

Disclaimer Study Guide

Disclaimer by Renée Knight

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Contents

Disclaimer Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Chapters 1-3.....	6
Chapters 4-6.....	9
Chapters 7-9.....	12
Chapters 10-12.....	15
Chapters 13-15.....	18
Chapters 16-18.....	21
Chapters 19-21.....	24
Chapters 22-24.....	27
Chapters 25-27.....	30
Chapters 28-30.....	33
Chapters 31-33.....	36
Chapters 34-36.....	39
Chapters 37-39.....	41
Chapters 40-42.....	44
Chapters 43-45.....	46
Chapters 46-48.....	49
Chapter 49-51.....	51
Chapters 52-54.....	54
Chapters 55-57.....	56
Characters.....	59
Symbols and Symbolism.....	62
Settings.....	65



Themes and Motifs..... 67

Styles..... 70

Quotes..... 72



Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Disclaimer. Renée Knight. New York: HarperCollins, 2015.

Catherine Ravenscroft is a documentary film maker with a lawyer husband, Robert, and an unmotivated young adult son, Nicholas. One day soon after moving into a new house Catherine mysteriously finds a book called "The Perfect Stranger" in her home. After reading part of the book Catherine is terrified because she is sure she is the main character in the book. The book details an traumatic event that happened to Catherine 20 years prior and ends with the main character (Catherine's proxy) being killed by being pushed in front of a train.

Stephen Brigstocke is a retired teacher. He was forced to retire after writing a cruel comment on a young student's paper. He was also previously fired from a job for becoming obsessed with one of his students. Stephen lost his wife, Nancy, several years prior to the start of the narrative and lost his son, Jonathan, even before that. Stephen finally decides to clear out his wife's belongings and he finds a envelope full of lewd pictures of Catherine. It is revealed Stephen's son Jonathan had an affair with Catherine 20 years ago in Spain. One day on the beach Catherine's then-young son Nicholas drifted out to sea on an inflatable toy and Jonathan died saving him. Stephen then finds a manuscript written by Nancy unbeknownst to Stephen years prior detailing the incident. Stephen decides to self-publish the book and use it to torment and eventually kill Catherine and her family as revenge, as he holds Catherine responsible for the death of his son.

Catherine keeps the book a secret from her family while she figures out what to do. Stephen goes to Nicholas's work and gives him a copy and leaves a copy for Robert at his office. Catherine reveals to Robert the book is about her which makes Robert furious, thinking his wife had an affair and almost let their son die. He kicks her out of the house and does not tell Nicholas the truth. Catherine deduces Stephen Brigstocke wrote the book and attempts to reason with him but to no avail. Stephen's mental health deteriorates into an unreasonable state, believing Nancy speaks to him and is telling him what to do. Eventually, Stephen creates a fake Facebook profile for his son Jonathan. Through this profile Stephen befriends Nicholas and reveals his mother had an affair and almost let him drown. This prompts Nicholas to overdose on drugs, putting himself in a coma.

While Nicholas is recovering, Robert refuses to speak with Catherine. She finally finds Stephen at his home and reveals the events detailed in "The Perfect Stranger" are inaccurate. Jonathan brutally raped Catherine while Nicholas laid in the next room. He had been stalking her the previous few days and propositioned her at a bar, which Catherine rebuffed. The day after the rape Catherine was so distraught and distracted she did not notice Nicholas wandering out to sea. Jonathan was also on the beach and ran to save Nicholas, drowning in the process. Stephen is shocked but also believes Catherine, as Jonathan had shown violent tendencies before. Stephen tells Robert the



truth which prompts Robert to make amends with Catherine. Catherine is angry that Robert seems relieved that Catherine was raped rather than her having an affair. The book ends with the state of their marriage in question.

When Nicholas wakes up from his coma Catherine tells him the truth about everything and she takes care of him until he recovers, reinvigorating their relationship. Stephen changes his will to leave his house to Catherine, which are then transferred to her after Stephen dies, implied to be from suicide. The book ends with Catherine still unsure about her marriage but committed to being a good mother to Nicholas for the first time in his life.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1 takes place in the Spring of 2013 and is told from a third-person omniscient perspective. Catherine is up late at night terrified about a book she is reading. Her husband, Robert, finds her in the bathroom and tries to comfort her but Catherine insists she is fine and will come back to bed soon. The narrator reveals, "Catherine had unwittingly stumbled across herself tucked into the pages of the book" (2). The book Catherine is reading features her as the main character as well as unbelievably detailed descriptions of the clothes she has worn and things she has done. In particular, an unnamed event from years ago has Catherine shaken. Something happened which she has never told anyone about, including her husband, yet it is featured in explicit detail in the book. Catherine walks downstairs in their maisonette, where they had moved only a few weeks prior because their son, Nicholas, had recently moved out and they did not need as much space any more. Catherine gets a drink of water and stares out the window, fearing someone is watching her.

Chapter 2 takes place two years prior and shifts to a first-person perspective. Stephen Brigstocke is a recently retired English Teacher. He was forced into early retirement because of cruel remarks he put on the essay of a seven year old in his class. Stephen had previously loved teaching, but after his wife, Nancy, passed away he lost his passion. He most recently worked at a private school where a friend of his is the headmaster, but before that he worked at a public high school while his late wife worked at a primary school where their son, Jonathan, attended. He is now in a state of depression because he was previously so committed to his life and now feels he has lost his identity. "I'm not a teacher anymore. I'm retired. I'm a widower" (7).

Chapter 3 shifts back to the same time and voice as Chapter 1. Catherine and Robert return home from a television award ceremony where Catherine won an award for her documentary on child sex-trafficking. While Catherine is happy, she is still haunted by the book she found in her house. "Her evenings have become a series of distractions to stop herself thinking about the inevitable time when she will be lying in the dark, awake" (10). Catherine is fearful of Robert finding out about the secret she kept from him. It is revealed the secret involves their son nearly dying while he was with just Catherine when he was young, but no more details are given. Catherine Googles the book's author, E.J. Preston, unable to find any information about him or her, only that the book was self-published under the banner Rhanmousia, "the goddess of revenge, aka Nemesis" (12). Catherine labors trying to figure out how the book ended up in their house, thinking maybe Robert had coincidentally bought it. She convinces herself that someone must have snuck into their home and put the book there.



Analysis

Throughout the first three chapters the author withholds large amounts of information to disorient the reader, setting the suspenseful tone for the book. This includes exactly what happened with Catherine and her son and the reason for there being two separate narratives. Catherine's secret seems to be the root of her fear. Although it is extremely disturbing that there is a book in which she is the main character, she is most concerned about her husband finding out about the secret, as it is the only specific detail from the book that is mentioned. By withholding the exact nature of the secret the author highlights its importance, directing the reader's attention to it while also allowing space for suspense and conjecture. The purpose behind having two separate narratives is yet to be revealed, furthering the suspenseful tone. There is not any overt overlaps between the two narratives but enough information is given to allow the reader to guess what the connection might be. Stephen and wife Nancy were school teachers, leading to a possible connection with Catherine and Robert's son. Catherine's TV award was a documentary about the child sex trafficking while Stephen goes out of his way to tell the reader he was not fired for molesting children. The connection between these details are specious at this point, but enough to inspire thoughtful predictions on the part of the reader.

The shift in narrative voice between the chapters, from third person omniscient to first person, signals to the reader Catherine's crisis is out of her control while Stephen's situation is from his own doing. The third person omniscient perspective exacerbates Catherine's fear of being watched. She fears someone out there knows everything about her and the reader is being told about her from a third person perspective, as if someone was watching her. Stephen's first person perspective by comparison makes him seem trapped within his own thoughts. He is somewhere between depressed and nihilistic, clearly still mourning the loss of his wife while also pessimistic towards his present. The author wants the reader to know more about Stephen as a character and more about Catherine in regards to her situation. The shift in narrative voice is how this is accomplished.

Discussion Question 1

What clues are given in regards to the setting of the story?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss possible connections between Stephen and Catherine based on the information given up until this point.



Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Stephen and Catherine's states of mind in these opening chapters.

Vocabulary

lulled, ricocheted, maisonette, fiefdom, tedious, fluke



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4 returns to Stephen's perspective. It has been seven years since his wife, Nancy, has died and he has finally begun the process of clearing out her belongings. As he is going through Nancy's clothes he comes across a cardigan that stirs up memories: from when she would wear it when she breastfed their son to it being her favorite thing to wear while she was writing. Stephen reveals he and Nancy were both writers before they became teachers. Stephen believes Nancy to be the superior writer, but neither had any large amount of success. After slowly donating all of Nancy's belongings Stephen feels rejuvenated and decides to "behave in a way that, if Nancy were to walk into the room, she would feel love for me and not shame" (18). On his way to the library to work on a non-fiction manuscript about the Martello Towers on the East Anglican coast (where they used to vacation) Stephen swears he sees a Nancy. After following the woman he sees he realizes its a woman wearing one of Nancy's jackets which was donated. After a full day of research at the library, Stephen returns home and finds some of Nancy's old manuscripts in a desk drawer. He pulls out one called "A Special Kind of Friend" and reads it before going to bed, feeling comforted by it.

Chapter 5 shifts back to Catherine as she is getting out of bed from another sleepless night. Just as Robert is about to leave for work she stops him and says she wants to go on a run and that she will walk with him to the train. She holds Robert's hand tightly as they walk and then embarks on her run. Even though she is out of shape, she finds the run distracting. "She should really be doing a fast walk, not a run, but the discomfort is what she needs right now" (21). While she is running she comes across a cemetery. She stops when she notices the gravestones of children. Catherine imagines what her son's gravestone would say had he died all those years ago and she begins to remember the incident. It is revealed Nicholas almost drowned but nothing else is revealed about the incident.

Chapter 6 finds Stephen waking up after a good nights sleep, having been comforted by his wife's manuscript. As he is looking for paper to type up his research from the day before Stephen finds an old purse of Nancy's wedged behind a desk. First he pulls out lipstick and a handkerchief which trigger lovely memories of his late wife and then discovers yellow envelope containing pictures. Thrilled at the prospect of seeing previously unseen pictures of his wife he makes a cup of coffee and moves to the sofa anticipating happy memories. Instead he finds pictures of Nancy that were not taken by him. She is laying on a beach in a red bikini staring straight into the camera. "Flirting? I think so. Yes, she was flirting" (26). Subsequent pictures were taken in a hotel room and were explicitly sexual. Stephen claims to know who was behind the camera but does not say who. He becomes angry that Nancy would have brought these photos into their home and now that she is gone he can never confront her about them. Stephen tears through the house to find any other secrets Nancy may have been hiding but finds nothing else.



Analysis

This group of chapters establishes a theme of coping with loneliness, albeit in very different forms. Catherine is dealing with the loneliness of being trapped without being able to share her struggle with anyone else. She turns to exercise to feel a release, which is out of character for her but she is desperate to feel something other than the crushing fear and loneliness of trying to figure out the nature of the book she found all on her own. Even in her coping she is unable to avoid her problem, being quickly reminded of the incident with her son by gravestones. She is trying to cope with avoidance and distraction, which is clearly not working. Stephen begins to cope with his loneliness in a much more productive way; he is clearing out his dead wife's belongings. This activity is therapeutic for Stephen, creating a dichotomy between Stephen and Catherine's loneliness. Catherine is looking for short-term immediate escape while Stephen is seeking a longer term solution.

The author subtly signals more potential connections between Catherine and Stephen in these chapters, furthering the suspense of how their narratives will eventually cross. Most overtly, Catherine references walking with her husband to the tube and Stephen sees his wife's "ghost" while on the tube; this places both characters as living in London. Stephen also reveals that he and his wife were both writers, while Catherine is searching for a writer who wrote the book in which she is featured. There is nothing more concrete to suggest Stephen, or his wife, have something to do with the book Catherine found in her house but this it is enough of a coincidence to create speculation in the mind of the reader. The author does this in order to create suspense and continue to actively involve the reader. Had the author revealed exact details of Catherine and Stephen's connection early on in the narrative it would not allow the reader to become actively engaged in the story.

