

# Beyond the Reef Short Guide

## Beyond the Reef by Todd Strasser

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## Overview

In many ways, Strasser's novel is particularly aimed at the interests of male teen-age readers. At first glance the plot seems to be a mere adventure story: Chris, the protagonist, and his father, a former high school teacher, set out to hunt for treasure in the waters near Key West, Florida, which should take several years. The treasure they are searching for supposedly consists of huge amounts of gold and silver on a sunken Spanish galleon. The adventurous elements of the book are enhanced furthermore by the fact that father and son have to face dangerous and frightening situations while scuba diving for the treasure in the ocean.

One reason why this book will especially appeal to boys derives from the special relationship between Chris and his father. This relationship overshadows all other interactions between the novel's characters, including Chris's relationship with his mother. When his parents get a separation—and despite the fact that he misses his mother very much—he stays with his father and helps him to overcome his nervous breakdown. What teen-age readers will appreciate here in particular is the emotional strength and understanding of Chris's behavior. In this part of his novel Strasser reveals in a very impressive way the weaknesses of adults and the potential strengths of adolescents in handling "adult" problems.

Strasser's novel also presents a love relationship which is at no point superficial or sensational. Chris and Shannon Horn who attend the same school in Key West gradually develop an honest relationship based on friendship and respect rather than on sexual attraction. Shannon is convincingly depicted as an equal partner to Chris, both in physical and mental strength.

In this way the author creates a male -female relationship between adolescents which emphasizes the importance of character and personality rather than mere physical or sexual appearance. Thus, Strasser encourages the young adult reader to reflect about his or her own experience and to examine his or her understanding of the values which he or she hold to be relevant for a meaningful relation between both sexes.

## About the Author

Although Todd Strasser's name rarely appears on high school reading lists, he is one of the most productive and successful authors of young adult literature in the United States. He published his first novel at the age of twenty-nine and went on to write another thirteen books for teen-age readers in the following thirteen years. A great number of these novels have been honored by prestigious awards, including Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association for *Friends Till the End* and *Rock 'n' Roll Nights*. In addition to his fourteen books for young adult readers, Strasser has written one adult novel *The Family Man*, which was published in 1988.

Born on May 5, 1950, in New York City, Strasser represents the younger generation of young adult novelists. In the 1960s when the genre experienced a major shift towards a more realistic and truthful representation of adolescent life (for instance in the "problem" novel), Strasser was an adolescent himself.

After graduating from high school he earned his college degree at Beloit College in 1974. From 1974 to 1976 he worked as a reporter for the Middletown newspaper *Times Herald Record* and became a free-lance writer in 1975.

Then he was employed as a copywriter by the Compton Advertising Company in New York for the next two years. In 1977 and 1978 he was a researcher for the magazine *Esquire*. Also in 1978, Strasser was the founding president of the New York City based fortune cookie company *Toggle, Inc.* Strasser married Pamela Older in 1981 and has one daughter. In his leisure time he likes to go fishing and skiing or to play tennis.

In order to keep up with his teen-age readers and their interests and problems he regularly accepts invitations to high schools all over the country and speaks at teachers' and librarians' conferences. He also likes to conduct writing workshops for adults and young adults.

Two of Strasser's novels have been adapted for television. *Workin' for Peanuts* was adapted as a Home Box Office "Family Showcase" presentation on cable television in 1985, and *A Very Touchy Subject* was broadcast as an "ABC After School Special" titled *Can a Guy Say No?* in 1986.

Strasser has contributed a number of short stories to periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Village Voice*.

# Setting

The narrative structure of *Beyond the Reef* is developed through a setting which consists of three different locales. The major place of action is Key West, Florida, where the Cooper family ends up living. After several trips to Chris's grandparents in North Miami Beach, his father takes Chris and his mother down to Key West to go fishing for two days. After some days of experiencing the exotic islands, the parents decide to move to Key West permanently, because (as Chris states) There was something about Key West. I couldn't explain it, but I could feel it. It was the orange sun, the turquoise water, and the green palms. It was places like Mallory Square at sunset and the guy who made his living on a bed of glass. It was the easy pace, gift shops that sold see-through bikinis, and restaurants with all the fried shrimp you could eat. Also, it wasn't Flintville, which suddenly seemed awfully boring.

There they lived in a house on Ashe Street "that was about a third the size of our old house back in Flintville. The tiny front yard was filled with palms, vines, and hibiscus." Because this house was in a shabby condition the Cooper family calls it "the Shack."

