

Your main commentary should be focused on *adverbial clauses*. Other topics may also be addressed.

5 *What is the point of departure for a story?* Unless you're writing a big cradle-to-grave saga – '*To begin my life at the beginning of my life*' – a story usually commences at a moment well into the life of the central character. As such, from the outset you're traveling forward with this individual through his
10 tale, yet are simultaneously discovering, bit by bit, the forces and events that shaped him in the past. As David Henry, my doctoral advisor, was fond of reminding his students in his lectures on literary theory: 'All novels are about a crisis and how an individual – or a set of individuals – negotiates said crises. More than that, when we first meet a character in a narrative, we are dealing
15 with him in the present moment. But he has a back story, just like the rest of us. Whether it's in the real life or on the page, you never understand somebody until you understand their back story.'

20 *David Henry*. Maybe that's a good point of departure. Because the accidental set of circumstances that landed David Henry in my life sent it down a path I would never have thought possible. Then again, *we can never predict where a particle will go...*

25 *David Henry*. Back at the start of the 1970s, when he was a young professor at university, he'd written a study of the American Novel, *Towards a New World*, that was noted immediately for its accessibility and its critical originality. Around the same time, he also published a novel about growing up in a Minnesota backwater that immediately saw him acclaimed as a modern-day Sherwood Anderson, alive to the contradictions of small-town American life.

30 'Alive' was the word everyone used about David Henry back then. *Towards a New World* won the 1972 National Book Award for Non-Fiction. His novel had been shortlisted that same year for the NBA in Fiction (a rare double honor) and was finalist for the Pulitzer. The photos of him around that time show just why he was such a media star as he had (to use a line from an *Esquire* profile of him) 'classic square-jawed American good looks and a serious sense of cool: Clark Gable Goes to Harvard.'

35 He was everywhere back then: appearing on talk shows; writing learned, witty essays for the *New York Review of Books*; debating right-wing hawks in public forums. What's more, though he dressed with a certain Lou Reed élan (black T-shirts, black jeans), he never jumped on the radical-chic bandwagon. Yes, he did publicly denounce 'the Babbit-like conformism that so dominates one corner of the American Psyche', but he also wrote articles in defense of America's cultural complexity. One of them, 'Our Necessary Contradictions', became something of a talking point when published in the *Atlantic* in 1976, as it was one of the first critical explanations of what David
40 called 'the two facets of the American psyche that rub up against each other

45 like tectonic plates.' I first discovered this essay while a freshman in college when a friend recommended David Henry's collection of journalist pieces, *Left-handed Writing*. And I was so taken with it that I must have foisted it on half a dozen friends, telling them that it explained, with brilliant clarity, what it meant to be an American who doubted so much about the state of the country today.

50 So I was in love with David Henry before I was in love with David Henry. When I applied to enter the doctoral program at Harvard, the essay which accompanied my application talked among other things about how much his approach to American Literature and Thought had influenced my own nascent academic work, and how the thesis I was hoping to write – *The Infernal Duality: Obedience and Defiance in American Literature* – was so David Henry.

55 Granted, I knew I was taking a risk in letting it be known – even before I had been accepted by Harvard – that I already had a preferred thesis advisor in my sights. But I was so determined to work with him. As I was coming out of Smith *summa cum laude* with very strong recommendations from my English professors there, I was willing to be assertive.

60 It worked. I was called down to Cambridge for an interview with the department chairman. At the last minute I was told by his secretary that the interview could be handled by someone else in the department.

And that's how I found myself face to face with David Henry.