Stephen's anger and the end of Chapter 6 undercuts the progress he made by clearing out Nancy's belongings in order to create a conflict for the character. A sudden shift in circumstances for Stephen will drive him to take action. Up until this point he had almost immortalized Nancy, referring to her in sanguine terms. Discovering her pictures assumedly indicating infidelity are huge shock to both Stephen and to the reader. Most curious about the discovery is the fact that Stephen claims to know who is behind the camera. This could either indicate that Stephen was suspicious of someone having an affair with his wife or already knew about it. This newfound conflict for Stephen drives the character narratively shifting him from a state of depression and coping to a state of anger.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author is revealing details about the incident with Nicholas so slowly?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss Stephen's reaction to finding the pictures of his wife.

Discussion Question 3

Describe and discuss Catherine's decision to exercise to cope.

Vocabulary

heather, frock, lethargy, wrought-iron, deluge, sheaf, fester



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7 opens with Catherine awaking in the middle of the night from what she describes as a speck of dust landing on her pillow. She still cannot sleep and wonders what would happen if she were to wake up Robert and tell him the truth about the incident with Nicholas. She recounts the aftermath of the incident 20 years prior: She was extremely distraught and Robert did not know what was wrong. He guessed she was depressed because she wanted to go back to work rather than stay at home taking care of Nicholas. Catherine saw this as a way out and told Robert he was right. She then spent a weekend away from her family to recoup, telling Robert she was helping a friend who was having a breakdown.

She feels taunted by the book's presence in her room, so Catherine moves it to the kitchen to try and get it out of her mind. In the morning Robert is making breakfast and asks Catherine if the book is her's. Catherine tells Robert she assumed it was his as she had no idea where it came from. Robert can tell Catherine is distraught and assumes she is wanting to go back to work (she has taken some time off from the move). Catherine lets him believe that is the case. She precipitously remembers how the book came to their home: it came out of a pile of unopened mail forwarded from their old address. She is relieved that whoever sent the book assumedly does not know they have moved. She feels rejuvenated and begins to concentrate on having a nice Sunday with Nicholas who will be coming over to spend the afternoon.

In Chapter 8 Stephen is unable to concentrate on his writing due to the discovery of Nancy's secret. He currently contemplates the nature of a small key he also found in her purse. It was attached to a spare key to their sons' apartment. Stephen decides to go to Jonathan's apartment while he is not home to search for where the key goes. Jonathan's apartment has a putrid smell in it and is extremely messy. Stephen discovers the smell coming from a dead mouse in a mouse trap. After disposing of the mouse Stephen finds Nancy's old writing desk and that the key opens a small drawer. The drawer contains all of Nancy's usual writing supplies as well as a manuscript labeled "Untitled" and it is dated long after Stephen had thought Nancy stopped writing. He decides to take the manuscript to read and to return it once he's done.

Chapter 9 covers Nicholas's Sunday afternoon visit to his parents. Nicholas struggles going through his old belongings, somewhat feeling hurt that his parents want to get rid of his things. Catherine has an awkward exchange with Nicholas, attempting to treat him as an adult but also be maternal. "It's so bloody complicated. She wants him to be a grown up but she also wants him to remember how much he loved her once" (43). Nicholas leaves the conversation abruptly to watch a football match with his father. In her frustration Catherine decides to try reading the book again. She falls asleep due to the amount of wine she has been drinking and wakes up a few hours later as Nicholas is leaving. He notices Catherine's book, saying he has read it. He said a customer at the



store he works at gave it to him as a gift but he never caught the customer's name. Catherine fearfully asks what happens at the end of the book. He replies, "She dies. Sticky end. She deserves it though" (46).

Analysis

These chapters thematically establish destructive behavior sparked by heightened emotional states in Catherine's brash attempt to read her book after speaking with Nicholas and Stephen's continuing to dig deeper on his late wife's deception. Catherine's tense discussion with Nicholas causes her to drink and smoke heavily, inspiring her to read the rest of the book, something she was previously afraid to do. This act is out of character for Catherine as she has up until this point acted in a very feeble manner. The words used to describe her reading the book are vividly chaotic: "She is lost in it, sinking beneath its weight. Its injustice. Her eyes close, the words washing over her, to the sound of a roar from the TV" (45). This action hints at an impetuous side of Catherine we have not seen yet. Stephen knows continuing to dig about his wife's secret will only lead to more pain and that he will not be able to do anything about it because she is dead. He also admits to himself breaking into his son's apartment is a huge betrayal of trust. He is acting out of the agitation and pain he feels from discovering the lewd pictures of Nancy. Catherine and Stephen are both aware they are acting irrationally in these situations but also know they cannot help themselves. The author includes these incidences to parallel to two characters and establish the behavior thematically.

Stephen's loquacity in describing smelling and eventually finding the dead mouse, in addition to other details found in Jonathan's apartment, is the author's indication of how ready he is to discover something awful. Rather than explaining the event in simple terms, the author uses an entire paragraph to chronicle Stephen's discovery of the rat: "I approached it, hand clamped over my nose and mouth, and there it was. A body. Rotting. Neck broken, mouth open, teeth bared, giving off that inside-out stench of putrefaction" (39). The description could have fit a dead human body but instead was used to describe a small rodent. Stephen also over-explains other things in the apartment, such as dead plants and the color of the sheets. The author wants to Stephen to exude a quality of heightened alertness, as if he is ready to find the worst thing imaginable. This allows the reader to identify Stephen's anxiety as he continues his research into Nancy's secret.

The author effectively uses a cliffhanger at the end of Chapter 9 to revive Catherine's intense anxiety about the book, which has been absent ever since she figured out whoever sent it may not know where she currently lives. This chapter is different from all others featuring Catherine, as the book is not omnipresent in Catherine's thoughts; she has been able to find a small amount of reprieve in remembering where the book came from. A full chapter of Catherine having an awkward interaction with her son preceding the cliffhanger is what makes the cliffhanger have so much narrative impact. The narrative lulls the reader away from the central conflict of the book only to have it reappear with brand new information.



Discussion Question 1

What might the connection between Catherine and Stephen be based on the information given up until this point?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Catherine and Nicholas. Why is it so tense?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss what we know about Jonathan thus far. Is there anything we can infer?

Vocabulary

chirpy, nuisance, lumpen, crepey, balustrade, biro, jangles



Chapters 10-12

Summary

Chapter 10 takes place 18 months prior to Spring 2013, meaning Stephen's narrative had shifted forward six months from Chapter 8. Stephen describes reading Nancy's untitled manuscript as distinctly hearing the voice of Nancy at the end of her life. Stephen decides Nancy meant for him to find the pictures and manuscript. He meticulously copies the entire manuscript word-for-word by hand. Once he finishes copying it by hand Stephen proceeds to type up the entire book. In the end, Stephen spends a year copying and typing Nancy's words. Stephen describes feeling Nancy's presence as he wrote and typed, encouraging him on.

Chapter 11 picks up where Chapter 9 left off with Catherine terrified by Nicholas telling her about the ending of the book, where the main character dies. Catherine immediately locks herself in the bathroom and begins to cry. Robert asks her what is wrong and she tells him she is fine. At 3 a.m. that night Catherine goes downstairs to read the end of the book, finding a grotesque description of her analogous character's death from being pushed in front of an oncoming train. The final words of the book prompt her to decide to take action against whoever wrote this: "Such a pity she hadn't realised that doing nothing would be such a deadly omission" (53). Catherine lights the book on fire which awakens Robert. He rushes over, confused over what is going on. Catherine admits the book is about her and that whoever wrote it is trying to punish her. Robert is confused and Catherine stops short of telling him about the the incident with Nicholas from years ago. Robert calms Catherine down, telling her she can always talk to him. He leads her back up to bed, telling her to go to the doctor tomorrow to get a prescription for something to calm her down. Catherine cannot get the image of her lying dead on a train track out of her mind.

Chapter 12 shifts Stephen's narrative forward again, taking place from the end of winter to spring 2013. Stephen decides to publish Nancy's novel himself. He does not own a computer so he buys a laptop and gets set up on the internet, something he had never had in his house before. Stephen searches the internet for information about Catherine. He learns enough information about her to put his plan in motion while also becoming adept at using the internet, becoming somewhat addicted. He hand delivers the book to Catherine's house and then finds Nicholas at work to deliver him a book. After a few weeks Stephen has not heard anything so he decided to return to Catherine's house to observe her. He finds out Catherine and Robert had moved but the new owners tell him they forwarded all the mail to her new address. Stephen habitually checks in on Catherine online every few hours, eventually finding her documentary about child sex-trafficking. He watches it, thinking "They really had no idea what she was like, did they, those people who'd rewarded her. I wanted to silence her, I couldn't bear to hear her voice" (67).



Analysis

The book and Nancy are symbolically being treated as active characters in the story, spurring and encouraging action from Catherine and Stephen, respectively. After Catherine reads the end of the book, the final line is revealed to the reader: "Such a pity she hadn't realised that doing nothing would be such a deadly omission" (53). This line is seen by the reader in quotation marks as if it is a line of dialogue. The book "speaks" to Catherine. She interprets the message from it as a call to action. Similarly, Stephen's dead wife, Nancy, influences Stephen's actions from beyond the grave. Just by reading her manuscript, Stephen assumes Nancy not only wanted him to find the pictures and book but also publish and seek out the book's subject. Also, after Stephen delivers the book to Catherine he finds an old hair of Nancy's in a jar of jam he opened, interpreting it as a sign of approval of Stephen's actions: "It was her seal of approval and it made me think about what else I might do to please her. Be bold, I thought" (63). Catherine and Stephen are spurred on by their own interpretations. Catherine is about to act at the behest of a book's words and Stephen is embroiled in an intense revenge plot based on an interpretation of the same words.

The time jumps in Stephen's story provide a considerable amount of narrative momentum while also creating new mysteries and reframing existing one's to engage the reader. Over the course of these chapters the central mystery of the connection between Catherine and Stephen is revealed - but in revealing this mystery, a larger issue of Stephen's motivation is introduced. In jumping forward in time narratively, the author provides broad recaps of Stephen's actions but does not provide specific descriptions of why he is doing it. Stephen clearly is seeking revenge on Catherine over something she did, but it is nebulous whether its some she did to Nancy, something Nancy observed her do, or something else entirely. This new mystery maintains the momentum created by shifting the timeline of Stephen's narrative forward.

There are hints in these chapters that Stephen is not only driven by his plot against Catherine, but also finding thrills and motivation in the voyeurism of the plan itself. Having never had much experience on the internet before, Stephen finds the ability to track and observe people's actions through the privacy of his home exhilarating and addicting. His penchant for voyeurism is shown through not only finding the whereabouts of Catherine, but also looking up old students of his. While the plot against Catherine is definitely important to Stephen, his high level of investment is also from the sense of purpose and power he is feeling from observing others from afar. A sense of purpose is what he has been missing ever since Nancy's death and his forced retirement.

Discussion Question 1

What are a few reasons for jumping the narrative forward in time?



Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Stephen's character in these chapters versus the beginning of the story.

Discussion Question 3

Predict what Catherine's first actions will be out of her newfound motivation.

Vocabulary

churned, preposterous, loo, feigning, sidles, obliging, larder, circuitous



Chapters 13-15

Summary

Chapter 13 opens with Catherine at the train station on her way to work. She is terrified standing near the train tracks, playing out the end of the book repeatedly in her head. Once she arrives at work safely she is overcome with relief at getting back into her normal routine. After exchanging pleasantries with her co-workers, Catherine starts a list of author's she had met with in the past to come up with some suspects for the author of the book. She recalls meeting with Nancy Brigstocke a little more than 10 years prior after Nancy wrote Catherine a letter. Nancy was dying of cancer at the time and claimed that her husband had recently died. Catherine sympathetically listened to Nancy but admitted there was nothing she could do to help her or her writing career. Catherine returns home and finds Nancy's original letter to her in a moving box and decides to go to the address listed on the letter. She arrives at the address (which the reader can identify as Jonathan's apartment based on the dead plant outside the front door) to find no one there. She writes a letter to Nancy and slips it under the door. As Catherine turns to leave an old woman who lives in an adjoining apartment walks up the stairs. Catherine probes the old woman for information about Nancy. The woman tells Catherine that Nancy is most likely dead by now and that she lived many of her final days in this apartment while her husband was away on "one of his trips" (78). Catherine is surprised to learn Nancy lied about her husband being dead and gets the old woman to tell her Nancy's husband's name is Stephen.