Flintville, the second locale, is the place where Chris and his family had lived for the last ten to twelve years. It was in this New York State town that the Cooper family led a more "normal" life: Ted Cooper was the Spanish teacher and swimming coach at the high school and Ann Cooper worked as an editor for the Flintville Times Dispatch.

The family lived in a white two-story house in a well-to-do neighborhood and seemed to have no problems whatsoever.

By introducing these two major locales Strasser creates images of lifestyles which function as a literary device for developing the theme and conflict of his novel. Whereas Flintville stands for a lifestyle of normalcy, security, and monotony, Key West embodies challenge, adventure and excitement.

The third locale of the novel is Seville, Spain, where Chris and his father search for information about the sunken ship *Sevilla* in the General Archive of the Indies. This locale serves as a means to provide the reader with some basic knowledge of a European country, which is convincingly related to the theme of the text. It also shows another facet of the protagonist's character who tenaciously works in a library over a period of several months.

Thus, the author on the one hand presents an adolescent character that differs from the widespread stereotype of teen-agers who are supposedly not interested in "serious" work, as well as providing a model of hard work that helps the teen-age protagonist achieve his goal.

## Social Sensitivity

Because Strasser is very concerned about today's young adults and their reading he has repeatedly made a point of stressing the necessity of giving them contemporary books written in a contemporary style about issues teenagers will find interesting—in short, books they will enjoy. Because of this goal, he puts special emphasis on the subject matter of his novels. As many other young adult authors do, he insists on truthfulness and relevance with regard to subject matter and theme.

In *Beyond the Reef* Strasser puts into practice his credo by depicting problems which are of major interest to contemporary teen-agers. It is first of all the conflicts within the Cooper family that many readers can identify with.

The behavior of the protagonist who finds himself in a mediating position between his parents sets an example for how to cope with family conflicts in a mature and reasonable way. There is no running away or any other spectacular action on the side of the adolescent but a surprisingly high degree of maturity deriving from a deep love for his parents.

The relationship of Chris and Shannon represents another issue relevant to teen-agers. It is in the years of adolescence that people begin to acquire an understanding of sexual behavior and relations. Strasser has his literary characters develop their relation out of respect and friendship rather than sexual attraction or superficial sexual motives. In the end Chris and Shannon do have a love relationship but one that is founded on both character and physical qualities, and Shannon is depicted as an equal partner.

The problems the Coopers have with the local community when they first arrive in Key West reflect Strasser's intention to discuss the question of tolerance toward people who are "different." Again, this is an issue teenagers are confronted with almost every day. The novel presents an example of a hostile community which bases its opinions of people on prejudice. When the Coopers are accepted in the end and the town even organizes a ceremony for Chris's father, it is due to the persistence of father and son in following their goal and their hard work to accomplish it.

With these three major issues Strasser convincingly conveys those values he considers to be most important: respect for others, honesty, love, and friendship.

# Literary Qualities

The narrative structure of *Beyond the Reef* is designed as a flashback, with an unusual twist. Strasser begins his novel by introducing the reader to a former period in the life of his protagonist Chris Cooper. This introduction only extends over a few sentences and yet it provides major pieces of information about the family and social background of Chris. The plot begins when he is seventeen and it further develops as a recollection of his life in the past five years. These years are delineated in a chronological sequence without any time-shifts. The frame work of the plot, however, makes use of time alteration.

Whereas at the beginning of the text the author presents his narrator as somebody living in a broke financial situation with his father, he closes the frame by describing Chris and his family as leading a very different life.

They are financially very well-off and his parents have a house in Flintville and another in Key West. The unusual twist Strasser employs here consists of a literary structure which does not adhere to a conventional framework plot but continues the story in the last chapter by depicting Chris's further development. In this way the novel presents three time levels which support the theme, in that each of them stands for a certain period of the protagonist's life.

The author employs a first-person narrative which enables the reader to follow the plot more easily and which allows a quick identification with the problems of the protagonist. A closer look at the literary style of *Beyond the Reef* supports the assumption that the novel seems to be intended for the younger adolescent reader. The twentythree chapters are brief, often their length is only ten to twelve pages. Each chapter usually deals with a new line of thought or action. The advantage of such a design is that the younger reader can comprehend the text without great difficulties on the one hand and that the plot can be delineated at a fast pace on the other. In this way Strasser enhances the adventurous action of his novel.

