAN THE SUN. ME.”



WHY WOULD A STUDENT BELIEVE SO FIRMLY THAT HIS TEACHER HATES HIM? That's what we want to know.

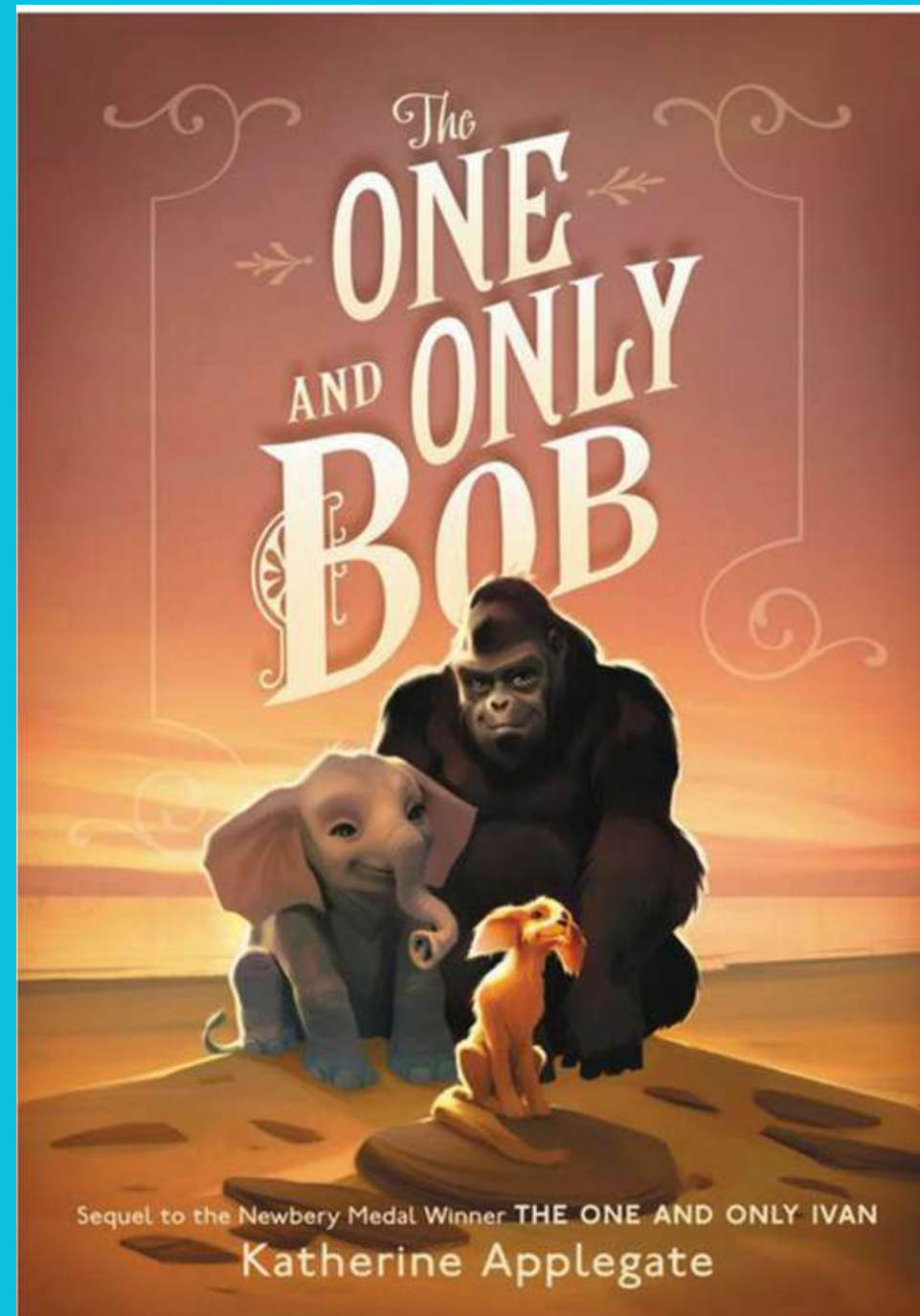
EXAMPLES:

NOVELS:

**The One and Only Bob
by Katherine Applegate**

**Opens with protagonist speaking directly to the
readers.**

“Look, NOBODY’S EVER ACCUSED ME OF BEING A GOOD



**“I BARK AT EMPTY AIR. I EAT CAT LITTER. I ROLL IN GARBAGE TO
ENHANCE MY AROMA. I HARASS INNOCENT SQUIRRELS. I HOG THE
COUCH. I LICK MYSELF IN The presence of company. I’m no saint, okay?”**

BEGINNING WITH MYSTERY/INTRIGUE

**This is where a book's opening sets up a
mystery
needing to be solved.**

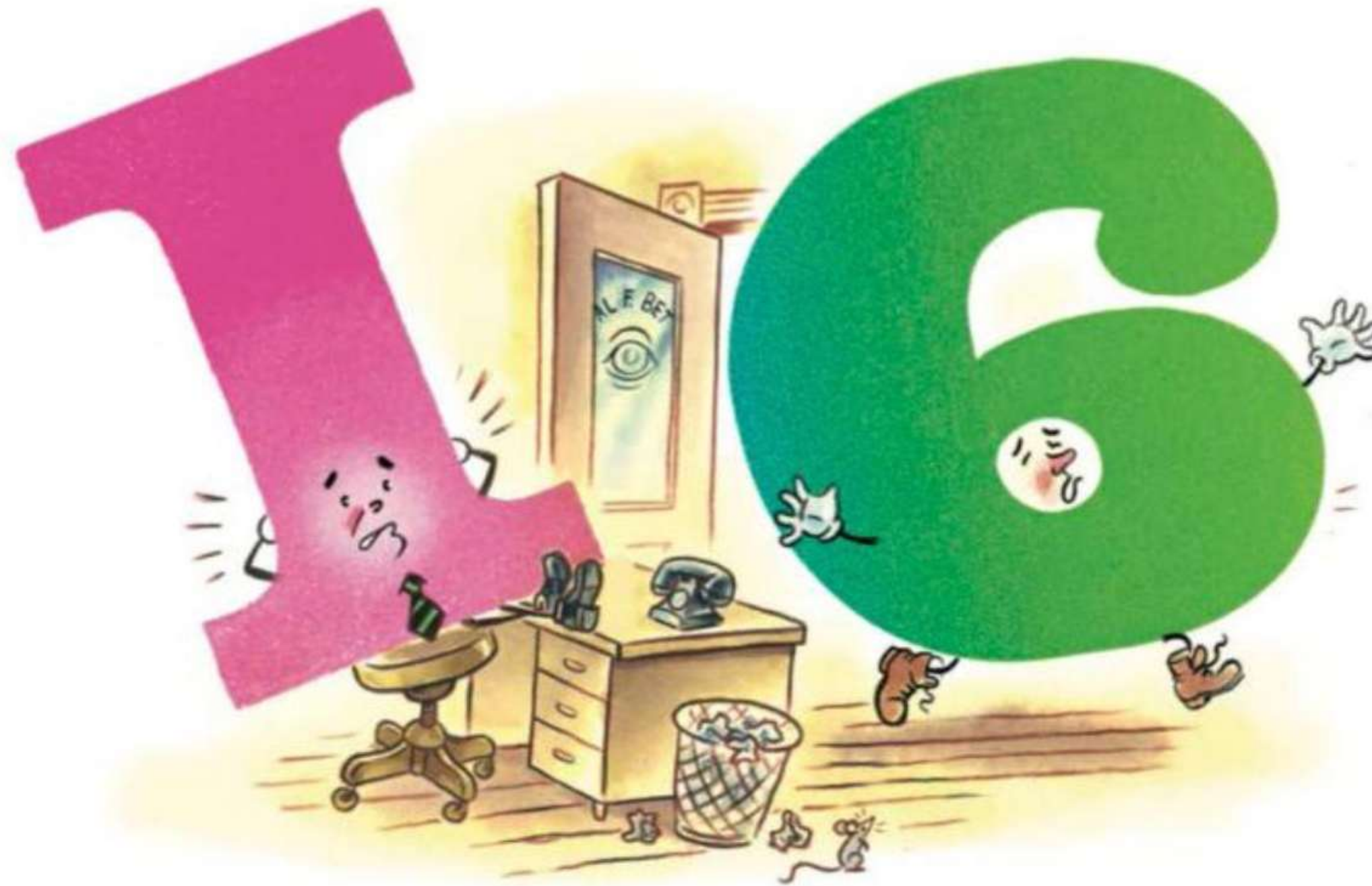
PICTURE BOOK EXAMPLE:

7 Ate 9 by Tara Lazar

Opens as a detective story from the first page

I was dozing in my chair when an urgent banging on my office door bolted me awake.

It was **6**. Something had scared the pants off him.

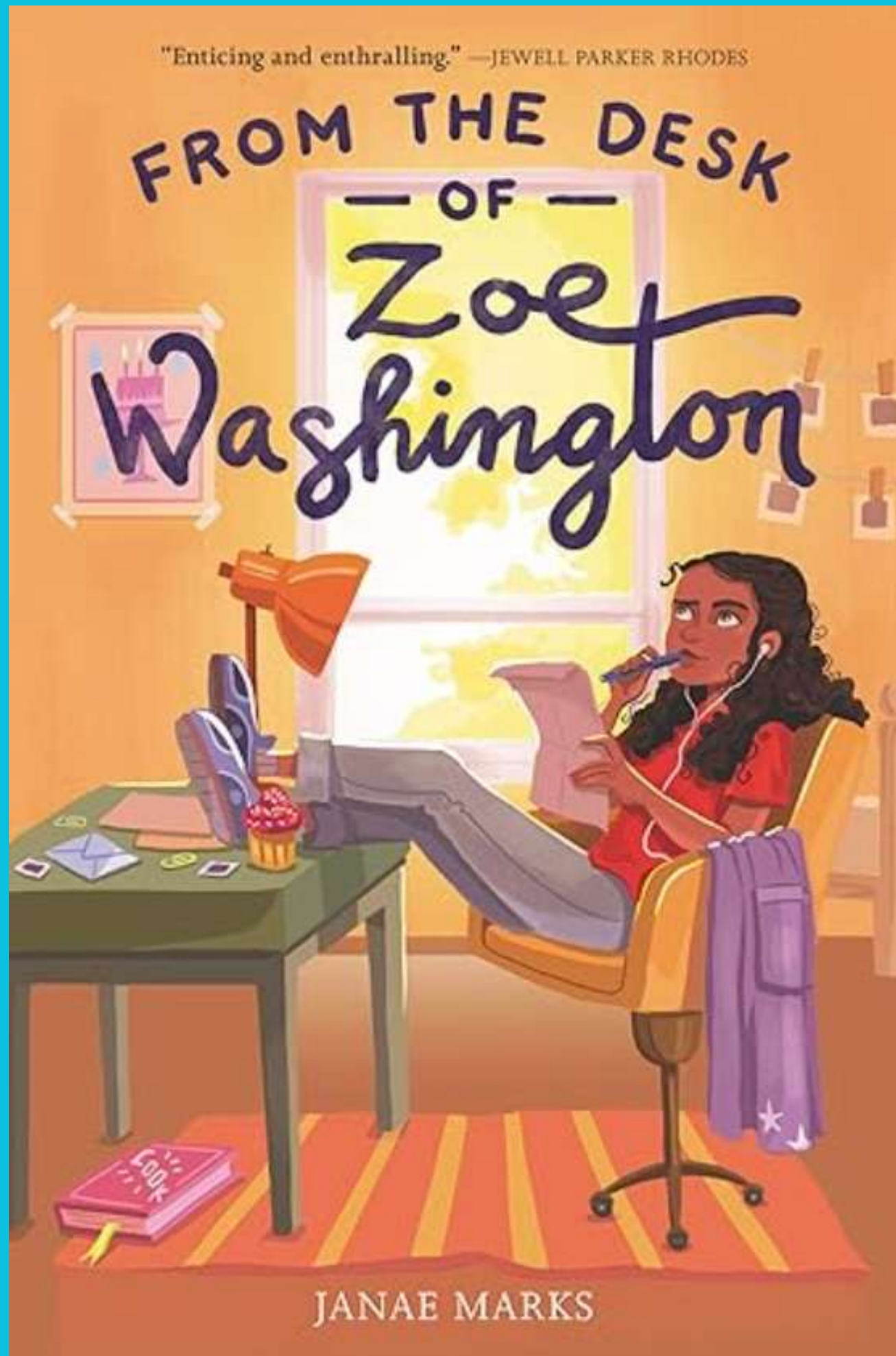


“**7** is coming to get me,” said **6**.

Beginning with Mystery/intrigue Novel:

**From the Desk of Zoe Washington
by Janae Marks**

**“On the day I turned twelve, I was certain it’d be
my favorite birthday yet, and then I got the letter.”**

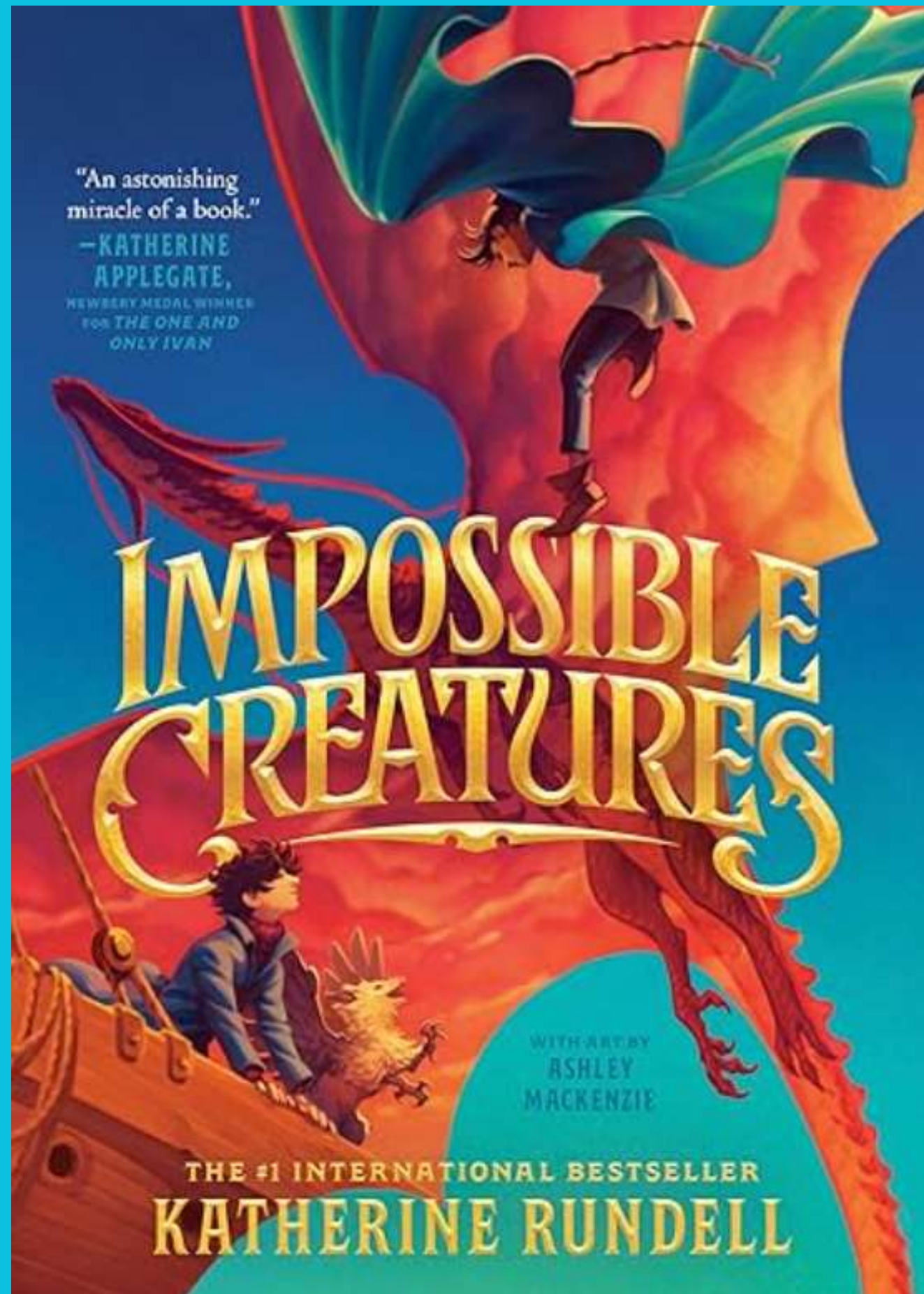


**Why does it intrigue us?
Because we're left wondering
what kind of letter would ruin her
prediction of it being the greatest
birthday yet? We want to know
what it said and who sent it.**

**BEGINNING WITH MYSTERY/INTRIGUE
NOVEL:**

IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES BY KATHERINE RUNDELL

"It was a very fine day, until something tried to eat him."