In Chapter 14 Stephen finds the note Catherine left at the apartment. Based on the letter Stephen finds out Nancy has previously met with Catherine and Nancy told Catherine her husband had died recently. Stephen takes Nancy's notebooks from the desk drawer where he had originally found the manuscript and becomes enamored with reading them, learning more about Nancy's motivations. Stephen has not left his house very much for several weeks, and his personal hygiene is suffering.

Geoff, his printer friend who helped him self-publish the book, rings the doorbell. Stephen's house is in a decrepit state which he explains to Geoff as being the aftermath of a break-in. Geoff tells Stephen he thinks the book is a lot better than he thinks so Geoff brought it around to different local bookstores to get it on their shelves. Stephen is touched and excited by the gesture and thrilled more people will be able to read the story. Geoff offers to help Stephen with marketing and selling the book. Stephen enthusiastically agrees.

In Chapter 15 Catherine returns to work and has her assistant, Kim, find out as much information as she can about Stephen Brigstocke, making Kim think he is part of a potential story for a new movie. Kim finds out Stephen was a teacher at Rathbone College. The current headmaster of the school is very uncomfortable talking about Stephen. Catherine gets information about old friends and students of Stephen's, making calls to learn more about him. One mother of a former student elucidates on



Stephen's extremely unpopular reputation. When Stephen became an ineffective upper school teacher he was moved to the primary school where he showed no care or regard for the students. Stephen was thought to be a heavy drinker and "there was something rotten in him, definitely rotten" (93). When Catherine asks if Stephen ever physically violated any of the students, the mother reveals Stephen was asked to leave his previous school for harboring an unhealthy obsession with one of his students. The mother tells Catherine she would be able to get the information about the student Stephen was obsessed with. Catherine feels rejuvenated having made progress in her pursuit of the author of *The Perfect Strangers*.

Analysis

The London train system (the tube as locals call it) symbolizes the most terrifying parts of the characters' respective situations. Catherine's terror in connection to the tube obviously comes from the ending of *The Perfect Strangers*. But apart from it being where the literary version of herself meets her demise, the juxtaposition of how good Catherine feels after leaving the tube shows that being around the train has become the fuel of her crisis. The language used to describe being at the train station could also be seen as a metaphor for how isolated and trapped she feels: "Buried beneath the earth, deep underground, at least thirty feet between her and natural light" (69). The train has the same symbolic value for Stephen, having thought he saw the ghost of his wife on the train in Chapter 4. Center to Stephen's crisis is the absence of his wife. It seems his life became unhinged after her death and then thinking he sees his dead wife on the train offers momentary reprieve. Catherine and Stephen have both felt the brunt of their situations while riding the tube emphasizing its symbolic value.

Now that the narratives have crossed, Stephen and Catherine's connection is clear, the author utilizes dramatic irony in the parallel narratives as a way to continue to build suspense and intrigue. Catherine does not know how much Stephen knows about her and vice versa; the reader is the only one who knows how much the characters know about each other. This builds suspense for the reader as he or she knows the narrative is building towards certain information being revealed to the characters. Catherine is learning the truth behind Stephen's time as a teacher while Stephen has a secondary goal of spreading the book so more people can learn about Catherine's misdeeds. Key information is still withheld from the reader (what terrible things did Catherine do? Why did Nancy lie about having a dead husband?) but the dramatic irony keeps the reader engaged while patiently waiting for bigger reveals.

It is becoming more and more evident Stephen is withholding information from the reader which causes him or her to question the veracity of everything Stephen has said up until this point. Up until this group of chapters the reader had no reason not to believe Stephen. He seemed like a rational man mourning his wife. Catherine's phone conversation with the mother of one of Stephen's former students indicates he had severely understated why he was asked to retire in Chapter 2. Also his newly revealed obsession with a former student makes when he searched online for the whereabouts of a former student in Chapter 12 seem sinister. The reader has lost trust in Stephen



severely disrupting the framing of the narrative going forward. Currently, Stephen is being framed as the villain with Catherine being an innocent victim. Though with the true actions of Catherine from the past yet to be revealed, the reader is set up for the narrative to shift again at any moment.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Catherine's relationship with Kim. Why is it so comfortable for Catherine?

Discussion Question 2

Predict why Jonathan has been mentioned but has of yet not been seen?

Discussion Question 3

List the information still being withheld from the reader. Discuss why you think the author chose to withhold each piece of information.

Vocabulary

leers, herringbone, gubbins, smug, malevolence, niceties



Chapters 16-18

Summary

Chapters 16 and 17 are set in late Spring 2013. Chapter 16 is a brief chapter featuring Stephen stalking Catherine at the train station. He has been following her in order to learn her daily routine and route home. He has also procured her current address and phone number. The narration of his thoughts are in short sentences and he is looking for signs of pain and discomfort in Catherine's face. He thinks about engaging her but he says, "We're not ready yet, Nancy and I. I've brought her with me" (96). He is wearing Nancy's cardigan. Stephen decides not to engage and reveals the next stage of his plan is to have Geoff get *A Perfect Stranger* into two bookstores near Catherine's house with the hope of exposing her.

Chapter 17 features Catherine's phone call with the mother of the boy who Stephen developed an obsession with. The woman, Mrs. Rossi, explained to Catherine that Stephen was her son's, Jamie, teacher. Stephen helped Jamie to do very well in school and helped him get into university, the first member of his family to do so. When Jamie began at school he saw Stephen around campus multiple time, staring at Jamie "like he thought he was invisible" (98). Jamie refused to call the police or let his parents call the police. One night Jamie returned to his dorm room to find Stephen sitting on his bed mumbling incoherently. He managed to kick him out and then a few nights later Stephen showed up again, banging on Jamie's door in the middle of the night crying. Jamie's friend kicked him out and roughed him up a little bit and Stephen never returned. Jamie still did not want to call the police over the matter.

Mrs. Rossi tells Catherine that Jamie would never want to talk to her about the ordeal and gets upset whenever anyone brings it up. Catherine leaves her number in case Jamie seems like he wants to talk. Catherine heads home and gets off the train a few stops early to walk as it is a beautiful evening. In front of a bookstore she runs into an unnamed old friend whom Catherine goes out for a glass of wine with. Once at home Catherine contemplates calling the number she has for Stephen. She instead decides to leave a review on the website for *A Perfect Stranger* as an indication to Stephen that she has received his message. She carefully crafts a review as not to make it seem like an admission of guilt or fearful. She signs the review as "Charlotte" which is the name of Catherine's analog in the *A Perfect Stranger*.

Chapter 18 shifts forward slightly in time to Early summer 2013. Stephen has become manic, sleeping during the day and staying up at night. "I like the dark. I am not alone. Nancy is with me and I have my laptop too" (103). He rarely leaves the house, using his laptop to order everything he needs, referring to it as his "pet" (103). He has just read the review and while he knows it is Catherine, he is dissatisfied with it. He wants Catherine to show the book is causing her pain and admit she is the awful person Stephen thinks she is. Stephen takes it as a provocation and vows to make her feel the pain he thinks she deserves.



Analysis

Stephen's increasingly deteriorating mental state is related to the reader through his behaviors, his references to Nancy, and the structure of his thoughts. Stalking Catherine, rarely leaving the house, and sleeping during the day while staying up at night are all indications of Stephen not being well. These behaviors seem extremely out of character based on the Stephen from two years ago, which make his descent into mental illness even more jarring. He also is increasingly referring to Nancy as if she is still around, still helping him actively. While he has not explicitly stated he hears Nancy's voice, he does believe she is communicating with him.

The narrative form also relates Stephen's poor mental health. Chapter 18 is entirely made up of Stephen's thoughts and no sentence is more than a few words long. For example, "Groceries delivered to my door. What a clever chap. It's mainly canned stuff. Like the war. Meat in tins. Chunky chicken" (103). These short sentences have no narrative flow and are confusing to following. It is slightly frustrating to read, signaling to the reader Stephen has changed and he is not well. Stephen is slowly losing touch with reality and has honed in on Catherine's suffering as his prime reason for existence.

Stephen's laptop symbolizes his transition and descent into madness, as once he purchased a laptop and internet connection his obsessive revenge quest against Catherine became his central focus. The laptop has enabled him to disconnect from the outside world. Prior to the laptop he was filling his time with writing, attempting to write a non-fiction book. With the laptop he has abandoned his book idea and become dependent on the internet for food, news, supplies, and anything else he might need. Referring to his laptop as "his pet" indicates an unhealthy dependence on the device. The laptop and internet have grabbed hold of Stephen's mind and imagination, giving him reason to go after Catherine and worry about nothing else.

The author uses the phone calls between Catherine and the mothers of Stephen's former student as an expositional device to fill in background information about Stephen. The unique structure of the narrative (switching between two parallel stories with different points of views) makes it difficult to blend in large amounts of expositional information about the characters, specifically Stephen because all of the information presented so far is from his point of view and questionable in veracity. The phone calls ameliorate this difficulty by giving a platform for the author to share the scary details of Stephen's past. This information is crucial to the plot moving forward and had to be delivered to the reader. The phone calls are a non-distracting and logical way of conveying this information.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and Contrast Stephen and Catherine's respective plans of action.



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the significance of Catherine running into the unnamed old friend.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Stephen's living conditions. How are they currently a reflection of his character?

Vocabulary

coax, beguiling, revulsion, nimbly, pithy, missive



Chapters 19-21

Summary

Chapter 19 opens as Catherine wakes up from a long night's sleep, one of the first good sleeps she has had in weeks. Catherine decides to work from home and calls the office to let them know. Robert had left hours ago needing to be at work early. Catherine and Robert connected the previous night over conversation for the first time since the beginning of the ordeal with the book.

The narration relates the story of how Robert and Catherine first met: he was a lawyer and she was working her first job at a newspaper. Catherine was 22 and Robert was 33. Catherine was attracted to Robert's confidence and openness. He aspired to be a member of parliament, a dream he still harbors to this day. It has been a week since Catherine posted the review to The Perfect Stranger website. She feels good about the action, thinking Stephen is seeking acknowledgement of the pain he has gone through. Catherine checks the website one more time to see if anyone had commented or any other reviews had been put up. There is nothing new so Catherine exits the pages and vows to never look at it again.

Chapter 20 finds Stephen still in a very manic state. He admits he needs to go outside and describes himself as becoming "a little 'stir crazy'" (109). He had ordered copies of the lewd pictures of Nancy and just received them from the photo store. He puts the photos in an envelope and puts the envelope in his jacket pocket and leaves the house. He walks to Berkeley Square and sits on a bench to eat a sandwich. Stephen marvels at how beautiful the square is and shares a sense of camaraderie with the other people eating outside. He walks to an address he has written down (54 Berkeley Square). After commenting on the architecture of the building Stephen walks inside and hands the envelope with the photos to the receptionist.

Chapter 21 has Catherine relaxing throughout her day awaiting Robert to come home. Because he will not be home until around 7 Catherine decides she is going to make a proper supper for them that night. Catherine feels very appreciative of Robert's support and patience throughout the ordeal with the book. She describes him as a natural mediator, having successfully moderated many arguments and misunderstandings between Catherine and Nicholas over the years. After returning from the supermarket, Catherine decides to lie on the couch and read a book for a few hours. Around six o'clock she calls her mother for their weekly phone call. Catherine is very close with her mother, who exhibits early signs of dementia but has not been formally diagnosed. Catherine texts Robert to tell him dinner will be ready around 7:15. By nine o'clock Robert still is not home and has not texted. Catherine becomes frightened, to the point of rehearsing what she might say to police if Stephen had done something to him. Robert finally texts back saying he is stuck at work. Catherine is furious at the thoughtlessness Robert shows towards her.



Analysis

Chapters 19 and 21 provide the reader more information about Robert and his relationship with Catherine, signaling the return to normalcy Catherine has felt since posting the review to The Perfect Stranger website. Catherine's relationship with Robert has seemed strained in previous chapters due to the state of duress The Perfect Stranger has put Catherine in. She was so focused and consumed with this crisis her relationship with her husband seemed cold and distant to the readers. These chapters provide the reader with details about the true nature of Robert and Catherine's marriage signaling Catherine's mind is truly released from the turmoil it had been embroiled in. This also serves to heighten exactly how bad off Catherine was. To find out Catherine is very in love with her husband after only a few chapters earlier she was constantly waiting for him to fall asleep so she could be alone is narratively jarring. This is a whole new characterization of Catherine, Robert, and their marriage.

