

Hooking the Reader with Character Development

By: Susan Furlong

I love to read. I'm also a busy mom, so I don't have much time, or patience, to invest in a book that doesn't hook me from the first couple pages. What I'm most drawn to in a book isn't the setting, or pretty writing, or even the premise of the story. What draws me in and keeps me reading is the main character. So, when I choose a book or a new series to read, I often skim the first two pages to see if the author can introduce me to a character who I want to get to know better. Someone who I'll care about and will want to travel with for the course of the story. Because isn't that what a book is? A journey of sorts? And who wants to be stuck on a long trip with a boring travel mate?

When I started writing *Peaches and Scream*, I knew I wanted to make the main character, Nola, strong and dynamic, yet slightly flawed. I also wanted to give readers insight to how Nola became the type of woman they'd want to hang with—a hard-working, down-to-earth gal who admittedly has a few quirks, but also a strong sense of justice. I decided to use Nola's relationship with her mother as a way to give readers a glimpse of her past and the origins of her strong character. Because like many southern mothers, Nola's mama has spent years giving her advice on how to handle all of life's little problems. My challenge, however, was how to convey their relationship in the opening pages of *Peaches and Scream*. I finally decided to start with a short preface introducing their mother/daughter relationship:

All my life, no matter where I travel or what adventure I'm living, I hear my mama's voice in my head, repeating over and over lessons she instilled in me during my youth. Lessons about what it means to be a proper Southern woman—feminine, sweet, charming . . . and most of all, strong. A handbook, of sorts. She calls these little gems of advice her Georgia Belle Facts—little bits of know-how passed down from Southern mothers to their daughters for generations. (Of course, she's put her own peculiar spin on a few of these tenets.) But overall, these facts are about living life to the fullest, with class, dignity and a sense of responsibility to care for our neighbors. Most important, though, her tidbits of wisdom have taught me that the Georgia Belle attitude isn't really about a particular region of the country. Nor is it about a person's heritage or financial status. In fact, because of my mama's tried-and-true advice, I've come to learn that the essence of southern spirit is for everyone—no matter who they are or where they live.

—Nola Mae Harper

Next, I decided those little bits of motherly advice would make great chapter headings. So I've included a saying from Nola's mother at the beginning of every chapter and randomly numbered

each as if they were being taken from a long list of motherly advice Nola has gathered over the years. I've dubbed these sayings "Georgia Belle Facts" and have tried to make each relate to an upcoming challenge Nola faces in that particular chapter. For example, in the first couple pages, Nola is returning home after a long absence of worldly travels. She immediately feels a bit of small town culture shock and is worried about facing down the local gossip mongers. Especially since her own misguided youth has given them a lot to talk about. So, I foreshadowed that conflict in the first Georgia Belle Fact:

Georgia Belle Fact #027: In the South, we greet one another with bits of juicy gossip, not some ol' boring Yankee-like salutation.

After introducing Nola and giving just enough background information to make her interesting, I still needed to provide readers with a vivid southern setting. I thought the best way to achieve this was by letting readers see the town through Nola's eyes. So, I created the opening scene with Nola arriving home after several years away. That way, readers could ride along with Nola see Cays Mill for themselves as well as grasp Nola's dismay—and concerns—about returning to her home turf. Also, by utilizing characters' dialects and the town's peachy street names in the first couple chapters, I hoped readers would feel like they'd stepped right into a small Georgia town. And since Nola's other family members play a key role in the book, and often provide motivation for her sleuthing tendencies, I used the first two pages to establish a bit of Nola's family dynamics through her own personal narrative.

I hope my opening pages draw you into the story and entice you to read more of *Peaches and Scream*:

I was idling on the corner of Blossom Street and Orchard, when the words came sailing through my open car window. "My word! Is that Nola Mae Harper I see?"

I snapped my head and squinted to the sidewalk where I spied the Crawford sisters sauntering along. I hadn't heard my full name, let alone that drawl I'd taken for granted in childhood, for a long time. I shot them a quick smile and waggled my fingers before moving down the road. As I continued, I noticed more than just a few of the locals rubbernecked as I passed, the sight of me eliciting curious stares and sudden whispers. I could imagine the return of the Harper family black sheep was going to crank the village's local rumor mill into full gear. Gee, it was good to be back. They may have dubbed Georgia as the "Peach State," but what they weren't saying was my hometown of Cays Mill was the pit. I should know; I was born and raised in this two stoplight town and had spent most of my adult life trying to shake its loamy soil from my boots.

That's why I surprised myself when home was the first place I thought of when my work situation took a turn for the worse. Then I really surprised myself when I agreed to spend time at home watching over the family's one hundred plus acres of peach farm while Mama and Daddy took their dream trip. But I guess I did owe them. Or so I'd been told— or had it implied in Mama's

southern sweet talk— often enough. Truth be known, they had been the world's best parents; and I, well . . . I hadn't always been the best daughter. At least that was what my older sister, Ida Jean, kept telling me. Of course, maybe she had a point. She'd stuck around Cays Mill, married the banker's son and was busy adding little twigs to the Harper family tree, a set of twins so far and another baby on the way. I, on the other hand, headed north of the Piedmont the first chance I got, took a job with a humanitarian organization and had been traipsing from one country to another for the last fifteen years or so, seeing the world or, perhaps more accurately, escaping from my own world. Heaven knows, if I hadn't left Cays Mill when I did, hard telling what type of shame I'd have brought to the Harper family name.

Anyhow, it'd been almost three years since I was home last and it looked like not much had changed in town. The city building, still the most formidable structure in the area, occupied most of the town green and acted as an unsurpassable anchor for Cays Mill's business section. Not that there were many businesses around these days. Like many small towns, the recession had hit our village hard. As I drove about the square, I saw more than a few vacant buildings, their empty windows only partially obscured under the bright awnings that served to protect the storefronts from the scorching Georgia heat. However, I was happy to see Red's Diner was still going strong. A line was formed outside the door, probably the after church crowd, heading in for Red's famous breakfast hash, served with grits and a side of toast with—what else?—peach preserves.

At the next stoplight I stole a quick glance in the rearview mirror and swiped a short piece of cropped hair from my forehead, before gripping the wheel and turning off the square. I traveled southeast, winding my way a mile or so out of town, heading for the family farm. If I had to describe Georgia, I'd say it was a like a hand- made quilt, tossed out all lumpy like over the bed. The northern part of the state would be the biggest bumps, where the Appalachian hills offered a beautiful blue hue and the winding rivers ran through like errant stitching. Then came the Piedmont, with big cities like Atlanta and Columbus acting as the nubby knots holding the fabric and the batting in place. Next, the Fall Line, where the rivers made a showy descent like colorful fabric bargellos, cascading over rocks and flowing to the smooth coastal planes where scenic towns like Savannah provided a decorative binding, sealing the quilt's overall beauty. My family's little block of the fabric was located on the Fall Line, where the northern rivers dumped their sandy deposits, making soil conditions just right for growing peaches, which my family had done for as many generations as I could count.



Susan Furlong has lived throughout the United States, including the South, but is now happily settled in the Midwest on a small hobby farm with her husband and four children. Writing about peaches comes naturally to her as she grows several varieties of her own. Susan also writes the *New York Times* bestselling Novel Idea Mysteries under the pen name Lucy Arlington. You can learn more about Susan by visiting her website at www.susanfurlong.com.

Peaches and Scream releases July 7th.

It's available for pre-order here: <http://tinyurl.com/olhbqvs>