**This opening line could fall into
several categories:**

Unexpected

Conflict/Problem

Mystery/Intrigue

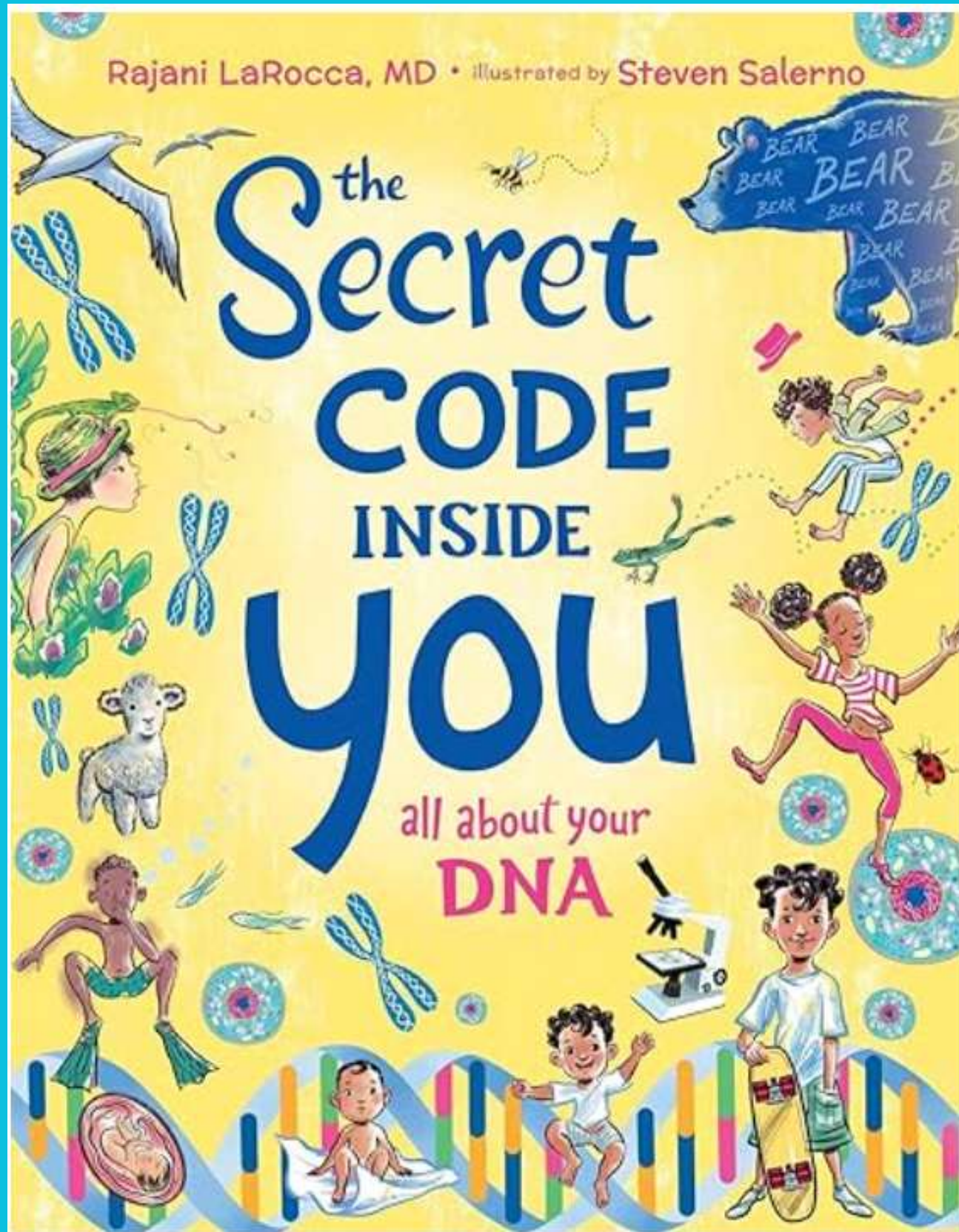
**But wherever it's placed, it
leaves the reader wanting to
read more to find out what this
creature is that might eat the
main character!**

Beginnings that Pose a Question

This is where a book's opening poses a question the reader wants to know the answer to.

**The Secret Code Inside You: all about your DNA, by
Rajani LaRocca**

**“Why aren’t you fuzzy like a dog, or buzzy like a
bee?”**



**Imaginative young readers
will want to know the answer
to that question right away.
Why do we have hair instead
of fur? Read the book and
find out.**

