

REVERSE CHRONOLOGY by Ken McGoogan

Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter used reverse chronology to structure his 1978 play *Betrayal*, one of his major works. The first scene takes place after an affair has ended and the last ends as the affair begins. Novelist Martin Amis reversed chronology in *Time's Arrow*, a 1991 novel about a man who apparently brings the dead back to life. Eventually, we realize that we are retreating through history, that the central character was a doctor who dealt death at a Second World War concentration camp. The device also turns up in *The Sweet Hereafter* by Atom Egoyan, and in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Here we deploy Reverse Chronology as a technique for discovering and developing structure. A writer wrestling with complex material, and struggling to find a narrative through-line, might find this useful. The idea is to start with the closing scene, the grand finale, and write it in the present tense. Then, you locate the previous turning-point scene, the scene without which the grand finale would not exist and write that in the present tense. Then, you go back to the scene before that, and you repeat this process until you arrive at the opening scene. Writing in the present tense helps maintain focus.

Here is what I mean:

1.

Every day, as soon as he awakes, and even before he dresses, Ken sits down at the computer and checks his net worth. Invariably during recent years – and especially since, in 2015, the grand total topped the ten-million-dollar mark – Ken has found this to be an intensely gratifying way to start the day. Being filthy rich suits him more than he could have imagined. He is doubly gratified to think that he owes it all to his own hard work and perseverance.

2.

One evening in 2012, while driving across town to teach a course at the University of Toronto, Ken stops in at a convenience store to buy a bar of dark chocolate: at least 85 per cent. He has promised his wife that he will stop purchasing these bars, but secretly he perseveres because of the stress involved in teaching these evening classes. As he pays for the chocolate bar, the clerk says, "Want to buy a lottery ticket? Win six million dollars?"

Ken shrugs and says, "Sure, why not?"

3.

"Sheena, I can't find my chocolate bar here in fridge."

"You're putting on weight, Big Fella. Those chocolate bars are just too easy."

"Easy!" Clasp his head, Ken reels around the room. "It's hard work finding those eighty-five per-cent bars!"

"You let your conscience be your guide, Ken. But with those bars, you are on your own."

Exercise: your turn. Write a three-part narrative using reverse chronology to establish a causal structure. Again: use the present tense. Tip: in addition to organizing a recalcitrant narrative, this technique can help with revisions. With each of my books, I edit backwards at least once, starting with the last chapter and moving towards the first. Almost invariably, this reveals passages and scenes that are overblown or irrelevant.