

## Trapped by a Killer

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At first, the killer seemed so exciting—exactly what I’d always longed for, what I’d often sought but never found. I didn’t see the dangers until it was too late. Even then, I should have tried to break free. I should have just walked away. But I couldn’t. I was hooked. Somehow, I had to find a way to make this work.

All mystery writers yearn to come up with killer first paragraphs, ones that jump off the page, seize hold of readers, and pull them in deep. I tried to write that sort of first paragraph for *Interpretation of Murder*, and I think I succeeded—at least, it feels like a killer to me. But sometimes killer first paragraphs, like other kinds of killers, make us feel trapped. Sometimes, when we focus on packing as much drama as possible into a first paragraph, writing the follow-up paragraphs gets tricky. My killer proved so problematic that I came close to cutting it and looking for a blander way to begin. I couldn’t do it. I liked the paragraph too much. Did I make the right decision? Frankly, I’m still not sure.

Here’s the first paragraph of *Interpretation of Murder*:

“To be fair,” he said, “I should tell you the last person I hired for this job got killed. Probably, it had nothing to do with the job. Probably. So. You interested?” The speaker is Cleveland private detective Walt Sadowski, and he’s talking to my protagonist, Jane Ciardi, an American Sign Language interpreter. They’re sitting in a coffee shop, and he’s interviewing her for a part-time job. I like the paragraph because it starts things off quickly, without any throat-clearing or scene-setting. It points to a possible murder in the past and hints at possible danger in the future. It establishes Walt’s voice—a distinctive voice, I hope—and immediately plunges Jane into a dilemma. And I think it’s funny.

The problem is the next paragraph. The problem is Jane’s response. In the situation I’d set up, there are two sensible ways for her to respond. First, she can stand up and say, “I’m sorry, Mr. Sadowski, but if you think it’s even remotely possible the last interpreter’s death was somehow connected to the job, I’m definitely *not* interested. Have a nice day.” But that would be the end of the novel, so I couldn’t let Jane be that sensible.

The other sensible way for Jane to respond would be to lean forward and say, “It *probably* had nothing to do with the job? That means you think it *could* have had something to do with the job. Why do you think that? How was the first interpreter you hired killed, and what possible connection to the job could there be? If you want me to consider taking this job, you have to give me full, detailed information about exactly what happened, and you have to give it to me now.”

But I couldn't let Jane say that, either. Then the novel would have gone from a killer first paragraph to several pages of back story about a character who dies before the novel opens. (And yes, you're right—he *was* murdered, and it *did* have something to do with the job.) I didn't want to do that. As soon as possible, I wanted to give the reader a break from the question-and-answer job interview format. I wanted to bring three important new characters into the scene, develop some conflict among them, introduce a little action, and give Jane chances to demonstrate both her sign-language interpreting skills and her martial arts skills. I also wanted to hint at the novel's central themes by bringing up questions about ethics. I had a lot I wanted to accomplish in this first chapter, and I wanted to accomplish all of it before returning to back story about what happened to the first interpreter.

So how can Jane respond when Walt reveals the first interpreter was killed and says, "Probably, it had nothing to do with the job. Probably." After many failed, frustrating efforts, I came up with this:

You can't afford to be picky, I'd told myself, not after the way you've messed up. If a chance for a paycheck comes along, take it. But I didn't like that second "probably."

"You haven't told me what the job involves," I said. "I assume you have a deaf client, and that's why you need a sign-language interpreter."

I don't know how well this solution works—you'll have to decide. Jane's response isn't really sensible, but I tried to justify it by revealing she's "messed up" somehow in the past and now feels desperate for a paycheck. I hope readers will wonder about how she "messed up" and sympathize with her financial situation. Also, I hope they won't just dismiss her as an idiot. She's troubled by "that second 'probably,'" so she's not too dense to recognize the implications of Walt's words. She sees the danger, but she consciously chooses to push her concerns aside for the moment because she needs this job so much. So she asks to hear more about it, hoping it won't involve anything riskier than sitting in an office and helping Walt communicate with a deaf client. (She'll ask questions about what happened to the first interpreter toward the end of the chapter, after—I think—there's been enough action to balance the back story.) Jane's response also reveals she's a sign-language interpreter, and I hope that, too, will intrigue readers. (Except, of course, that if readers have read even one sentence of either the back-cover blurb or the Amazon summary, they'll already know Jane's a sign-language interpreter. Why do so many agents and editors insist we cram that sort of background information into our first paragraphs, when these days nobody even thinks about buying a book without first reading a back-cover blurb or an Amazon summary?)

