

THE AFTERWARD:

The Beginning

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Matt Beam is a Toronto-based author, photographer and teacher. He's written a number of young-adult novels. His latest book is *City Alphabet*, a collaboration with fellow author Joanne Schwartz. A sequel to that book, *City Numbers* is forthcoming in May, 2011. He guest edits the Afterword this week.

It's a good time of the year to start something. Spring has sprung. Longer days have begun. There are all kinds of beginnings out there, and this is worth mulling over.

I've begun a few blogs over the years. One was on the state of my reading life after having "broken up with" [Haruki Murakami](#). The other was on how the melodramas of several TV shows matched up with my life after someone had broken up with me.

Both of them were beginnings with no middles or endings. Sometimes these kinds of beginnings are referred to as failures, or at the very least, false starts.

The beginning of every novel, for me, is like falling in love. The characters, though flawed, have no flaws, though physically varied, are stunning, though complex and human, are somehow beautifully simple.

This never lasts.

The beginning of my new photography book, [City Numbers](#), began even before I knew I was it was happening at all. Much before I called myself a photographer. Years before I met my collaborator and writer of the book, [Joanne Schwartz](#).

As is typical of collaborations, friendships, books, ours has had all kinds of beginnings.

I've recently started a detective series. Its beginning was fun and spirited. As the middle of my narrative swells – buttons popping, gum shoes kicked up on the desk, hands behind head – it demands, "Who the heck done it?!"

Bah! I say. The middle can wait ... We're just getting started here ...
Something else out there has just begun. Some people called it a
Revolution (There've been a few of those these days).

Other people call it Armageddon.

Still others call it the iPad.

At last year's [Writers' Union of Canada](#) AGM, many people were calling it
an Opportunity.

Only a few of them were writers. Not true. A few of them had been writers.
But something magical happened to all of us inside that conference room.
Just like at the beginning of one of [Kenneth Oppel's](#) fantastic young adult
novels:

Words were spoken, a spell was cast, and we had all transformed into
something new: Content Providers.

Hmmm ... Sounds like a story to get to the bottom of.

The Middle

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The middle is the meat. The middle is tough. The middle is where the
important stuff happens.

For a writer, an artist, the middle means work. You've chosen your weapon,
your palette, your purpose. Your thief.

Now go.

For [City Numbers](#) that meant finding and photographing particular digits,
somewhere out there, in the city.

There were days and nights when all I could see were numbers. On
storefronts, toilet-paper packaging, garbage bins, and milk cartons. On the
ceiling of my bedroom.

The middle is obsessive.

The writer's middle is big. Or long.

The pop star's middle is a six-pack. Until it isn't. Then it's over.

It's almost never over for us lumpy – lengthy – writers. Sorry, content providers ... CPs.

Never over. And for majority of us never quite enough.

Some of us CPs are turtles. Some are hares. The jury is still out on this guy. Turtle, Hare ... Fox? I'm not the one to say.

Meantime, I like to hang with turtles. They will survive the Revolution. Armageddon.

The iPad.

Turtles have thick shells and they've got time to plot their courses. Turtles are hard, hard at work.

The Middle will determine which way the publishing industry – the public, YOU –will go. In the meantime, the turtles will toy with the approach.

Here are a few I've witnessed and appreciated:

Jonathan Mendelsohn has been writing his [incisive and insightful book-and-movie blog](#) for four years now. Writer, editor, publisher. Slowly but surely his audience grows, his chops sharpen. If blogs are really the future, he's got a serious leg up.

[Andrea Johnston](#), meantime, has a pad of paper. And pipes. Johnston is poet and a bard.

When the Middle is done with us, some believe it will take us back to the days of Dickens. For starters, there will be serials:

“Like what you read, ma'am? That next chapter will be 49 cents.”

More important, though, is that public speaking will come to the fore. Dickens could tell a mean yarn. So can Johnston. She'll be the one telling the stories when the power goes out...

Ah, but that's a topic for the End. Or the Epilogue.

What's the hurry?

In my middle, I found fortune. In [Joanne Schwartz](#), I found a visionary, a co-conspirator. In [Groundwood Books](#), a small and great Canadian publisher.

But we all found fortune in the process, the doing, which is as much the Middle as anything I know.

The Hitchhiker's Guide To Making a Quasi-Ending

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The End is enough to keep you up at night.

Is it coming? What can I do about it? How can I make it so that it's perfect perfect perfect.