On the other hand, despite of the fact that the subject matter might arouse the interest of male young adult readers, there is no particular boy's slang or typical teen-age slang or idiom employed. Instead, the novel is dominated by dialogue that features fluid and unambiguous language. Even so, the narrative features some variety; for instance, in chapters 13 and 14 Strasser uses letters for the narration for the purpose of demonstrating the distance from Florida to Spain where Chris and his father try to find background information about the sunken galleon at the General Archive of the Indies.

Another means of attracting the reader's interest is constituted by illustrations preceding the text of each chapter as well as by a map of "The Treasure Site" and "Florida" at the beginning. The illustrations by Debbe Heller function as allusions to the central idea in the chapters. They support the text per se rather than provoking an additional level of interpretation.



# Themes and Characters

Whereas Strasser in his earlier novels for young adults depicted motives such as drugs, rock 'n' roll music, and teenage sexual behavior, here he focuses on diving and adventure in order to present the growth of a boy in the years between ages twelve and seventeen.

When he first introduces his protagonist Chris Cooper, the reader gets to know a somewhat average teen-ager with ordinary interests and aspirations.

There is, however, an important difference from many of the other male protagonists found in young adult fiction.

Chris as a positive literary hero takes an active and at most times a very mature stand in order to solve his own or his parents' problems. At times he seems to be even more grown up than the adult characters. The way Strasser depicts Chris convincingly demonstrates how problems can be solved if one works consistently and sticks to one's goal. The positive conclusion of the novel is not just a mere happy ending, but results from Chris's various efforts throughout the story to help to fulfill his father's dream. Thus, *Beyond the Reef* conveys a positive image of the years of adolescence and provides a model of how to cope with problem situations.

In general, Strasser develops the dimensions of his theme by always relating them to his protagonist. Chris constitutes the thematic center from which the reader is supposed to explore the complex conditions determining the behavior of the protagonist. In this way, motives and values are revealed and offered for discussion within the process of reading. Besides the conflict Chris has to face with his parents' separation and his father's disillusionment caused by the living conditions of the family and the absence of any success regarding the treasure, the author depicts two other major thematic aspects in order to create his overall subject matter.

The first of these two aspects consists of the relationship between his protagonist and Shannon Horn, one of Chris's schoolmates. Although Shannon to a certain extent stands for the attitude and the lifestyle of the local "conchs," she is the first to accept Chris and his family. Other than Billy Peebles and David Lester who are Chris's classmates at school, Shannon recognizes in Chris the human being rather than the "out-of-town person."

She is one of the most interesting characters of the novel. Strasser designs her as an individual rather than a cliché of a female adolescent; he depicts her as a teen-ager with a strong but sensitive personality. She stands out from the stereotypes of teen-age girls because she performs as well as the boys when it comes to fishing, diving, or steering a boat. She is respected by the male teen-agers because of her courage and physical strength rather than her sex.





This is also true for the relationship between Chris and Shannon which at first is solely based on friendship. Only in the end after they went together through difficult situations including Chris's risky adventure to get shark-teeth or coping with the death of one of his father's divers do they develop a love relationship and become more than "just friends."

Shannon's mother Betty is another impressive character. Although Chris's first encounter with this "tall woman with a long blond ponytail" selling pink coral necklaces and shark-teeth pendants gives a mystic description of Betty Horn, he soon learns to appreciate her caring and warm personality, something he also admires in Shannon.

Betty, who is a single parent, and Shannon stand as examples of an honest and warm family relationship.

The second aspect Strasser employs to develop the themes of his novel is directed toward the question of how people treat other people who are different or are from another place. With this idea he addresses the general issues of tolerance and the values by which people judge other people. The Coopers are considered to be outsiders by the local inhabitants of Key West for mainly three reasons: first of all, they are from a place far away from Florida; second, they practice a different "northern" lifestyle; and finally, they supposedly came down to Key West for mere adventure and excitement, for treasure hunting. At one point Shannon explains to Chris the philosophy of the local people, the conchs: "It's spelled c-o-n-c-h, but they pronounce it 'conk.'

I mean, you can't be a conch unless your grandfather was born and died here." Chris and his father are ridiculed by the local people because of their efforts to find treasure. Chris has to face prejudice from many of his schoolmates and even from his teacher.