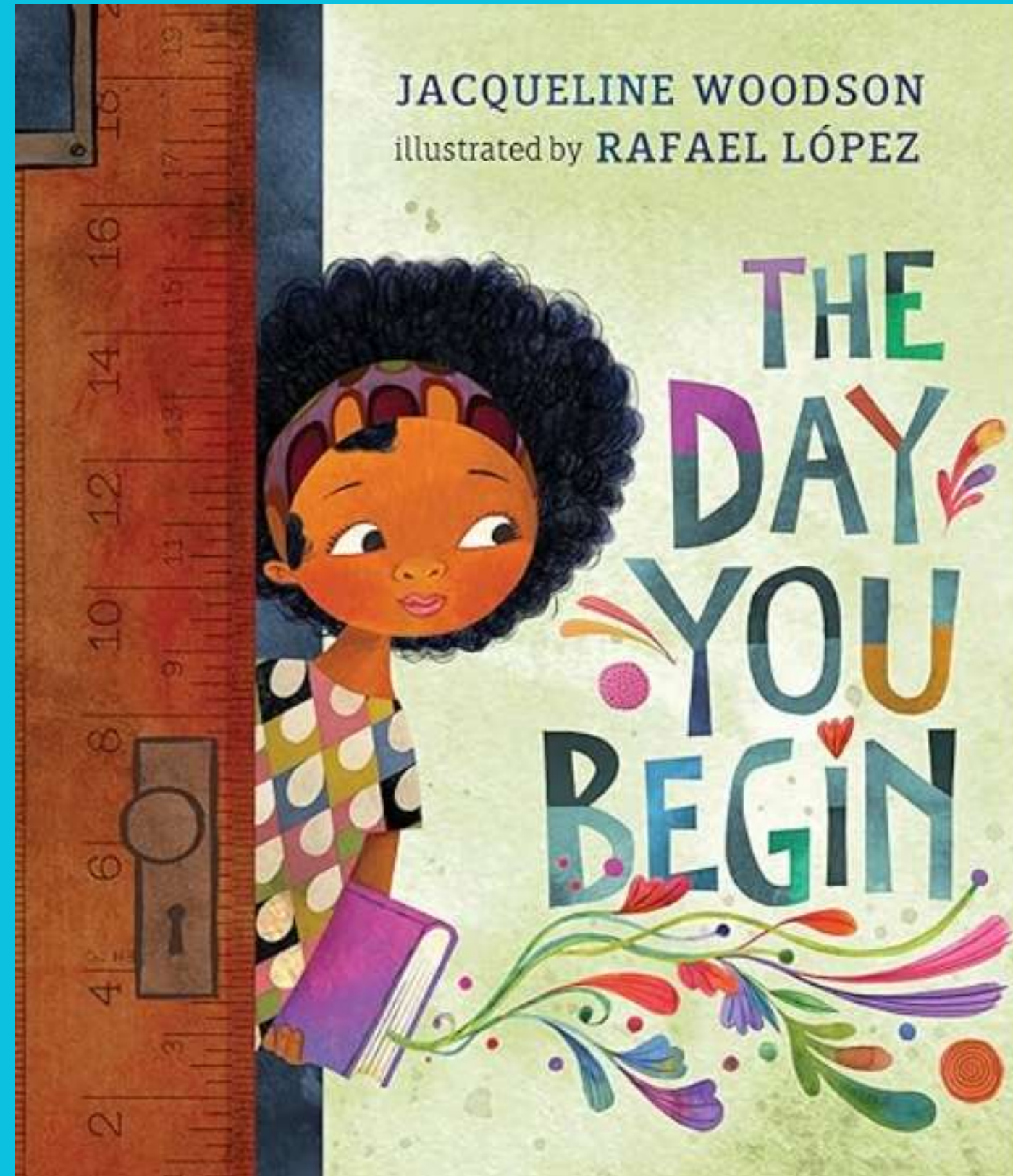
Beginnings that Pose a Question

The Day You Begin by Jacqueline Woodson

Opens with the protagonist's question:

**“You know that feeling when you walk into a room
and no one there is quite like you?”**

**The story continues
with the book's main
character learning
to find courage by
sharing her own
stories and
experiences.**