And not tragic tragic tragic.

The End haunts people, the artist especially. Whether it's typing the last word, shaping the last bit of clay, or singing the last note.

"Be sure," the End says to us, "because after this, nothing more can be done."

One of my all-time favourite endings in books comes in the middle of the first novel of a trilogy. It's the quasi-ending of an hilarious episode.

And it's a number: 42.

(Probably 12.5% of you already know what I am talking about. Or rather, 1/8.)

The episode occurs in the novel, [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#). The uber-computer, Deep Thought, is asked to come up with the “Ultimate Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything.”

And after seven and a half million years of whirring and crunching, it spits out the digit, [42](#).

Perfect! The “end” satisfies with an answer. Makes us laugh our faces off. And poses further questions like “What is the actual QUESTION?”

Over the last few days, I've finally figured out the ending to my first detective novel. It's \$53.29. And without spoiling a thing, I can say I hope my ending attains half the level of efficacy that [Douglas Adams](#)' did with his.

One of the biggest challenges Joanne Schwartz and I had in creating a counting book of 26 pages was deciding what number to go up to. And where to end.

To come up with our answer, Joanne and I found a real opportunity. We were able to introduce mathematical concepts such as zero, 000; fractions, $\frac{1}{2}$; percentages, 3.25; and even a professional handle – James Bond's that is – 007.

What I'm most proud of though is our finish. It is the best ending I've ever created, and I think, ever will. Our final image blows the whole thing apart.

Wide wide open. It's an explosion. But in a good way.

Speaking of things being blown apart – metaphorically, of course – I won't deign to predict how it will shape up for the publishing industry.

We're not even close to the end. Really just getting started

My sense is the End will be a new beginning, if not an opportunity for all.

But there is one thing I do know – when I've placed our new beautifully designed picture book, City Numbers, or its predecessor, City Alphabet, into people's hands, something magical happens.

It's an expression. An expression more powerful than an explosion. Ten times better than a perfect ending.

It is, each and every time, a whole new beginning.

Don't Worry ... The Future is Updatable

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The epilogue is a function of human nature, wanting to set things straight, bring up-to-date, state the bigger picture, gently apologize, pat oneself on one's back.

The reality is that completion of a project is as much about timelines and Chaos as it is about perfection and harmony.

My guess is that 99% of all artists want to change 99% of the works they've done ... while they fester over the project they are currently adapting, editing, reshaping.

It never seems to end.

In my latest young adult novel, [*Last December*](#), my protagonist, Steven, finishes the narrative, written in diary form, with P.S., P.P.S., etc. It's three months later, in March, and he needs to qualify, if not exactly conclude.

I wonder what he's doing now...

I also wonder when it is exactly in life's timeline that we stop using P.S.'s. The simple answer: Adulthood.

If I could finish off my recent C.V.'s and grant applications with a P.S., I would love to add something like, "P.S. There's SO much more, I promise!! P.P.S. Will get back to you on that ASAP!!"

Eventually though one has to take a risk, decide, step into the light.

This is a function of growing up.

And in this thinking, the book – the unplug-in-able, immutable, bona fide object – is mature.

A book has the rough and wrinkled beauty of a person who has resolutely – for better or worse – decided on her/his path. A book stands on its very own, apart from the writer, artist, as I testament to a happening, a sequence of happenings that end, in space and time.

Done.

It follows then, in this CP's mind, that the new e-book reality is young. Very young. And it may always be so.

It's a publishing Peter Pan. Never deciding, always updating, hedging, waffling, modifying, mollifying.

Some might call this change "progress" – the concept has amazing stamina despite all its defeats, and deaths, in the mud – others will call it "sitting on the fence."

Lucky for Joanne and I that then our epilogue for City Numbers was 50% of the written content. It isn't a footnote to the narrative, an equivocation, but true statement of purpose. An introduction.

This back-of-the-book intro is bound within the original concept. It IS the original concept.

And it is bound by its sturdy, verifiable cover.

My conclusion? Maybe this isn't the beginning of the end (hedge, hedge), but it is perhaps (waffle, waffle) the end of Endings, and if I'm right about that (qualify, qualify) I think it's a shame.

P.S. I'll probably change my mind about this.

P.P.S. Will get back to you on that ASAP!!

P.P.P.S. If you find any typos, trying metaphors, doubtful syllogisms, and/or factual errors, don't worry ... Matt Beam blog 2.0 is just around the corner.