Only in the end when he and his father prove to be right and when the Key West community begins to respect their courage and perseverance do the conchs accept the Coopers.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize the life of the Cooper family when they were still in Flint ville. How did they get along at that time?
2. Why did the Coopers decide to move to Florida? How are they welcomed by the Key West community?
3. Who are the conchs and why don't they like outsiders who settle in their town? Why do they change their opinion of the Coopers?
4. What problems does Chris Cooper have to face in school? How do his classmates react toward Chris?
5. Characterize Chris's father. What did he do before moving to Florida and how did that help him in his search for the treasure?
6. What causes Chris's parents to separate? How does Chris feel about that?
7. Discuss the characterization of Shannon Horn. How does she treat Chris?
8. Describe the relationship Shannon has with her mother. Why is Chris fascinated by Betty Horn when he first meets her?
9. Explain why Chris and Shannon are attracted to each other. Describe the major stages in the development of their relationship.
10. Why do Chris and his father travel to Spain? What does Chris learn about the Spanish lifestyle?
11. Explain the problems that cause Chris's father to start drinking. How does Chris react to his father's behavior?
12. What kind of treasure do Chris and his father discover? How do they go on living after the discovery?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Characterize Chris's relationship with his parents. Explain why he stays with his father in Key West and how he helps to solve the problems of his father.
2. Discuss the motives that lead Ted Cooper to become obsessed with the idea of finding the sunken galleon.
3. Describe the attitude of the conchs in Key West toward "outsiders." How do you feel about their attitude? Have you had similar experiences? What was your reaction?
4. Discuss your favorite character from Strasser's novel and explain why he or she is admirable. Does he or she set an example for you?
5. Interpret the title of the novel with regard to the themes of the novel.

What idea seems to be captured in the title? In what way might the title be applied to you?

6. Compare the different settings of the novel in relation to the developmental stages of the protagonist.
7. Discuss why you think the novel is or is not an adventure story. Include in your discussion stylistic characteristics of the text to support your statements.

## For Further Reference

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilson. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 3d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989. A standard and indispensable work for librarians, teachers, counselors and others working with young people. Consisting of four parts the book explores the interdependence of young adults and their psychology with their literature, discusses contemporary young adult novels and views the role of professionals in working with books and young readers. The authors make suggestions for evaluating various kinds of books to provide starting places for discussion. Each genre chapter is followed by "30 Recommendations for Reading" to give assistance to teachers or librarians in preparing the reading and discussion.

Hendrickson, Linnea. *Children's Literature: A Literary Guide to the Criticism*.

Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. An indispensable source for those professionally interested in the genre. This well-structured bibliography contains a annotated listing of criticism with regard to authors and their works as well as subjects, themes, and genres. It also lists the most important resources in children's literature up to the mid-1980s.

May, Hal, and Susan M. Trosky, eds.

*Contemporary Authors*. Vol. 123. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988. Contains detailed biographical followed by critical sources, as well as excerpts from interviews.

*Media and Methods* (February 1983). A general overview of Strasser's novels for young adults up to the 1980s with special emphasis on media adaptations of his books.

*New York Times* (June 19, 1985). A review of Strasser's *A Very Touchy Subject* in the context of his earlier books and in relation to recent trends in the genre of young adult literature.

Roginski, Jim. *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*.

New York: Libraries Unlimited, 1985.

A collection of interviews with some authors, including Strasser, making comments on bookmaking, the creative process, reviewers, and readers. Various views and backgrounds of writing children's and young adult books are presented. A comprehensive bibliography concludes the book.

Sutherland, Zena. *The Best in Children's Books: The University of Chicago Guide to Children's Literature 1979-1984*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. A collection of reviews of about fourteen hundred American and British book titles (including Strasser's *Angel Dust Blues* and *Workin' For Peanuts*) for children and young adults published in the years 1979 to 1984

primarily selected on the basis of literary quality. This invaluable guide for teachers, librarians, and professionals provides a most useful index to titles, developmental values, curricular use, reading level, subjects and type of literature.

## Related Titles

Among the fourteen young adult books by Strasser, *Workin' for Peanuts* (1983) and *The Diving Bell* (1992) share some similarities with his novel *Beyond the Reef*. In *Workin' for Peanuts* the author presents a similar thematic conflict by depicting a close relationship between the protagonist Jeff and his father. Like Chris in *Beyond the Reef* Jeff is confronted with severe financial family problems caused by his father's unemployment. Jeff, who has to come to terms with the hardships of his low social status (including the fact that he has to give up a girl he fell in love with), plays an active part in helping his father to cope with his psychological problems of being jobless.

The novel *The Diving Bell* contains similarities to *Beyond the Reef* with regard to the setting and the narrative structure. The adventure of sports, in particular of diving, is the major constituent of the action-packed plot in this story.



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