Catherine's harsh reaction to Robert not coming home illustrates to the reader that Catherine may not be as recovered from the traumatic experience of The Perfect Stranger as she is intimating. When Robert stays late at the office without letting her know it sends Catherine into a panic. Not a simple worry, but a full-on panic. This frailness shows Catherine is very much still in the thick of dealing with trauma of her ordeal. She may have moved past it in being able to go a whole day without thinking about it, but she is experiencing after-effects, possibly PTSD, from what had happened.

Stephen's description of the building where he drops off the photos is a metaphor for what he wants to happen to Catherine:

"The front of number 54 has been partially torn out and replaced with glass, oversize slabs of glass, as if the building's mouth has been forced open and these glinting tombstones shoved in to prevent it from every closing again. A building permanently trying not to gag. It's a humiliating expression for this once noble facade" (110).

Just as the building was once great but has been bastardized into what Stephen finds to be an ugly and humiliating version of what it was, Stephen wants to expose Catherine, a well respected member of the community, and change her into a hideous being for people to gawk and scoff at. He wants her to never be able to hide her secrets from anyone and be judged by all who come across her.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Stephen feeling camaraderie with the other people eating outside?



Discussion Question 2

Describe Catherine's relationship to her mother. How does it seem similar or different from her relationship with Nicholas?

Discussion Question 3

Predict who Stephen is delivering the photos to. Support your prediction with examples from the narrative.

Vocabulary

coy, comradely, facade, mediation, martyr, oriface



Chapters 22-24

Summary

Chapter 22 shifts to a new narrative point of view, third person omniscient but centered around Robert. He is sitting at his desk at work after hours of not moving. He received the envelope from Stephen, containing a copy of *The Perfect Stranger* and the photographs, revealed to be not of Nancy but of Catherine. Robert is disgusted and shocked by the lewd photographs, but knows it has to be her because he recognizes the underwear she is wearing. The pictures are from a vacation the family had taken in Spain. Robert had left the trip early because something with work had come up. He sees Nicholas in some of the pictures on the beach and decides to call him with the intent of asking him if he remembers anything about the trip after Robert left.

Robert picks up Nicholas from his flat. Upon seeing the filthy state of the flat Robert begins to blame Catherine for their sons' lack of ambition. "This is her fault. She pushed Nicholas away" (124). Over dinner at a pub Nicholas tells his father that he has met a girl and they are planning on taking a trip together if they can save enough money. Robert asks him if he remembers the trip to Spain they had taken, which Nicholas vaguely remembers but no specific details. Robert offers to help Nicholas pay for his trip, something he knows Catherine would not approve of. Robert returns home and looks up the book online, finding the same website Catherine had found and the review she had left. Robert goes to bed in the spare bedroom.

Chapter 23 shifts back to Catherine perspective (still third person). She wakes up and finds Robert to have already left the house. She takes Robert sleeping in the spare room as a thoughtful gesture, not wanting to wake her up. Throughout the day Robert will not return Catherine's texts or calls. The next night she wakes up at midnight hearing Robert's car pull up. She watches Robert quietly place his keys on the table and walk into the kitchen. Catherine walks downstairs and finds Robert sitting with a glass of whiskey. When she walks over Robert spreads out all of the pictures he received on the table. They proceed to fight aggressively with Robert interrogating her about what happened in Spain after he left. Catherine tacitly admits to having an affair but tries to defend herself by saying she never wanted Robert to leave. Catherine asks where he got the photos and Robert slams the copy of *A Perfect Stranger* on the table. When asking if the man Catherine had slept with wrote the book, she says she thinks his father wrote it and that the man she slept with is dead.

Chapter 24 is a flashback to the Summer 1993 and is first person narration from Stephen's point of view. Stephen and Nancy are sitting at home one afternoon when there is a knock at the door. Stephen opens the door to find two police officers who ask to come in. They tell Stephen and Nancy there has been an accident and their son Jonathan had drowned. They need to travel to Spain to identify the body, though the Spanish authorities are sure it is him. Nancy calls the consulate to make travel arrangements and find out details about the accident. This was the first time Stephen



heard the name "Catherine Ravenscroft." Stephen and Nancy debated whether or not to reach out to her but decided it was up to her to contact them. Catherine never did call and Nancy later found Jonathan's camera and developed the film, keeping her findings from Stephen.

Analysis

Chapter 22 signals Robert becoming a central figure in the plot by being the first chapter to not center around Catherine or Stephen. Robert previously had been on the fringe of the narrative but by receiving the photos from Stephen and a copy of *The Perfect Stranger* he has been thrust into the central plot. By adding Robert to the main action of the novel the author is able to raise the stakes as well as vilify Catherine. It is no longer a standoff between Catherine and Stephen. Robert's marital life is shaken and he relates their son's lack of ambition to Catherine's action. Catherine's actions have not only put herself in danger, but her entire family. Robert figuring more heavily into the plot creates momentum in the narrative, forcing certain secrets to be revealed while also creating new ones.

The author uses vague language and misdirection to fool the reader into thinking the photos were of Nancy leading to a critical moment in the plot when the reader finds out the pictures are, in fact, of Catherine. In Chapter 6 when Stephen first finds the photos he uses the pronoun "she" to refer to the subject of the photographs rather than Nancy's name. "She was looking straight into the camera. Flirting? I think so. Yes, she was flirting" (26). He also refers to being betrayed by Nancy, leading the reader to make the natural assumption that Nancy was in the photographs. When it is revealed Catherine is the subject of the pictures Catherine is no longer seen as the victim. It is clear she has done something terrible and these pictures are related. This is a very important moment in the book because up until this point Stephen has been characterized as the wrongdoer. While this does not exonerate Stephen for his actions, it does show the reader the situation is far more nuanced than originally thought.

Those closest to you being strangers is thematically present throughout all three of these chapters, heightening the reader's inclination to not trust anyone. Catherine now seems like a stranger to Robert having kept such a big secret for all these years. Nancy is a stranger to Stephen having not told him about the pictures when she originally had them developed. Robert feels his son is stranger, potentially damaged from seeing something in Spain all those years ago. This distrust amongst the characters narratively serves to have the reader suspect all the characters of dishonesty. Strangers are usually people one does not know, but in this situation strangers are the people who are closest.

The reveal that Jonathan is dead places into context Stephen's weakening mental state. The reader had only thought he had lost his wife, but now know he lost both his wife and his son. At the beginning of the book Stephen is despondent, not having motivation to live. Upon finding the pictures of Catherine taken by his son as well as the manuscript of *The Perfect Stranger* he feels empowered because he can finally do something about



his lost love ones. He can avenge his son and fulfill his wife's plan. This is what drives him into borderline insanity. He is fulfilling the needs of ghosts: loved ones who are long gone. He has no way of knowing if this is what they would actually want, so he is creating a dialogue in his head between him and his departed family. This serves to make Stephen slightly more sympathetic now that it is known exactly how much he has lost.

Discussion Question 1

Recap the major plot points revealed in these three chapters.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss who is more in the wrong: Stephen or Catherine.

Discussion Question 3

What information is still missing from the incident in Spain?

Vocabulary

collage, plodding, triptych, consulate



Chapters 25-27

Summary

Chapters 25 and 27 are centered on Robert. After the fight with Catherine the night before, Robert had driven a few blocks away with a bottle of whiskey and slept in his car. He wakes up somewhere between hungover and still intoxicated. He decides he needs to find a quiet place he can sit and read *The Perfect Stranger*. He hops on the bus and silently observes the people around him, making judgements about their lives based on their appearance. Robert finds an open café, orders tea and toast, and begins to read the book. He cannot resist reading the final line of the book first which Robert takes as a threat against Catherine, but he feels no need to protect her. The beginning of the book finds John (the stand-in for Jonathan) and his girlfriend Sarah on a backpacking trip throughout Europe. Sarah receives news from home which forces her to return to London before the end of the trip. John wants to return with Sarah but she insists he carries on without her, so he writes a postcard to his parents and boards a train to Spain. Robert senses a foreboding air about the writing, "The slow-coming dark of tragedy" (142).

Chapter 26 takes place in Summer 2013 but solely is Stephen recounting his and Nancy's trip to Spain to identify Jonathan's body. Nancy and Stephen arrived in Spain, signed the necessary paperwork and proceeded to the morgue to identify the body. Stephen noticed a mark running down his left arm and was told it was an injury he sustained during the accident. They were next taken to the beach where Jonathan died. Stephen and Nancy removed their shoes and stepped into the water, saying a silent goodbye to their son. Next, they were taken to the hostel Jonathan had been staying at. Nancy went through all of Jonathan's belongings and packed them up, not letting Stephen participate. Stephen assumes this is when Nancy found the camera. They found a pack of cigarettes in Jonathan's bag. They did not know he had smoked and knew his girlfriend at the time, Sarah, would not have approved. Stephen did not particularly care for Sarah, but he thought that had she not left the trip early his son may still be alive.

Chapter 27 returns to Robert reading. The majority of this chapter is passages from the *The Perfect Stranger*. In the book, John has taken notice of a woman named Charlotte (Catherine's stand-in). Charlotte has a young son and is described as using him to get attention, playing to part of a single mother in order to get noticed. John helps distract the young son to get him to eat and walks Charlotte and her son back to their hotel. Charlotte puts her son to bed but asks John to wait for her in the lobby so she can buy him a drink. Robert detects a note of jealousy in the writing and is confused, as Catherine said the boy's father wrote the book. Robert continues to read the graphic portrayal of John and Charlotte having sex, only feet away from Charlotte's sleeping son. Charlotte convinces John to extend his stay a few days.



Analysis

Jonathan's camera symbolizes an interpretable lens into the past. The parts of *The Perfect Stranger* shown in these chapters were written by Nancy's impression of what happened on the trip. She was not there, but details are included (such as Jonathan's smoking habit) which she learned after his death. The lengthy description of Charlotte (and by extension Catherine) are completely gleaned from the pictures Jonathan took of her. "He was easy prey for a woman of her experience. A woman who was a little bored. A woman who was looking for a bit of light entertainment, just to fill in a few days before she returned home to her husband" (151). Jonathan's camera and pictures give Nancy a glimpse of what happened to her son prompting her to fill in the blanks herself. Had she not found Jonathan's camera she may have never written *The Perfect Stranger*. The pictures do not inculcate facts in the mind of those who see them; rather, bits and pieces of a story waiting to be completed.

The time frame presented in Chapter 26 (Summer 2013) is significant because the author wants to inspire doubt of the veracity of the account as it's Stephen's memory of what happened rather than what actually happened. The author marked Chapter 24 as occurring in Summer 1993, allowing the reader to fully believe the account. Because this chapter is set in the present of the narrative but discusses events of the past, the reader is meant to doubt if Stephen is being fully honest. He has left out crucial details previously, such as the pictures being of Catherine rather than Nancy. The author wants to reader to be torn as to whether or not he or she can believe Stephen.

The Perfect Stranger embodies a twist on the "story within a story" literary device, where a separate narrative parallels the events of the main plot. This device is used in a unique way as the reader knows *The Perfect Stranger* was explicitly written to parallel actual events central to the main plot of the book. This is an atypical presentation of this device, as generally the story-within-a-story is meant more as a metaphor. This literal use of the device is used by the author to make the reader question what he or she assumes about the main plot. The detail of Jonathan's cigarettes are included in *The Perfect Stranger* as well as Stephen's account of going to Spain to identify his son's body. This makes the reader believe *The Perfect Stranger* is accurate. But Catherine has desperately claimed things did not happen exactly as they are presented in to book, raising doubt in the mind of the reader. The use of this literary device lends itself to suspense and intrigue.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss what parts of *The Perfect Stranger* you think are true or false.

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Sarah's name not being changed in *The Perfect Stranger*.



Discussion Question 3

Why does Robert feel most wronged by the fact that his son was present for Catherine's affair?

Vocabulary

anorak, rucksack, sanctimonious, ruptured



Chapters 28-30

Summary

Chapter 28 finds Catherine chasing after Robert following their fight. After he drives off she returns to her house and tries to figure out where he had gone. She cannot figure out where he is and he will not respond for her texts or calls. Catherine stays up all night and finally, as the sun is coming up, drags herself into bed and closes her eyes. She feels a small amount of relief now that Robert knows about the the affair and her lover's death. He deserves to know and Catherine knows she should have told him. As she is sleeping the phone rings. The number is blocked on the caller ID and no one speaks when she answers the call. She knows who it is. "He doesn't say it, but she can feel it" (158).

