

FINDING MY TEEN NARRATOR'S VOICE: THE OPENING LINES OF *SWIMMING ALONE*

By Nina Mansfield

The Sea Side Strangler Strikes Again!

Leave it to my mentally unstable, common sense impaired parents to ship me off to the only town in America with an active serial killer on the loose. I could so easily have the life squeezed out of me by some deranged killer. Now that would be the ultimate revenge. I mean, talk about a guilt trip—not that I'd be alive to benefit from it. And quite frankly, I'd prefer to die peacefully, in my sleep, at the age of one hundred and eight, thank you very much.

So begins my debut young adult mystery *SWIMMING ALONE*. I had a great deal of fun writing these opening lines, but it took me several years and many rewrites to get to them. Somewhere during my revision process, I realized I needed several things to happen. I needed to introduce my readers to The Sea Side Strangler, a serial killer who haunts my protagonist throughout the novel. I also needed to introduce the narrator, Cathy Banks. No, we don't know her name yet. But we know she isn't an adult, since her parents are shipping her off somewhere. And from the voice, I think most people would venture to guess that she is a teenager, and a snarky one at that.

More on "voice" in a bit.

I dug through the old drafts of the novel on my computer hoping to find the original opening. Alas, it is probably saved somewhere on a floppy disk. OK, maybe not, but it certainly was written well before I had my current computer. But I do remember this. When I first started writing the novel was in the 3rd person, began at a different point in the story and was told through a series of flashbacks.

An early beta reader of mine strongly suggested I tell the story chronologically. By nature, I am not a very linear thinker, so a flashbacky-non-linear story makes perfect sense to me, but it isn't necessarily the best choice for writing a young adult mystery novel.

I rewrote the novel, and started the story by introducing my protagonist the moment she learns about the Sea Side Strangler. I had a well-told 3rd person mystery, but I still felt like it was missing something, and I wasn't quite sure what. I didn't want to sit on the manuscript forever, so I began to send it to agents.

Several expressed interest, but there were no bites. One agent suggested I rewrite the novel in the first person.

That would be a major change. I thought about her suggestion for six months, and then I decided she was right.

I rewrote the novel and sent it back to her.

I received a polite "thanks, but no thanks." The novel, she said, was still missing something.

I was devastated, of course. My devastation led me to seek out writing advice on line. I discovered a community called Verla Kay's Blue Board made up of children's and young adult writers, and I learned my devastation was not unique. Through the Blue Board, I became acquainted with the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). I also hooked up with a critique group in my area, and I registered for my very first writing conference, the

SCBWI Conference in New York.

It was at this conference that I attended a workshop on writing young adult fiction. I can no longer remember who gave the workshop—some prominent agent or editor—but she stressed one thing: VOICE.

That's what my novel lacked.

That's what my opening lacked.

I had told a perfectly good mystery story, but I had not captured the teen voice.

On the train ride home, I thought about my narrator. I thought about how her parents were going through a divorce—something I wanted to work into the opening—and how she had ended up getting sent away to stay with an aunt in a beach town. Most kids would enjoy some time away from their parents, but Cathy was annoyed. She was going to be away from her friends for the summer. She was going to have to find a job. And yes, there was indeed a serial killer on the loose.

I got home from the conference, and I wrote those opening lines.

And I continued to write:

But seriously, what kind of psychos send their only daughter, their bundle of joy, the light of their lives away to a town where dead bodies keep washing up on shore? My parents, that's who—all so they could strangle each other without having to worry about me getting in the way. Not literally, just legally. You know—the “d” word: Divorce. The week before they shipped me off, Mommy dearest smashed one-half of the Tiffany china when she found a foreign thong in Daddy's glove compartment. Now the lawyers are trying to figure out whose half she smashed. (I'd find the questionable thong far more intriguing if I wasn't totally skeeved.) These are the atrocities they are trying to shield me from.

Serial killers weren't exactly on their radar when they decided to ship me off.

This particular serial killer wasn't on my radar either until I saw the headline splashed across the front page of the Beach Point Gazette.

Once I had captured Cathy's teen voice in the opening, I would go on to rewrite the entire novel again. But this time, I knew I had finally found what my novel was missing.

SWIMMING ALONE (Fire & Ice YA, Aug. 2015)

The Sea Side Strangler is on the loose in Beach Point, where fifteen-year-old Cathy Banks is spending the summer with her aunt (who happens to be mystery writer Roberta McCabe). Although thrilled to be away from her psychotic, divorcing parents, with no cell phone or internet access, Cathy is positive that her summer is going to be wretched. Just when she begins to make friends, and even finds a crush to drool over, her new friend Lauren vanishes. When a body surfaces in Beach Point Bay, Cathy is forced to face the question: has the Sea Side Strangler struck again?

SWIMMING ALONE is available on [Amazon](#), [B&N](#), [IndieBound](#) or [Fire & Ice YA](#).



Nina Mansfield is a Greenwich, Connecticut based writer. Her debut novel, *SWIMMING ALONE*, a YA mystery, was published in 2015 by Fire & Ice YA. Her graphic novel, *FAKE ID: BEYOND RECOGNITION*, illustrated by Leyla Akdogan, will be out online with [Plume Snake Comics](#) in 2016. Her blog *NOT EVEN JOKING*, has hosted numerous mystery writer guests. Her plays have been published and produced throughout United States and internationally. Nina's short mystery fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and *Mysterical-E*. She is a member of Sisters in Crime, Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, the Short Mystery Fiction Society and the Dramatists Guild. Connect with her on her [Website](#), [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).