In the remaining paragraphs of my first two pages, I try to give people more reasons to keep reading. Walt responds to Jane's question:

"Nah, the client's not deaf." To me, Walt Sadowski didn't look much like a private detective. I don't know what I'd expected, but it hadn't been this—a marginally heavy, unevenly balding man, fifty or so, big black-rimmed glasses parked on a broad, bland face. He sat forward. "His daughter's deaf. She's

nineteen. Nice enough kid, her dad says, but rebellious. Lately, she's been acting weird. He's afraid she's mixed up in things that could hurt her."

Already, I'd started to feel uncomfortable. "So you'd like me to talk to her?" I said, knowing that probably wasn't it. "To sign with her, that is, and find out what's going on?"

He shook his head. "Her dad says the direct approach won't work. So I've been following her on and off, keeping track of where she goes and who she sees. The problem is, I can't tell what she's talking about, because she doesn't speak. Bugs won't work, tape recorders, anything I'd normally use. Now, she's got this boyfriend, and they spend lots of time together, waving their arms around and stuff. If I knew what they're saying—"

"Just a minute," I cut in. "You want me to spy on her? I can't. It's not ethical. Interpreters keep their clients' communications absolutely confidential."

"She's not the client. Her father is. And it's not like he's trying to repossess her car or something. She's a teenager, for Pete's sake, and he's worried sick about her. How is it unethical to help a father protect his kid?"

I thought back to the ethics class I'd taken two years ago. In every situation we'd discussed, the deaf person was the client. If the client's a hearing person, does that make a difference? Would it matter that I'd be trying to help her? I lifted my hands. "It doesn't feel right. And is it legal? Don't private detectives have to be licensed?"

"Hell, I'm not asking you to detect anything. I'll handle that. You'd just be—well, providing a service. Like if I was working on a case, and I came across something written in a foreign language, and you translated it. That's all."

Not the world's most convincing analogy. "I don't know. This isn't something interpreters do."

"Look, Miss Ciardi," he said, and stopped. "Okay if I call you Jane? Jane, I know it's unusual. That doesn't make it wrong."

Again, I hope these paragraphs contain enough intriguing elements to make readers keep turning pages—a private detective who doesn't fit the Sam Spade stereotype, a rebellious deaf teenager who's "been acting weird" and might be "mixed up" in something dangerous, a worried father, a protagonist who cares about acting ethically and is sharp enough to spot the problems with a weak analogy.

Does any of that make Jane's response to Walt's opening statement sensible? No. If I went on a job interview and heard a statement like that, I'd walk out. Chances are, you would, too. I could have made my first two pages much more realistic by leaving out any references to the first interpreter's death. Walt could simply not mention it. Since he's almost as desperate to hire an interpreter as Jane is to find a job, it would make sense for him to keep his mouth shut. Jane could accept the job thinking it was completely safe, and find out about the first interpreter only after she's fully committed to helping the deaf teenager. That would be more realistic. But it wouldn't be as much fun, and it might not draw the reader in as well.

So maybe that's why we try so hard to write killer first paragraphs. They may trap us in unrealistic situations. They may force us to make our characters behave in ways that aren't really sensible. But if the paragraphs are intriguing enough to keep readers turning pages anyway, maybe they're worth all the problems they create.



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens has published almost fifty short stories, most of them in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. One story was nominated for Agatha and Macavity awards and made the also-ran list in *Best American Mystery Stories 2013*; another story appeared in *Family Circle* after winning a contest judged by Mary Higgins Clark. *Interpretation of Murder*, published by Black Opal Books, is a traditional whodunit that offers readers glimpses into deaf culture. Its protagonist was introduced in a Derringer-winning *Hitchcock* story, "Silent Witness" (now available on Amazon). Her second novel, *Fighting Chance*, a young adult martial arts mystery, will be published in October by The Poisoned Pencil. Website:

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