Chapter 29 consists only of a passage from *The Perfect Stranger*. It is the morning after John and Charlotte's sexual encounter. Charlotte is on the beach with her son, Noah. She has a hangover and is somewhat annoyed with Noah's presence in her life, wanting to see John again. She is walking with Noah to get ice cream when John walks past them. They do not speak but John finds where Charlotte's towel is and places his near it. Before returning to the beach Charlotte buys Noah an inflatable dinghy, something he had been asking for the entire trip. After exchanging suggestive glances with John, Charlotte asks a nearby family to watch Noah while she uses the bathroom. John follows her in the two passionately have sex in a bathroom stall. Charlotte returns to the beach to find Noah still playing happily. She lays down and falls asleep. When she wakes up she sees Noah, still on the inflatable dinghy, drifting out to sea. She screams for help and John runs into to ocean to save Noah. While struggling to return to shore two other men dive in to help. The men are able to bring Noah in but John is still out at sea. John drowns and a boat eventually finds his body and brings it into shore.

Chapter 30 opens with Robert finishing the passage featured in Chapter 29. He heads to work and puts on the spare suit he keeps at his office. Robert is considerably distracted by what he has just read. He reminisces about the first time he and Catherine met and how he knew right away that "she knew what she wanted and how to get it. Fuck the consequences" (170). Robert wonders if the incident at the beach is why Catherine and Nicholas have always had such a difficult relationship. Robert can not help but wonder how much Catherine thinks about the sex with her lover, comparing it to Robert. He feels intense jealousy. "Not green, but black and dense" (172). After calming down Roberts decides he is going to call the family to thank them for their son's sacrifice and apologize for his wife's failings. But first Robert wants to touch base with Nicholas, so he calls and invites him for dinner.



Analysis

The author chose to reveal the entirety of the incident in France through the text of *The Perfect Stranger* so that the reader may find out about it exactly the same way Robert does. This allows the reader to identify more with the confused, hurt and jealous feelings Robert exudes in Chapter 30. The betrayal Robert feels from learning about the affair and his son's near death experience is understandably heightened by the graphic depiction of sex between "Charlotte" and "John." Even if Robert knows this to be an exaggeration for literary effects, the images are inextricably present in his mind. Finding out about the incident through the text of *The Perfect Stranger* also suspends belief in the reader as it has already been established that the intricacies of the events depicted may not be entirely accurate.

The theme of coping with loneliness reappears here, showing Robert having to deal with feeling completely isolated from the woman he thought he knew best. Stephen's loneliness has taken the form of destructive behavior, Catherine coped with her loneliness by forcing herself to believe her problems would just go away. The author has Robert cope with this new loneliness by deciding to reach out to the family of his wife's former lover and making plans with his son to discuss the situation. Robert copes by reaching out the others while Stephen and Catherine isolate themselves even further. This difference is critical in the difference between Robert and the other two main characters; Robert is not selfish or impetuous whereas Catherine and Stephen are meant to be seen in this way.

The author plays with genre conventions in the passage from *The Perfect Stranger* by writing it as if it is a general romance novel but injecting an absolutely tragic event. The descriptions in *The Perfect Stranger* are over sexualized and highly graphic and id characteristic of the romance genre. By following up language such as this with the heroic rescue of Noah and tragic death of a character, the author shirks expectations, making *The Perfect Stranger* into a highly dramatic affair. This highlights how Nancy carefully crafted the book to be as painful as possible for the people who read it. Painful for Catherine in reliving the whole ordeal and painful for Robert in having to read graphically about his wife's affair.

Discussion Question 1

Predict what Robert's plan is. Does he think he can diffuse the situation entirely?

Discussion Question 2

How does Catherine know who is calling at the end of Chapter 28? Who do you think is calling?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the decision to reveal the full incident in Spain through *The Perfect Stranger*. Was this narratively effective? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

swilling, ballast, spade, dinghy, sinews, automaton



Chapters 31-33

Summary

Chapter 31 is told from Stephen's perspective. He recounts the aftermath of Jonathan's death. Nancy sunk into a deep depression, unwilling to leave the house or do anything. One day Stephen convinced her to go on a walk. She took a long time to get ready and Stephen went upstairs to check on her. Stephen found Nancy submerged in the bathtub wearing her clothes. She said she wanted to experience what Jonathan experienced when he died. Nancy stopped working and Jonathan's salary was barely enough for them to get by. One day Stephen came home to find Nancy sorting through Jonathan's belongings. Stephen helped and found a box of condoms and a large amount of pornography under the bed. Stephen quickly disposed of it without Nancy seeing, knowing it would greatly upset her. About five years after Jonathan's death Nancy decided she needed space from Stephen and she moved into Jonathan's old flat. Nancy never told the neighbors what happened to him and promised Stephen she would not hurt herself as long as he left her alone. About a year after Nancy moved Stephen received a call from someone from the Tenant's Association saying there had been complaints about a smell coming from the apartment. Fearing Nancy had died, Stephen rushed over only to find Nancy laying on the couch, breathing, and she forthrightly told him she had cancer. Stephen took her home and this was the last time he would step foot in the apartment until he found her manuscript. Stephen now realizes why Nancy told Catherine her husband was dead. They were so distant it did not seem like a marriage anymore. Stephen then says Nancy is alive again. "But now she is alive again - my constant companion. I hear her voice and I speak to her regularly. I told her about the phone call and the sound of fear in the whore's voice" (182).

Chapter 32 finds Catherine at work unable to focus on anything. She is still in shock from Robert's cruel reaction to finding out everything. Catherine knew he would be very upset but never imagined it would be so severe. Robert has moved out and is staying at a hotel and Catherine has been staying in the spare bedroom to avoid the loneliness of the her own bed. Kim tells Catherine she found the contact information of the Headmaster of Rathbone College who left just after Stephen was forced to retire. Catherine harshly reacts and tells her there is no story there. Catherine calls Robert's office to see if he is there. If he is she plans on heading there to confront him. The receptionist says he is working from home today. Catherine returns home to find Robert and Nicholas enjoying a beer. Robert says Nicholas is going to stay with him while Catherine is away chasing her next big story. Robert has packed a bag for Catherine and a cab is on its way. Catherine wants to scream but can not because Nicholas is there. Catherine plays along with Robert's ploy to kick her out of the house. She gets in the cab and gives the driver an address.

Chapter 33 is the first chapter told from Nicholas's point of view (still third person omniscient). Nicholas is in the spare bedroom and smells his mother on the bed. He knows that she has been sleeping in there. Nicholas is unsure what is going on between



his parents and does not particularly care to find out. He has decided to sublet his room while he is staying with his father in order to make a profit. He also admits he lied about having a girlfriend, but still plans on taking the money his father said he would give for a trip. He puts an unlit joint in his mouth and ignores his father's calls that supper is ready. Nicholas buries his head in the pillow. "They've never been close but, still, the smell of her nearly brings tears to his eyes" (191).

Analysis

The authors uses flashback in Chapter 31 to fill in some of the unrevealed information earlier in the book, creating a cohesive narrative without plot holes. Stephen's account of Nancy's deteriorating mental health provides the reader with information previous withheld. Nancy and Stephen's separation explains why Nancy told Catherine her husband was dead. Nancy's untruthfulness with her neighbors explains why the old woman whom Catherine met did not know Jonathan had died. By weaving this information back into the narrative the author is able to ensure there are no loose unanswered questions in the readers mind.

The theme of those you are closest to being strangers appears when Catherine is in a state of shock from Robert's cruel reaction. "She knew she had concealed parts of herself from Robert, but she had not realised, until now, how much of him she didn't know. When she had tried to imagine his response to the book, she had failed to conjure up this bitterness." Robert now feels like a stranger to her, just as she feels like a stranger to him. Catherine has been so absorbed with dealing with a different stranger (Stephen) she failed to comprehend the full impact her secrets may have on those closest to her. She has taken for granted what her husband might think and is now in danger of losing him completely.

The moment Stephen hides the condoms and pornography found under Jonathan's bed from Nancy is symbolic of Stephen contributing to preserving a pristine image of Jonathan. Nancy felt Jonathan was a victim. The prose in *The Perfect Stranger* vilifies Catherine as a predator and characterizes Jonathan as her helpless prey. In keeping the condoms and pornography from Nancy, Stephen is unknowingly contributing to this fantasy. Nancy has built an image of Jonathan and refuses to let it go. Stephen is contributing to maintaining this image, first by hiding the condoms and pornography and presently by carrying out Nancy's plan.

In Chapter 30 the author creates a shock for the reader by lulling them into thinking Stephen is acting and speaking more lucidly only to surprise them at the end of the chapter with the clearest indication that Stephen is mentally unstable. Recent chapters featuring Stephen have been somewhat incoherent in his speech and action but Chapter 30 finds Stephen speaking to the reader in a calm manner. His thought process seems to make sense and the retelling of Nancy's hard time after Jonathan's death is coherent. When he reveals to the reader that he is "talking" to Nancy everyday it is jarring. The reader was tricked into beginning to think Stephen is doing better but instead learn he is worse than ever.



Discussion Question 1

Where do you think Catherine is going in the cab?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of shifting the point of view to Nicholas for the first time?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Nicholas is brought to tears after smelling his mother?

Vocabulary

chivvy, sodden, ornate, insipid, holdall, glib, shoal



Chapters 34-36

Summary

In Chapter 34 Catherine is at her mother's house, having traveled there after Robert kicked her out. She tells her mother that Robert is out of town and they have a construction crew at the house so she did not want to be there alone. Catherine tells her mother she has a headache and just wants to lie down and try to get some sleep.

Catherine undresses and lays beneath the covers in a twin bed (the room has two twin beds and Catherine's mother sleeps in the other). Her mother comes in the room shortly after and gives Catherine a glass of water and some aspirin. Catherine listens to her mother go about her business, showing the occasional signs of dementia such as telling someone on the phone Nicholas is at home with a nanny. Catherine is still awake when her mother comes to bed and Catherine tells her mother everything that has happened. After Catherine finishes talking she sees her mother has been asleep the whole time, but nevertheless it felt good to say it out loud.

Chapter 35 contains Stephen describing his current relationship with Nancy. He wears her cardigan and old hat all the time, claiming it makes him feel close to her. "There are strands of hair still in it, her DNA snuggling up against mine" (197). He feels closer to Nancy than he ever has before. Stephen feels *The Perfect Stranger* is a collaboration between the two of them, with Stephen taking credit for the title as well as changing the ending. He decided the character Charlotte should die in the end. Stephen has heard from Geoff that a few copies of the book have sold at local bookshops. It gives him satisfaction that more and more people are learning about how terrible a person Catherine is.

In Chapter 36 Catherine goes to the address Kim found for Stephen Brigstocke. The house is dilapidated and clearly has not been tended to in years. Catherine knocks on the door and no one answers. She shouts into a window, announcing herself and says she wants to talk about Jonathan. She continues to knock with no answer. She calls the number she has for him and hears the phone ring inside the house. The outgoing message on the answering machine is Nancy's voice and Catherine hangs up and continues to knock. She opens the mail slot and tries to reach the inside lock but to no avail. She shouts through the mail slot one of more time. "I know you have my number. Call me - speak this time. I want to talk about Jonathan. I deserve to be heard, Mr. Brigstocke" (200). She then calls his number again and this time leaves a message.

Analysis

Stephen's pleasure with more and more people buying his book exudes the voyeuristic theme present throughout the book with Stephen tricking others into peering into and watching a life that is not their own. Stephen's entire plan is a voyeuristic endeavor: he watches and observes Catherine and her family from a far, meticulously inserting



himself undetected in order to bring her suffering. He is energized by this. By putting the book into stores he is making anyone who reads it unwittingly take part in the same activity. In spreading his penchant for watching others he is "widening the net" (198) and making it so when Catherine tries to escape she will be surrounded by others watching and judging her, something Stephen believes will break her.

Nancy's hat and cardigan are symbolic of Stephen's burgeoning borderline insanity as they are what he believes connects him with his wife most. The author includes these articles to clothing to emphasize how unhealthy Stephen's 'connection' with Nancy is. He does not feel Nancy is with him in a spiritual sense, he is literally wearing her clothes and believes she is there with him collaborating and scheming. The cardigan and hat are physical representations of Stephen's insanity and are present to make the reader know he is not well.

