

Come a Stranger Short Guide

Come a Stranger by Cynthia Voigt

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Overview

There are times when there is nothing ten-year-old Wilhemina Smiths can do but dance. Her body demands it; the music inside her head demands it.

So skilled is she at ballet, she is awarded a scholarship to a summer dance camp for the gifted. Mina, as she is called, is the only black child at the camp, but she scarcely notices this, so enthralled is she with the wonder of the camp, with the fascination of things she is learning about dance and music, and with the view of life outside her hometown of Crisfield.

The following summer Mina returns to camp, but everything is different.

She has spent the school year growing, her body is awkward and ungainly, and she can no longer dance with ease and grace. There are other changes also. She begins to see herself as a token black in a sea of white faces, someone who ensures federal funding for the program. Before the middle week of camp, Mina is asked to leave. She thinks it is because of her dancing; she is afraid it is because she is black. Mina is numbed by the experience, embarrassed and ashamed of her body, perhaps ashamed of being black.

It is into this confused state that Tamer Shipp comes and establishes himself in a special way in Mina's life.

He is the minister who is substituting for her father during the summer while her father is doing special work for the district church. Tamer helps Mina overcome her feelings of rejection and regain a sense of pride in her black heritage. Although she knows he is married and too old to love her in return, Mina transfers to Tamer all the love she once had for dancing.

At the end of summer, Tamer and his family return to their church in Harlem, and Mina spends the school year dreaming of him and waiting for his return. When the Shipp family are once again in Crisfield, Mina finds a way to do something special for Tamer to repay him for the help he has given her. Because Alice Shipp is a "butterfly" wife, uninterested in domestic chores, Tamer's home is chaotic and his children are often neglected. For small pay, Mina spends the daylight hours that summer bringing order and serenity to the Shipp household. Alice is free to go out with friends while Mina stays with the children, performing household tasks. Tamer returns in the evenings to find his wife "giggly and happy," his house clean, dinner on the table, and his children cared for. Mina finds joy in the work because she knows the value of her gift to Tamer. In addition, she encourages Alice to study for her high school equivalency test because Mina believes that having a diploma will give Alice self-esteem.

Once again the Shipp family return to Harlem, and Mina spends the fall and winter impatiently awaiting their return.



However, she learns toward the school year's end that the Shipps are moving to the Midwest and Tamer will be gone from her life. She vows to give him a special gift, a gift that will remain with him forever, by bringing the Tillerman family to meet him on his last visit to Crisfield. Bullet Tillerman had a profound influence on Tamer when Tamer was younger, and Mina knows meeting the Tillermans will be especially meaningful to him. As Mina goes about making friends with the Tillermans, she finds they add a rich, vibrant thread to the tapestry of her life.

At book's end, Mina, now fifteen, is able to view her love for Tamer philosophically. She knows he has added much to her maturity, to her pride in herself as a person, and to her pride in her race, and she has helped him "make peace with a long grief." There is a new boy in town, Dexter Hallway, and Mina is relieved to find he can claim her attention, relieved she is growing free from her love for Tamer.

She knows Tamer will remain one of the best men she has known, but for now the thought of Dexter makes her feel like dancing.



About the Author

Cynthia Voigt is a writer of impressive productivity. Since her first book in 1981, she has published one book per year, sometimes two. At present, she has written seventeen books for young adults, one for children, and one for adults. Her books are marked by a wide variety of subject matter in which she explores ideas and interests that mirror those of her readers.

Voigt was born February 25, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts. She was the second of five children, having two sisters, and twin brothers, thirteen years her junior. Her childhood was spent in rural southern Connecticut.

She attended Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, a private girls' boarding school, and later Smith College, where she graduated in 1963.