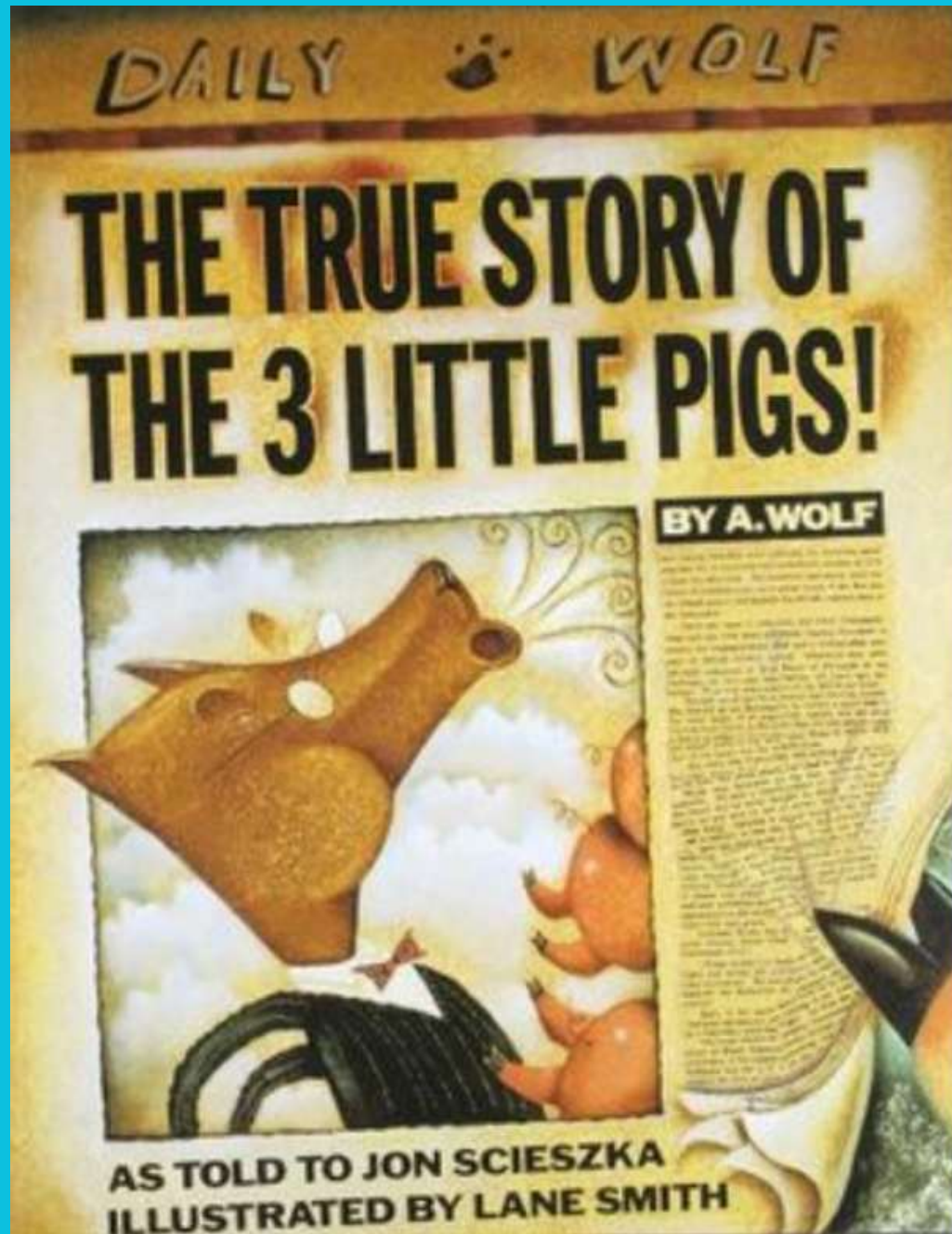


Beginnings that Use a Twist on a Classic

This is where a book's opening takes a famous first line and flips it into something completely different.

“Everybody knows the story of the Three Little Pigs. Or at least, they think they do.”

**This is the opening of
The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!
by Jon Scieszka**



**An alternate take on this familiar
classic tale, the story begins with
the wolf, Alexander T. Wolf, sitting
in jail trying to set the record
straight**

Beginnings that Use a Twist on a Classic

Novel Example

“It was a truth universally acknowledged that any young lady without a dragon was doomed to social failure.”

**This is the opening of
Scales and Sensibility
by Stephanie Burgis**

**Young adult readers familiar
with the novel Pride and
Prejudice will want to read
further to see what happens
in this retelling of another
Austen tale.**



More ways to begin stories that will keep readers wanting more:

Vivid Imagery and Sensory Details

- Engage the senses:**

Use descriptive language that appeals to sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste to create a strong mental picture.

Set the Stage:

Establish the setting quickly: A quick, incisive introduction to the setting can ground the reader in the story.

Keep it age-appropriate:

**Use language and concepts that are accessible to
the target age group.**

Your Turn!

**Share a first line or two from a book
you have on hand.**

**Let's discuss why it grabs the
reader (or doesn't).**