Catherine reaching and yelling through the mail slot is representative of the separate realities she and Stephen are existing. Catherine is still firmly planted in the real world. She begins to deal with her situation, acknowledging if she does not she may lose her family forever. Stephen exists in his own fantasy world, where Nancy is with him and punishing Catherine is of the utmost importance. Catherine tries to break through into Stephen's reality but is only able to reach and arm through and project her voice over, but unable to fully reach him. This barrier must be broken somehow before Stephen does something truly destructive. The author also creates this separation in having the chapters about Catherine, Robert, and Nicholas told in a different narrative voice from the chapters about Stephen.

Discussion Question 1

Predict what you think Stephen's final plan is.

Discussion Question 2

Describe Catherine's mother. How does her characterization reflect the rest of the story?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Stephen changed the original ending to Nancy's manuscript?

Vocabulary

chirruping, graft, phlegmy



Chapters 37-39

Summary

In Chapter 37 Stephen continues on to the next part of his plan. Stephen was in the house when Catherine tried to break in and is amused by her attempts. He reveals he has been having email correspondence with Robert, who has apologized on his wife's behalf and agrees she is a terrible person. Stephen considers Robert to be on his side now. Stephen claims Nancy tells him she is ready to see Jonathan again.

Stephen goes to a book reading at the local bookstore arranged by Geoff. He is very uncomfortable reading his book in front of people but is still gracious to Geoff for setting it up. After the reading Stephen claims he has an idea for a new book but needs help researching Facebook and internet culture. The new main character is a teenage boy and Stephen wants to understand youth culture before he starts writing. Geoff offers up his son to train Stephen in exchange for Stephen helping with Geoff's son's English papers. After meeting over the course of a couple of weeks Stephen feels comfortable using social networking online and sets up a fake Facebook account for Jonathan. Stephen begins collecting friends using Jonathan's persona. "You can't have too many friends, but it's important he has one special one, a confidante, some he can open up to" (206).

Chapter 38 shifts between Catherine in the present of the narrative and flashbacks to Summer 1993, when the incident in Spain occurred. After her failed attempt to find Stephen she is frustrated and heads to work. On the way to work she unknowingly passes by Stephen who is staring at her. Once at her office she finds copies of *The Perfect Stranger* piled up on her desk. She looks out her office door and sees Kim on the verge of tears and another co-worker, Simon, holding a copy of the book. Simon and Kim question Catherine about the nature of the book, saying Stephen Brigstocke had just been there. He told them the book was about Catherine and that she tried to break into his house. Simon and Kim try to make sense of the situation and Catherine becomes increasingly frustrated. She gets up to leave and Simon grabs her by the arm, prompting Catherine to smack Simon across the face with a copy of the book, causing his nose to bleed. Catherine returns to her mother's house and receives a call from the HR department of her office. They place her on one week sick leave and offer to set her up with anger management classes. She closes her eyes and the narrative shifts to a recount of what happened in Spain from Catherine's point of view.

Robert has just left her and Nicholas and she is trying to make the best of it. She notices a young man at dinner staring at her. Once back at the hotel she puts Nicholas to bed and goes down to the hotel bar to read a book and relax. She sees the same young man from the restaurant looking at her and he takes a picture of her. Catherine receives a call from Robert at the hotel front desk. After taking the call she turns around and sees the young man sitting at the bar next to an empty stool and two drinks in front



of him. Catherine's mom interrupts her reminiscing, asking if she is having another headache.

Chapter 39 finds Nicholas not enjoying staying with his father. He finds spending time with his dad boring and watching football is the only enjoyable part of their days. He heads to bed and opens his laptop on his chest. A message from a new friend he has been corresponding with waits for him. Nicholas met the new friend online and they have a lot in common, including having both read *The Perfect Stranger*. Nicholas reveals salacious details about his life to the new friend, giving him advice and chronicling his sexual exploits. It is revealed the new friend he is corresponding with is "Jonathan."

Analysis

Catherine hitting Simon in the face with *The Perfect Stranger* symbolizes her full descent away from logic and reason. Stephen has used *The Perfect Stranger* as a weapon throughout the narrative. He was provoked and attacked using the most readily available tool: Nancy's manuscript. Catherine now uses *The Perfect Stranger* as a weapon, albeit in a much more literal way. Catherine has symbolically stooped to Stephen's level, using this book in an erratic and violent way after being provoked by another. She has abandoned the logic that has previously driven her and is acting off of instinct, just like Stephen.

The concept of strangers thematically reappears in Chapter 38 in Kim's emotional reaction to receiving the books from Stephen. It was previously established Kim looks up to Catherine as a role model, personally and professionally. Just as so many other characters in this book, Kim finds out someone she feels close to is actually more of a stranger than she would have ever thought. This is important because it highlights how much Catherine has kept secret about herself. Ever since Jonathan's death she has been living a lie. By not coping with this incident she has suppressed the person she is supposed to be, becoming a stranger to those who love her. Because Stephen is forcing Catherine to reckon with the event her personality is changing in a violent way.

The account of Spain from Catherine's perspective is meant to inform the reader of what actually happened while also firmly establishing Stephen (and by extension Nancy/*The Perfect Stranger*) as an unreliable narrator. The reader now has the fictional version and the actual version. It was already hinted at that the version of events in *The Perfect Stranger* were reconstructed based on Nancy's assumptions, but now the reader knows just how inaccurate it is. *The Perfect Stranger* frames Catherine as the aggressor but now the reader knows Jonathan was the one who initiated contact. The more the reader finds out about the true nature of the events 20 years ago the more he or she can exonerate Catherine and vilify Stephen (and Jonathan and Nancy).

Discussion Question 1

How much of Stephen's account of his email correspondence with Robert do you believe?



Discussion Question 2

How does Stephen know how to manipulate Nicholas so well?

Discussion Question 3

What are some similarities between Catherine and Stephen in terms of their respective family lives?

Vocabulary

entreaties, tedious, imbues, carafe, sarcophagus



Chapters 40-42

Summary

In Chapter 40 Stephen updates the reader on where he is with his plan. He has been pretending to be Jonathan online, luring Nicholas into some sort of trap. He sends Nicholas a picture of his mother from Spain, claiming he found it in an old box and it had Catherine's name on the back of it. This, Stephen told Nicholas, is the reason he originally contacted him. The picture is of Catherine sitting on the beach, but Stephen plans to send Nicholas the sexual photos of Catherine at a later time. Stephen plans to push Nicholas "...to the brink. All I need to do is feed his darkness and lead him to a point of no return then leave him there, teetering on the edge" (227).

Chapter 41 is an entry from Nancy's journal, dated October 1998. Nancy is still depressed about Jonathan's death and bewildered by Catherine's seeming lack of empathy. Nancy questions why Catherine did not run out after her son that day at the ocean. When Nancy met with Catherine she claimed her and Jonathan had never met before that day but Nancy had already found the pictures on Jonathan's camera, so she knew Catherine lied. Nancy mentions she is angry she was not with her son when he died and feels Catherine should know that pain. "Only if that happens to you can you really understand what it is like" (230). Nancy also reveals Catherine attended Jonathan's funeral but did not bring flowers or come close to his tombstone.

Chapter 42 continues the recounting of the incident in Spain in 1993 from Catherine's perspective. Catherine woke up and saw Nicholas floating out to sea on the inflatable dinghy. Catherine yelled, "Help me!" and for years she has felt guilt about not yelling "Help my son!" She still feels immense guilt that she did not risk her own life to save her son. When Jonathan ran out to save Nicholas, Catherine yelled, "No!" But she does not elaborate on why she yelled that. Once Nicholas was safely back to shore she took him to the hotel. Catherine is still amazing Nicholas never remembered any part of the incident. As she walked back off the beach she took one last look at Jonathan and felt nothing.

Analysis

Stephen's assumption of Jonathan's identity to lure Nicholas into some sort of trap highlights a theme of loss of identity present throughout the text. Stephen has completely lost himself. He is acting on "Nancy's" instructions and now embodying "Jonathan" to continue the plan. Stephen no longer has a place in the story; rather, it is him acting on the behalf of his loved ones. Stephen no longer feels like an assassin, but as a weapon to carry out the attack. Catherine has also lost her identity. The life she built for herself has all but disappeared. She no longer is herself in the way she and her family have known her over the past 20 years. She is someone new and she must cope with that.



Since Stephen's actions embody what he thinks Nancy wants, her journal entry provides clues to the reader as to what Stephen may do next. Nancy was very troubled at the lack of empathy Catherine showed towards her. If she wanted Catherine to feel the pain she felt then most likely Stephen wants to harm Nicholas in some way. These clues are left by the author to allow the reader to be an active participant in the narrative. Rather than passively waiting to find out what happens next, the reader is able to search the text for clues and hints about upcoming events.

Discussion Question 1

What are the similarities and differences between Catherine's memory from the drowning and the details given in *The Perfect Stranger*?

Discussion Question 2

Predict what Stephen plans to do with Nicholas.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Nancy's influence on the plot. Is Stephen truly carrying out her wishes or is he using her as an excuse?

Vocabulary

nonchalance, inane, promenade



Chapters 43-45

Summary

Stephen continues with his plan to entrap Nicholas in Chapter 43. While he sits at his computer, he listens to a news story on the television about internet predators luring young children. Stephen knows if Jonathan were a young boy right now he would not have fallen prey to predators such as this, knowing he could have talked to Nancy about anything. When Jonathan was young it was Nancy who taught him about sex, not Stephen. Jonathan and Nancy had a very close connection all the way until his death. Stephen sends Nicholas the rest of the pictures of his mother, including the sexual ones. He also sends the words, "Jonathan Brigstocke. 6 June 1974-15 August 1993. A perfect stranger who died saving your life" (241). Finally, he sends an excerpt from Nancy's journal that questions whether or not Catherine actually loved her son, as she did not seem to want to save him.

Chapter 44 picks up with Nicholas after he receives Stephen's messages from Chapter 43. He stumbles out of his parents' house in a daze and makes his way to a train station. The description of his thoughts are short sentences and somewhat manic: "He starts to walk but trips. Is pushed? No, trips. Better sit down. Sit it out" (243). Nicholas takes a train to an unknown station and walks up to a house which has boarded windows. He gets to the front door and throws up. He stumbles inside the house and curls up on the ground. He hears murmurs of people speaking but cannot hear what they are saying. A pretty girl asks him if he is okay and he grabs her arm but she pulls away. Nicholas stumbles into the main room and sits on the sofa. "He never wants to leave this place. This is where he can be his best self" (245).

Chapter 45 opens with Catherine continuing to recap the events from Spain. The day after Jonathan drowned saving her son Catherine traveled back to London. She and Robert shared a drink upon her arrival and they made love. Catherine states she concealed some bruising on her neck and thigh for weeks after her arrival home until they faded. Had Jonathan not died she would have shared her secret but due to his death she felt she had to keep it to herself.

Catherine wakes up to her phone buzzing and it is Nicholas. She does not answer the phone in time and Nicholas leaves a voicemail. On the recording Nicholas does not speak and is sobbing. She tries to call back to no success. Catherine rushes outside and calls a taxi and is dropped off at her house. She lets herself in.

Analysis

Throughout the book, the author uses sentence patterns to convey the mental state of the characters. Previously, Stephen's deteriorating mental state was shown through the use of short and terse sentences. This was early in the book and as the narrative



progressed his words have become more fluid, showing that while he is still mentally unstable his perceived presence of Nancy has calmed him down and make him (at least outwardly) seem more rational. Chapter 44 contains sentences similar to that of Stephen early in the book. Nicholas is terrified after Stephen (pretending to be Jonathan) sends him the lewd photos of his mother and told him she almost let him drown. "He's still holding the book. Flicks to the end. Wants to read his mother's death. He laughs. Pure fucking fantasy" (243). These short, disjointed sentences show the reader Nicholas is in a state of extreme duress. He is not able to keep up with his own thoughts resulting in a disconnected flurry of emotions.

The symbolism of the tube reoccurs in Chapter 44, with Nicholas using it to retreat to an unnamed place. The tube is representative of Catherine's greatest fears. The end of *The Perfect Stranger* has Catherine being pushed into a train and the underground atmosphere makes her feel isolated from the outside world, completely and utterly alone. Nicholas has now been brought into her fear. He enters the train station after receiving the rest of the pictures from Stephen and he is mentally and physically broken, barely able to walk or hold a cohesive train of thought. Nicholas entering the train station shows the reader he has completed his forced descent into despair, which has been Catherine's fear all along; her family being impacted by her choices.