After graduation she moved to New York City where she worked for an advertising agency. She married her first husband in September 1964. When she encountered difficulty finding a job, she completed the certification requirements necessary to teach school, a career change that she says was a happy choice for her. She taught high school English in Glen Burnie, Maryland, from 1965 to 1967. In 1968 she moved to The Key School in Annapolis where she remained for many years as a teacher, part-time teacher, and department chair. Voigt divorced in 1972 and married Walter Voigt, a teacher of Latin and Greek at The Key School, in 1974. She is the mother of two children, daughter Jessica and son Peter. She and her family have recently moved to Maine. Among her personal interests—in addition to life with her husband, son, and daughter—she includes going out to dinner, summer trips to the family's island in the Chesapeake Bay, and walking in old cemeteries.

Voigt published her first book, *Homecoming*, in 1981. In it she began the saga of the Tillermans, a family of four fatherless children who are abandoned by their mentally ill mother, a story that evolved into six additional books.

Voigt has won many awards for her writing, including the 1983 Newbery Medal for *Dacey's Song* and the 1984 Edgar Allan Poe Award for *The Callender Papers*. *A Solitary Blue* was named a 1984 Newbery Honor Book.



Setting

Come a Stranger is one of several novels by Voigt set in Crisfield, Maryland, a small town located on the eastern shores of Chesapeake Bay. The time is the latter half of the 1970s. Mina lives in a closely knit, predominantly black neighborhood where her father is pastor of a church. They are a large family of six children, although Eleanor is married and Charles Stuart is away at college. The story takes Mina from age ten through age fifteen, through fifth grade in her neighborhood elementary school, where black children are in the majority, to high school where Mina becomes one of the minority. Her mother points out to her that in terms of power, her role as a woman makes Mina a member of a second minority.

Mina vows that neither being black nor being a woman shall stand in the way of her being her own person. In this story of growth and maturation, family life is important, and it is the environs in which she is raised that aid Mina in emerging into an independent, warmly caring young woman.

Social Sensitivity

Voigt has written a moving novel of racial identity, of growing up and finding one's place in the larger world. She writes convincingly of a young African American woman's maturation. While there are instances in which Mina encounters prejudice, there are no violent racial incidents. Mina develops friendships from both races and behaves in an exemplary way by looking beyond color. Voigt, however, fails to balance her presentation as those people who behave in a prejudiced way are white.

Literary Qualities

Come a Stranger deals with the African American experience through the eyes of its protagonist Mina Smiths. In Mina, Voigt has created a strong central character who is worthy of admiration and emulation, and reading of her can only increase racial understanding for Come a Stranger's audience. The reader comes to know Mina in a personal way as she changes from a ten-year-old, wondering why God made some people black and some white and why she is one of the black ones, to a fifteen-year-old exuding pride in the woman she has become.

The book is without intense conflict and internal tension, and its primary worth is not in the story it tells but in the insights it reveals about Mina's inner growth and the destination at which she arrives. Mina learns to "look with a long eye" and to appreciate the struggles, as well as the progress, of African Americans in the years since slavery. She experiences prejudice and learns to deal with it; she resists the temptation to act out of prejudice herself; and she learns to develop friendships based on the person. At fifteen Mina rejoices in her growth "upwards . . . from the strong tangled roots of her life," and the reader rejoices with her, having witnessed the circuitous path she has followed.

In addition to a strong central character who gives perception to the African American experience, there are other fine literary qualities in the book: 1) Voigt writes in precise, forceful prose; 2) She counterbalances the presentation of difficult issues with humor and wit; 3) She interjects dance terminology to give the story authenticity and anchors the story in actual locales; and 4) The book also adds information to the saga of the Tillermans begun in earlier novels and followed with intense interest by their fans. The sorrow Tamer Shipp feels over the unresolved issue of Bullet is shared by readers of *The Runner*, and Tamer's making peace "with a long grief" gives a kind of closure to Bullet's death.



