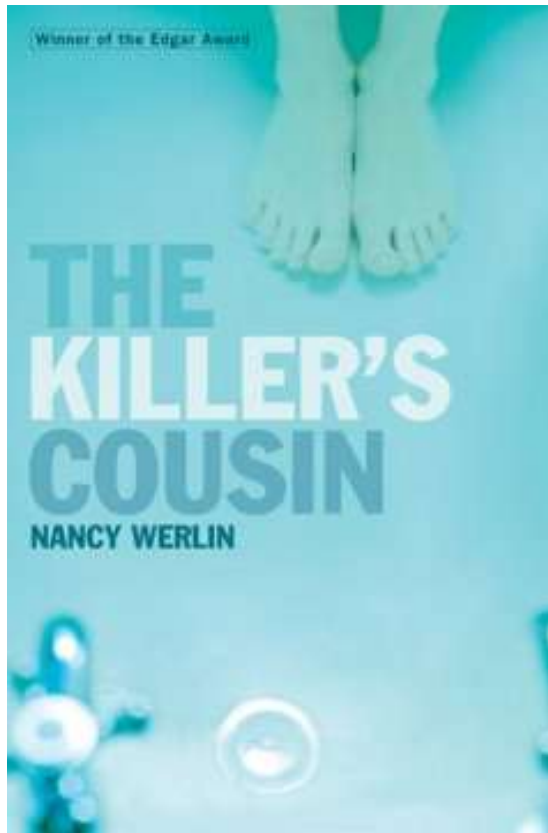


The Killer's Cousin by Nancy Werlin



What's It About?

Recently acquitted of murder, seventeen-year-old David has moved to Massachusetts to complete his senior year of high school. His aunt and uncle have offered him shelter—escape from the media's questions and from the uncertain glances of his neighbors and ex-friends.

His attic apartment doesn't feel much like a shelter, though. He sees ghostly shadows at night, his aunt is strangely cold, and his eleven-year-old cousin, Lily, is downright hostile. And as Lily's behavior becomes more and more threatening, David can't help wondering why. What ugly secrets lurk within the walls of Lily's home?

There's one thing David knows with certainty. The more he learns about his cousin Lily, the harder it is to avoid thinking about his own past.

- Winner of the Edgar award

Inspiration

The Killer's Cousin was my second novel, and it (and I) went through five torturous, hideous, and painful drafts over five years before it reached its final form.

In the first two versions of what was then called *Cambridge Gothic*, the narrator, David Yaffe, was 26 years old and working as a high school history teacher. He was obsessing over an old girlfriend, yes, but she was very much alive. Right from the beginning, however, the story of his cousin Lily and her family was much as it is in the published book.

It took me a long time to understand that the problem in those initial drafts was David. He was a nice guy; he was concerned about his cousin—but somehow that wasn't enough to draw the reader into the mystery. As you read, you thought: “Who cares?”

In despair, I abandoned the novel and went to work on something else. Then, months later, I had a sudden revelation. Quickly, I wrote a prologue in which I made David eight years younger, and dropped dark hints about his own past.

In short, I turned David into a sympathetic narrator—and tied the two parts of the story together—by making him a killer.

Make of that what you will.

Discussion Questions

(by Lynn Rutan)

As you read:

- In the Prologue, David introduces himself and says that the tabloids asked if the reason he was acquitted was because his father was a lawyer. “Powerful litigator calls in favors?” Then David says, “I am no more willing to talk about Emily and what happened my senior year of high school – my first senior year – than I ever was.” What can you predict about the book from this section?
- David comes home to find Lily in his room, looking through his things. When he asks her to leave, Lily asks him, “Did you feel powerful? Were you glad? Even for a minute?” What do you think she means? How does this encounter make you feel about Lily?
- In Chapter 5, David tells us, “Greg listened as I was acquitted of killing his sister. There have been only hints before this first revelation. What did you guess had happened?”
- Raina asks to paint David and he refuses. “No one feared me – except me,” he thinks. David keeps giving us reasons to suspect the worst of him. Why?
- Why is Lily so upset when her parents start to talk to each other and seem to revive their relationship?
- David keeps excusing Lily’s rude behavior, saying, “She’s just a kid.” Do you think he is right?
- The interaction of characters provides a way for an author to develop complex characters. What do we learn about David from his friendship with Frank Delgado? With Raina Doumeng?
- Lily plays a series of nasty tricks on David and he manages to stay calm. Then in Chapter 30, David tells us, “The next day I came home to the most alarming Lily-trick yet. Nothing.” David tears the room apart. Why do you think he loses his composure on the day she has done nothing?
- When David’s father comes to get him, Lily is upset about David’s leaving. Since she has clearly resented David’s presence, why do you think she is so unhappy about what is happening?
- In the hotel, David feels that he can tell his father everything that has happened. His father has never promised to believe him. Why do you think David is finally able to do this?

- As the fire rages around them, Lily tells David that she killed Kathy. David tells her that her punishment is to live with it. Do you think Lily actually killed her sister or just thinks she did? Is living with her guilt punishment enough if she did?
- Vic and Julia are very distant from David after the fire, even though he saved Lily's life. Can you explain this behavior?

After you finish the book:

- David "tells" his story in first person. Of course, this is really the author speaking. How would the story change if the author had chosen to use third person?
- Think about the title. At the end of the book, does it have a different meaning for you?
- Kathy appears to and speaks to David. Do you think she is just in David's mind or is Kathy really a ghost?
- When did you first suspect that Lily might have played a role in Kathy's death?
- If you were on a jury, would you have acquitted David of Emily's death?
- David tells Lily that it doesn't matter whether you meant to do something so horrible or not. "What matters is that you know that you could do it again. That it is possible." What do you think about that? Do you think either David or Lily could do something like that again?
- After the fire, David says that saving Lily had somehow given him hope that he would find ways to atone in the future. Do you think David will ever forgive himself?
- The author skillfully resolves many of the puzzles but leaves a few tantalizing questions. What are some of these? How do you feel about this technique?

Publication Information

Age 13 and up.

First USA publication 1998 by Random House.

Published by Penguin in ebook and physical book. Audiobook available from Brilliance Audio.

Translations: Spanish, Danish, Dutch, Japanese.

Reviews and Awards

- Winner of the 1999 Edgar award for best young adult mystery
- An American Library Association "Best of the Best: Best 100 YA books of the Past 10 Years) selection, 2005.
- Winner of the 2001 Garden State (New Jersey) Teen Book Award
- Winner of Black-Eyed Susan Award (Maryland), High School division, 2000-2001
- Honorable Mention "Silver Kiss" in the Golden and Silver Kisses 2002 award program, from the Dutch Stichting CPNB.
- Texas TAYSHAS high school reading list, 2000

- Evergreen (Washington State) Young Adult Book Award list, 2001
- South Carolina Young Adult Book award list, 2000-2001
- Eliot Rosewater Indiana High School Book award list, 2000-2001
- Tennessee Volunteer State Book Award, YA master reading list, 2002-2003
- Pennsylvania Young Adult recommended list, 2000-2001
- South Dakota Young Adult Reading Program list, 2000
- An ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- An ALA Quick Pick—Top 10
- An ALA Teens' Top 10 Best Book Pick
- An ALA Popular Paperback, 2003
- IRA Young Adult Choice
- A Booklist Editor's Choice
- A Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book
- A New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age
- A Bank Street College Best Book of the Year
- A Parent's Guide to Children's Media selection
- Starred reviews in *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, *Voya*, and *Kliatt*