Catherine has retold the incident in Spain over the course of a few chapters leaving out the sexual encounter between her and Jonathan, signaling to the reader that this part of the story is of the utmost importance. The version of events in *The Perfect Stranger* largely lines up with Catherine's account, albeit with more vivid language. The large portion of the sexual encounter being missing from Catherine's telling of the story highlights its importance and its likely eventual impact on the plot. Other clues, such as Catherine's bruises and establishing Jonathan as the aggressor, allow the reader to predict the truth behind what happened.

Discussion Question 1

Where do you think Nicholas runs off to?

Discussion Question 2

Why might Catherine have had bruises to conceal for weeks upon her return from Spain?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the sexual encounter is left out of Catherine's retelling of the incident in Spain?

Vocabulary

ooze, squabble, foetus, murmur, telltale, gristle



Chapters 46-48

Summary

In Chapter 46 Stephen ponders some of the differences between details in *The Perfect Stranger* and what had actually occurred. For example, in *The Perfect Stranger* Jonathan's girlfriend, Sarah, left their trip because her father had fallen ill. In reality Jonathan and Sarah had a fight and she left the trip upset. After Jonathan died, Nancy called Sarah to tell her what happened, reaching Sarah's mother who promised to relay the message to Sarah. They never heard from Sarah again. Stephen also remember a call from Sarah's mother after Sarah returned from the trip but before Jonathan died. Stephen only heard Nancy's end of the conversation. Sarah's mother was very upset but Nancy calmly told her they should be able to sort out their own problems.

In Chapter 47 Catherine frantically tries to wake up Robert. He is in a dazed state having taken sleeping pills before he went to bed. Catherine tells him that Robert is in some sort of trouble, while Robert is sure he is fine. Once Robert hears the voicemail of Nicholas crying he becomes angry, wishing he had been the one to tell Nicholas about the nature of *The Perfect Stranger*, berating Catherine for this all being her fault. Catherine does not defend herself but is angry Robert is not more focused on their son in this moment. Catherine finds a letter in the spare bedroom revealing that Nicholas had been fired from his job two weeks ago, something Robert was unaware of. After calling hospitals and the police with no success Catherine receives a call from an unknown number. She answers it.

Chapter 48 finds Jonathan shutting down Jonathan's fake Facebook page. "It's time now to begin tidying up, to wipe our fingerprints away" (259). Stephen claims Nancy wants him to leave it up but he feels it best to shut it down. Stephen goes outside and lights a bonfire, a tradition he and Jonathan used to partake in when he was young. It was when Stephen felt closest to Jonathan. After sitting outside for a bit, Stephen walks inside and sees Nancy in front of the computer. He thinks it's is because the bonfire conjured up happy memories, but it is because there is a message from Robert on Nicholas's Facebook page.

Analysis

Chapter 47 contains a pivotal moment for Robert's characterization, when is shifts out of a state of anger and into a state of fear. Up until this point Robert has been angry at Catherine about the whole situation. Anger is the only emotion he has felt as he thinks Catherine is an awful person who can not be trusted, to the point of emailing Stephen to apologize and relate his sentiment. This comes to a head in Chapter 47 when Robert berates Catherine. Upon learning Nicholas lost his job, Robert changes his sentiment. He releases himself from from the delusion that this is all about Catherine and her misdeeds and realizes he and his family are in serious danger. This character shifts sets



up the action for the rest of the story; Catherine and Robert are on the same side with the goal of saving their son.

The severity of Stephen's mental illness is once again heightened for the reader in him saying he physically sees Nancy sitting in front of him, forcing the reader to somewhat exonerate Stephen of his wrongdoing, as he is clearly very sick. Stephen's actions are sinister, there is no denying that; Stephen genuinely wants to hurt Catherine and her family, but this is motivated by a mental condition out of his control. The author wants the reader to be clear that Stephen is not well. In him saying he sees his dead wife sitting in front of him, the author almost makes Stephen sympathetic. He is living in such a state of delusion that the level of help he needs almost trumps the damage he is doing to Catherine and her family.

Discussion Question 1

Is there anything Catherine can do to win back Robert's respect? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolic use of Nancy as a figment of Stephen's mind.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Catherine's anger towards Robert and vice versa. Are they justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

strop, splutters, taper



Chapter 49-51

Summary

Chapter 49 picks up two days after Nicholas went missing. He was found on the street having suffered a stroke from drug use and is currently in the ICU at the hospital. It is the middle of the night and Catherine stares at her son while he is in a coma. Her and Robert are both concerned about their son but are currently not on speaking terms. Catherine and Robert take turns staying with Nicholas, but never at the same time. Catherine steps outside to have a snack and smoke a cigarette. When she returns she sees Stephen standing over Nicholas. A nurse tells Catherine her father is here. Catherine screams and tries to grab Stephen. Security is called to calm Catherine down and Stephen escapes. When Robert arrives several hours later he tells Catherine he invited Stephen to visit, saying they owe it to him to meet Nicholas as Jonathan died saving him. Catherine is sure Stephen is trying to kill Nicholas but Robert thinks Catherine is delusional and asks her to leave.

In Chapter 50 Stephen is at home after the incident at the hospital. He laments his visit to Nicholas had not gone entirely according to plan. He assumed no one would be with Nicholas in the middle of the night, or at the very most Robert would have been there. He was surprised to see Catherine, as Stephen assumes she does not love her son. Stephen planned to pull Nicholas off of life support while no one was looking but did not get the chance. Stephen receives a call from Robert apologizing for his wife's behavior. After a brief conversation they hang up and Stephen goes to sleep, taking some pills to help him settle in. Several hours later he wakes up to the sounds of his front door opening. He slowly walks downstairs and finds Catherine in his house. She tells him to sit down and begins to spit on him repeatedly. "I am an insect again, trapped by the spittle of my predator who is planning to eat me alive. I am being eaten alive" (276).

Chapter 51 tells the encounter between Stephen and Catherine from Catherine's perspective. She creeps through Stephen's house taking note of how disgusting everything is. Stephen's laptop wakes up, showing a Facebook message from Robert updating Stephen on Nicholas's condition. When Stephen comes downstairs she tells him to sit down, spits on him, and begins to cry. She then tells Stephen the truth of what happened in Spain.

After Jonathan had propositioned Catherine at the bar she declined and quickly went back to her room. She felt embarrassed and quickly went to sleep. The next day Nicholas and Catherine spent their time going shopping, playing at a fair, and laying on the beach. Throughout the day she saw Jonathan multiple times taking pictures of them. That night she put Nicholas to sleep and went down to the bar to get a glass of wine to bring up to her room. While she sat on the balcony she hears a noise outside her door and realized she left the keys in the keyhole. Jonathan entered the room and threatened Catherine with a knife. He forced her to strip naked and masterbate. Nicholas woke up and called for his mother from the other room. Jonathan allowed her to go calm him



down. When she returned Jonathan had her put on the lingerie Robert had bought for her. Jonathan proceeded to rape Catherine multiple times over the course of three and a half hours. Catherine does not tell Stephen all of the details of the assaults, but enough to accurately portray how vicious Jonathan was.

Analysis

Voyeurism reappears thematically in Chapter 51, establishing a connection in the behaviors of Jonathan and Stephen. The true version of what happened in Spain is finally revealed and Catherine seems to have been a victim of the voyeuristic game of a maniac just as she is today. Jonathan watched and stalked Catherine from a distance just as Stephen does today. This connection affirms how much Catherine is reliving a nightmare and why she kept quiet about the true nature of her relationship with Jonathan. Catherine was completely helpless to Jonathan's gaze. She did not even register the danger of being watched until it was too late. When she realizes Stephen has been watching her she does not know how to act because her previous experience with Jonathan has shown her that if someone is watching her and wants to hurt her there is very little she can do about it.

The description of the Catherine's rape uses similarly salacious language as the version in *The Perfect Stranger*, highlighting to the reader how disturbing it must have been for Catherine to read an account of her rape presented as a consensual experience. This firmly establishes Catherine as the victim of this story. Up until this point the reader has assumed Catherine and Jonathan's encounter was consensual, having never been given any reason not to. Now that the truth is revealed, knowing Catherine is dealing with trauma and possibly post-traumatic stress disorder, the version of events shown in *The Perfect Stranger* is upsetting and triggering. *The Perfect Stranger* presents a graphically sexual, but pleasurable, scene, while reality was graphic, violent, and quite unwanted on Catherine's part. Catherine instantly becomes the victim and Stephen the villain.

The author makes a larger social statement about advocacy for victims of sexual assault in revealing Catherine was raped. Catherine has been afraid to come forward about her assault. She has kept it to herself until it boiled over and endangers her even further. While in reality it may not be as extreme as the father of one's attacker seeking revenge, there is societal commentary present of women not reporting sexual violence that will end up causing further psychological damage. No one believes Catherine that Stephen is trying to hurt her family. Being told she is wrong is akin to a sexual assault victim being told she was not actually assaulted. While not the main message of the book, it is certainly an intentional commentary.

Discussion Question 1

What clues were previously given to the reader hinting that Stephen raped Catherine?



Discussion Question 2

What reasons do you think Catherine has for not telling Robert the truth of what happened in Spain?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the current state of Catherine and Robert's relationship. How did it get to this point?

Vocabulary

stubs, sustenance, nuisance, twinge, helter-skelter, minutiae



Chapters 52-54

Summary

Chapter 52 shows Stephen reacting to hearing his son is a rapist. After Catherine leaves, Stephen's first reaction is to assume she is lying, but he knows she is not. He cannot stay in the house, feeling too disturbed, so he grabs his coat and hops on a bus. He takes the bus to the cemetery where Nancy and Jonathan are buried. He sits and watches a dog walker pass by. The dog defecates and the owner picks up after the dog and throws the bag away. Stephen grabs the bag out of the trashes, opens it up and flings it at Jonathan's tombstone. He begins to yell at Jonathan, angry over his actions. He feels a hand on his shoulder, the dog walker attempts to comfort him. After the dog walker leaves Stephen heads back home and calls Catherine. He tells her that he showed Nicholas the pictures and convinced him that she does not value his life. He also asks if Catherine has told her husband about the rape. She tells him to tell Robert himself.

At the start of Chapter 53 Catherine receives word Nicholas has opened his eyes. Though he is not fully conscious and his recovery will take a long time, the doctors are confident he may be able to make a full recovery. When Catherine arrives at the hospital she learns Robert had left five minutes prior. Catherine wants to leave it to Stephen to tell Robert about the rape. "She is punishing him by delaying the revelation, but it was Robert who was so quick to allow a wall to come between them, Robert who slammed the door shut" (303). Catherine sits with Nicholas and clips his fingernails while she waits for Robert to come back.

In Chapter 54 Robert is having tea with Stephen. Stephen tells Robert what Catherine told him. Stephen fully believes Catherine's words. Catherine told Stephen that Jonathan had forced her to cut a cross into his arm and lick the blood, explaining the mark on Jonathan's arm Stephen saw when identifying his body. Robert reacts with bewilderment which turns to anger. He grabs Stephen by the coat and yells at him, unleashing his frustrations feeling betrayed for defending him to Catherine. After Robert storms off Stephen is unsure what to do. He decides to go to the ICU and watches Catherine sleeping next to Nicholas.

Analysis

Nicholas partially waking up from his coma, but is not fully becoming lucid, is symbolic of Catherine's gradual ascension out of the terror Stephen has put her through. Catherine receives word Nicholas's eyes have opened just after she tells Stephen the truth of what his son did. Nicholas is not fully recovered but makes a huge step forward and receives a good prognosis. This mirrors Catherine's situation at the same moment: by telling Stephen the truth of what Jonathan did she has taken a step towards relief, her eyes have metaphorically opened. Everything is not fixed and she still has many



challenges ahead of her, but just as Nicholas will hopefully make a full recovery, for the first time over the course of the narrative Catherine sees hope.