Themes and Characters

The core of *Come a Stranger* revolves around Mina Smiths, a black girl who grows before the reader's eyes from an amusing, energetic ten-year-old who is "t-rou-ble," into a strong-spirited young woman of fifteen who has a healthy sense of her own person. It is Mina's changing view of the world and her place in it that is the theme of this story. At ten Mina is little aware of life outside her neighborhood. She feels secure in her family, absorbed in her dancing, and untouched by prejudice or rejection. Black history and slavery seem far removed to Mina, and her papa's sermon on Jonah's fear of strangers in far-off lands is less entertaining than thinking about ballet camp. But in her second summer at the dance camp for gifted students, Mina begins to understand her father's concern. Midway through camp she is asked to leave, and she fears the rejection is because she is black. Her race and its history take on new importance to Mina as she attempts to deal with the prejudice exhibited by others, without falling into its entrapment herself.

Mina matures as she ages, aided by the support of her strict but loving parents and by her friendship with Tamer Shipp. Tamer is a minister like her father, who has a wife and children and is much older than Mina. However, Tamer helps Mina overcome her feelings of shame and rejection when she is sent home from dance camp, and she comes to love him. Her mother tells Mina she has been given the gift of loving deeply, and Mina knows it is true. Through her years of growing up, Tamer is a continuing influence on Mina's life as many of the decisions she makes are based on what Tamer Shipp might think. Much of the plot deals with ways Mina seeks to express her love, but she learns "love gives what's best in us to us," and she also profits from the friendship. Tamer helps her attain a sense of racial pride and a feeling of self-worth. Mina knows she need not fear "living among strangers in far-off lands" as she has confidence in her ability to "do about anything."

After all, she is Wilhemina Smiths, and she is t-rou-ble.

The characters of Mina and Tamer were both introduced as supporting characters in earlier works by Voigt about the Tillerman family. Although to have read the earlier books might give resonance to this story, *Come a Stranger* stands well on its own. Mina emerges as a strong personality, one created with skill by Voigt.

Other characters in the story are seen through Mina's eyes, but they develop strong identities. Perhaps the least satisfying character is Tamer Shipp, as one is never sure what motivates him.

One is also unsure what it is that threatens to overwhelm his spirit, leaving his eyes vacant of feeling, "as if he couldn't come out at all because it was too hard, and it would hurt too much."

The reader accepts Mina's assessment of Tamer as good and strong and committed to serving humanity, but wonders if it is congruent for him to take a position at a

Midwestern college where he laughingly calls himself "a show and tell." Would not a person with his high degree of idealism have scoffed at such a position? One has unanswered questions about Tamer, but his ambiguity serves to make him an interesting personality.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think Mina was accepted at ballet camp because she was gifted or because she was African American?

Why do you think Mina was dismissed from ballet camp?

2. Mina feels in her second summer at ballet camp that she is being forced to act as if she wants to be white. What are some of the ways in which she acts in this manner?

3. What does Miz Hunter mean when she tells Mina she must learn to look with a long eye?

4. When Tamer and his family come to dinner, why does Tamer insist on dancing when he has not danced for years?

5. Why does Mina say Alice Shipp is like a butterfly?

6. Mina is unusually responsible for a girl of her age. Discuss some of the ways in which she acts responsibly.

7. What are the traits in Tamer Shipp that Mina finds attractive?

8. Mina's mother tells her that "love gives what's best in us to us, I think."

What does she mean by this?

9. Why does Tamer want Alice to take the high school equivalency test?

10. When Mrs. Edges tells Mina she is moving Mina to the intermediate class because she has natural grace and coordination in tennis, Mina is surprised. Why does she react this way?

11. Why does Mina want to bring Tamer Shipp and the Tillerman family together?

12. What are some of the reasons Mina and Dicey become good friends?

13. What was Abigail Tillerman's purpose in coming to see Mr. and Mrs. Smiths?

14. When Mina defends Dicey before Mr. Chappelle, she says that she does not do it for Dicey or for Tamer Shipp, but for herself. What does she mean by this?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mina says that clubs formed by her friends are formed in order to leave people out and to make sure people know they are left out. Is this an accurate assessment of social clubs or is it unfair?
2. Mina's teacher is unhappy with her because she is not reading books about African Americans. Is it important to read about ethnic group as Mina's teacher insists? Why or why not?
3. Mina falls in love with Tamer, a much older married man, when she is eleven, and maintains her crush for several years. Does this seem realistic to you?
4. What are the qualities or attributes that make Mr. Bryce an ineffective teacher?
5. Mina's mother tells her that "there are men who don't like girls, women, to be too smart." Is this an attitude that has changed or is it still a prevailing attitude?
6. Most of the whites in *Come a Stranger* are portrayed as rather undesirable people: Mr. Bryce, Miss Maddinton, the people for whom Mina babysits, and the girls in the P.E. class.

Has Voigt been too stereotypical in her portrayal of whites?
7. When Mina works for the Shipps, she cleans house, cooks, and tends children for small pay. She often works extra hours without being sure when she can leave. When she worked for a white family who treated her similarly, she considered them mean-spirited and abusive. Are the Shipps abusive of Mina?
8. Mrs. Smiths says that the white society wants everyone to be alike and has no place for eccentrics. Is this a true or false statement? Support your answer with examples.
9. Read *The Runner* and discover additional information about Tamer Shipp as a young man. Write a character sketch about Tamer from the information given in both books.



For Further Reference

Irving, Elise K. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 410-412. The article accompanies Voigt's Newbery acceptance speech. It is written by a friend and addresses the question, "What is Cynthia Voigt, the person, really like?"

Kauffman, Dorothy. "Profile: Cynthia Voigt." *Language Arts* (December 1985): 876-880. The author writes a profile of Voigt based on an interview. She explores Voigt's sources for her stories, the inspiration for her characters, and the reasons for the similarity of her settings.

Shadiow, Linda K. "Recommended: Cynthia Voigt." *English Journal* (April 1987): 71-72. Shadiow writes of the qualities that make Voigt's characters memorable—characters who "get to both their external and internal destinations."

Voigt, Cynthia. "About Excellence."

Language Arts (January 1986): 10-11.

Voigt discusses the idea of excellence and concludes there is no reliable standard by which it can be measured.

———. "Newbery Medal Acceptance."

Horn Book (August 1983): 401-409.

This is the speech given to the American Library Association when Voigt accepted the Newbery Medal for *Dacey's Song*. In it she speaks of the excellence consistently found in children's literature and delineates the roles of editors, publishers, and librarians in fostering this excellence.

———. "On Teaching." *Language Arts* (November 1985): 740-741. This answers the question Voigt is often asked since winning the Newbery, "Will you stop teaching now?" She gives an explanation of the reasons why she teaches.

Voigt, Jessica. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 413. Voigt's daughter writes a brief, warmly personal view of her mother.



Related Titles

The Runner is one of seven books in the Tillerman cycle and is the first of the books chronologically. It relates the story of Bullet, a high school student struggling to grow up under the strong rule of an oppressive father. In order to deal with the frustrations in his life, but also for the joy it brings him, Bullet runs. His running helps him gain maturity as he learns "to run his race well."

Four of the Tillerman books feature the children of Bullet's sister Liza.

Homecoming tells of the four children being abandoned by their mother on the parking lot of a Connecticut shopping mall and their later efforts to get to their grandmother's home in Maryland. They are unsure if their grandmother knows of their existence, or if she will be willing to accept them.

Dacey's Song continues the children's saga after they arrive at their grandmother's home and centers on the efforts they and their grandmother make to merge as a family. It includes the death of the children's mother. Sons from Afar relates the efforts of the two boys in the family to locate the father who never married their mother and who abandoned them years before.

Seventeen Against the Dealer brings Dacey to adulthood and deals with her search to find focus for her life. It is the last of the Tillerman books, and in it Voigt attempts to draw together loose ends and point each character toward her destiny.

Like Come a Stranger, A Solitary Blue is an evolution from books about the Tillermans. It is the story of Jeff, a character in Dacey's Song, who becomes increasingly important in Dacey's life.

He reappears briefly in Come a Stranger as a friend of Mina's who introduces her to a special boy, Dexter Halloway.



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