The dog walker consoling Stephen represents Stephen's re-entrance into the real world, finally taking him away from the destructive rampage against Catherine and her family. Stephen has not had meaningful human interaction with anyone outside of those involved with his plot against the Ravenscroft family (he has spoken with Geoff, but the help he received was all in relation to his plan). The dog walker's empathy towards Stephen re-grounds him in reality. Stephen has learned of the type of person his son really was and feels helpless, but the dog walker's kind words made Stephen realize his revenge plot is not the way to preserve his son's memory. Torturing the Ravenscrofts' will not bring Jonathan back. All he can do is grieve and move on.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Stephen's reaction to learning about Jonathan.

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Stephen's reaction to learning the truth to Robert's reaction.

Discussion Question 3

Describe Catherine's state of mind. What do you think she plans to do next?

Vocabulary

flail, defecate, prostrate, prurience



Chapters 55-57

Summary

Chapter 55 finds Catherine sitting with Nicholas in the ICU. Catherine awakes from a nap to find Nicholas looking at her, not just opening his eyes but also focusing. The doctors say it is an excellent sign and that he should be able to leave the ICU soon. Catherine and Robert are both at the hospital, agreeing to both be with Nicholas as much as possible. Before going to bed one night Robert attempts to make an apology to Catherine for everything that has happened and asks why she never told him about the rape, but Catherine feigns sleep. "All she wants is to be able to sleep at last, with the knowledge that finally the truth has broken free" (311).

Nicholas continues to make progress and Catherine contemplates how she is going to tell Nicholas the truth about everything once he wakes up. Catherine has a growing resentment for Robert for being so relieved Catherine did not have an affair and diminishing the fact that she was raped. The narrative jumps forward an undisclosed amount of time. Nicholas has been home from the hospital for two weeks. Catherine tells Nicholas the truth about what happened in Spain. Nicholas asks questions but is unsure how to respond and Catherine reassures him there is nothing he needs to do, she just wanted him to know the truth. Catherine ruminates on how she could have acted differently to avoid this entire crisis. She did not go to the police after the rape for fear no one would believe her. She was not watching Nicholas closely on the beach that day because she was so distraught, but wishes she had been more attentive. Catherine upsets herself and decides she cannot dwell on the past and will focus on the present.

Chapter 56 takes place in Autumn 2013. Stephen still copes with learning the truth about his son. He wonders if he had ever raped before. Stephen thinks about Sarah leaving Jonathan on the trip and wondered if it was due to some sort of violent outburst, but because Nancy never shared the truth about what happened between Jonathan and Sarah he will never know. Stephen admits the former student he stalked at University was because he was seeking to replace Jonathan. Nancy never knew about Stephen's obsession with the student.

Stephen has begun gardening to calm himself. He regularly has bonfires to burn the trimmings he pulls. He also burns the pictures and the rest of Jonathan's belongings. Stephen gets rid of his laptop and tells Geoff he is no longer working on another book. Finally, Stephen gives Nancy's hat and cardigan to the charity shop he had previously visited. He receives a voicemail confirming an appointment for the following week, prompting him to pull out a piece of paper and begin writing.

In Chapter 57 Catherine is spending time with her mother. Nicholas comes over for a visit and they all watch television together. Catherine wonders how things would be different if she and Robert had more children. She reveals she found out she was pregnant about a month after returning from Spain. She considered keeping the baby as



there was a chance it was Robert's, but she could not be sure. The weekend she spent away with friends was actually her going to get an abortion. Robert texts Catherine that he will be there soon to pick everyone up for dinner. Nicholas remembers a letter came for Catherine at the house which he had to sign for. Catherine reads the letter twice, folds it up and puts it away.

The narrative jumps to Winter 2013. Robert and Catherine are entering Stephen's house. Stephen died in an apparent accident while having a bonfire, but it remains specious whether or not it was a suicide. Stephen left Catherine his home and Jonathan's apartment in his will. The letter Stephen wrote to Catherine says he expects her to sell it and hopes the money can help her live an easier life. Robert decides to wait in the car while Catherine looks around. Catherine knows Robert thinks she is back to normal, but Catherine knows she is a different person than she was before. Catherine feels betrayed that Robert seems relieved by the fact she was raped rather than her having an affair. "When she is at her most brutal, she thinks that, given the choice, he would rather she had suffered than to have enjoyed a burst of illicit pleasure" (332). In the letter Stephen sent there was also a film negative. Catherine holds it up to the light and sees there was a moment during the rape where Nicholas had come out of his room and watched. Catherine immediately shows this to Nicholas who says he does not remember anything. Catherine begins to cry and they embrace. Catherine feels closer to her son than ever.

Analysis

Chapter 55's voice is third person omniscient towards both Robert and Catherine for the first time in the book, representing them occupying the same emotional space after the truth finally comes out. Chapter 57 then moves back to focusing on just Catherine, representing the distance still between them. The third person omniscient voice is nothing new (every chapter other than the one's told from Stephen's point of view have this voice) but previously each chapter only focused on the inner thoughts and feelings of a single character. Chapter 55 is the only chapter to be omniscient towards more than one character. Previously Catherine and Robert have been occupying distant spaces in the narrative. They were distant from each other with all the of the secrets and aggressions. Now that everything is out in the open they are able to occupy the same emotional space, focused on their son's recovery. The author wants to show that everything being out in the open has healed their relationship to a certain extent. However, in Chapter 57 the narrative voice returns to focus on solely Catherine. The secret of her having an abortion after being raped is still unshared with Robert. Even though most of the events in Spain are now out in the open, this secret reestablishes the distance between Catherine and Robert.

Catherine taking care of Nicholas in the hospital and at home during his recovery symbolizes a new start in their mother-son relationship. Ever since the incident in Spain, Catherine and Nicholas have had an intrinsic distance between them; until Catherine shared with her son what happened to him they could never be close. Now that she has the opportunity to tell him everything, their relationship can start anew. She grooms and



tends to all of Nicholas's needs as if she were a mother tending to her baby. Catherine gets a second chance at being a mother and being close to her son by literally and figuratively helping him heal his wounds.

Stephen's journey ends with acceptance of the falsity of his delusions, implying he feels death is his only option. While it is not explicitly stated in the text that Stephen commits suicide it is implied in a few ways, including changing his will just before his death and dying making a fire, something he has done countless times before. A more subtle suggestion of his suicide is his coming to terms with his delusions. His image of Jonathan is shattered and Nancy's intentions for her manuscript are not longer clear to him. He has been basing his entire existence on those two things. Now that this has all crumbles he feels he has nothing left to live for leading to him to suicide.

Discussion Question 1

Why might the author choose to reveal Catherine's abortion in the last chapter?

Discussion Question 2

Is Catherine justified in her anger towards Robert? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What is the symbolic value of Catherine's mother's worsening dementia?

Vocabulary

pylons, tinge, malevolence, inedible, pallor, stoke, relic, tutted, pulpy



Characters

Catherine Ravenscroft

Catherine is the protagonist of the book. She is an award-winning documentary film maker with a husband and son. She is also the first person to find and read *The Perfect Stranger* and victim to Stephen's plot.

Catherine is driven professionally and very successful. While her professional life is successful, her personal life is not quite as happy. Her relationship with her son has always been strained and her marriage to Robert has been growing increasingly distance. These personal problems are due to an incident in Spain 20 years ago, later revealed to be Catherine being raped by a stranger who then dies saving Nicholas from drowning the following day. Catherine is very smart but paralyzed by fear for much of the book.

Robert Ravenscroft

Robert is Catherine's husband. He is a lawyer who previously had aspirations of becoming a member of parliament, a dream which never panned out but he still harbors. Robert has a much easier relationship with Nicholas than Catherine does. Robert reacts with disgust and rage when he learns Catherine slept with someone else, not knowing the sex was not consensual. Robert takes his marriage for granted and does not truly know how to show Catherine love.

Nicholas Ravenscroft

Nicholas is the son of Robert and Catherine. He is 25 years old and very unmotivated. He did not attend university, much to his parents' chagrin. He currently works as a salesman at a department store. He has a history of drug use and just moved out on his own for the first time. He is manipulative of his parents, often conning them into giving him money. Nicholas has an online friend in Jonathan, who he later learns is Stephen using Jonathan as a proxy.

Stephen Brigstocke

Stephen is a retired school teacher, father to Jonathan, and widower to Nancy. He was forced to retire from teaching after he wrote cruel comments on a young student's paper. He also once had an incident where he stalked a former student at his university. Stephen believes Jonathan's relationship with Catherine was consensual and blames her for his death. Upon finding a manuscript his late wife wrote about his son's death, Stephen decides to use it to terrorize Catherine and her family. Stephen has a deteriorating mental state, believing his dead wife can still speak to him.



Nancy Brigstocke

The late wife of Stephen and mother to Jonathan, Nancy wrote *The Perfect Stranger* manuscript which Stephen uses to victimize the Ravenscroft family. She died of cancer roughly 15 years before the start of the narrative. Her presence is felt through her journal entries, her words in *The Perfect Stranger*, and Stephen believing he can hear her voice. She was much closer to Jonathan than Stephen was and may have known about his violent tendencies but never shared this information with Stephen.

Johnathan Brigstocke

Jonathan is the late son of Nancy and Stephen. He died at age 19 trying to save a young Nicholas Ravenscroft from drowning in Spain. The night before the rescue he brutally raped Catherine. It is never explicitly stated why he raped Catherine, but it is inferred he may have been violent with his girlfriend at the time.

Catherine's mother

Catherine's mother is never named and lives close to Catherine and Robert. She lost her husband more than 10 years ago. She suffers from early symptoms of dementia.

Geoff

Geoff is Stephen's friend who owns a print shop. He helps Stephen self-publish *The Perfect Stranger* and distribute in local bookstores. Geoff's son helps Stephen set up a fake Facebook account for Jonathan.

Sarah

Sarah was Jonathan's girlfriend when he took a trip through Europe. Sarah originally went on the trip with Jonathan but left part way through, after which Jonathan rapes Catherine. It is never revealed why Sarah left the trip but it is inferred Jonathan was violent in some way towards her.

Kim

Kim is Catherine's assistant. She looks up to Catherine personally and professionally. It is very difficult for Kim when Catherine's life becomes so chaotic, as it impacts Kim's life as well.

Simon

Simon is Catherine's co-worker. They have a professional rivalry and do not get along very well. Simon is who confronts Catherine after copies of *The Perfect Stranger* are distributed at work, leading Catherine to attack him with a copy of the book.



Symbols and Symbolism

A Perfect Stranger

This book, which is used to torment Catherine and her family, is a physical representation of the secret Catherine has been keeping all these years. Her secret has shaped and defined her relationship to her family and now she must confront this secret in concrete form.

Nancy's legacy

Though Nancy died prior to the start of the narrative, she is used symbolically as the prime motivation for Stephen's actions. Stephen justifies what he is doing as carrying on Nancy's legacy. He molds her memory to his liking in order to warrant revenge against the Ravenscrofts. As Stephen descends into mental illness his reliance on the idea of Nancy becomes stronger, and when he learns the truth behind Jonathan's actions his delusions of Nancy guiding him relent.

Stephen's laptop

Stephen's laptop represents his disconnect from reality and descent into his mental illness, focused on torturing Catherine and her family.

Prior to the laptop Stephen was filling his time with writing, attempting to write a non-fiction book. With the laptop he has abandoned his book idea and become dependent on the internet for food, news, supplies, and anything else he might need. At the end of the novel he gets rid of the laptop, representing his acceptance of his laptop's role in his misdeeds.

The Tube

The London train system (also called The Tube) symbolizes the most terrifying parts of Catherine's situations. Catherine's terror in connection to the tube obviously comes from the ending of *The Perfect Stranger*, where the character representing her is killed by being pushed in front of the train. But apart from it being where the literary version of herself meets her demise, the juxtaposition of how good Catherine feels after leaving the tube shows that being around the train has become the fuel of her crisis. The language used to describe being at the train station could also be seen as a metaphor for how isolated and trapped she feels: "Buried beneath the earth, deep underground, at least thirty feet between her and natural light" (69).



Jonathan's Camera

Jonathan's camera symbolizes an interpretable lens into the past. The Perfect Stranger portrays Nancy's impression of what happened on the trip. She was not there, but details she includes were inferred from the contents of Jonathan's camera. The lengthy description of Charlotte (and by extension Catherine) are completely gleaned from the pictures Jonathan took of her.

Jonathan's condoms and pornography

Jonathan's condoms and extensive pornography collection symbolizes his true nature, and Stephen's hiding of those things before his wife could find them contributes to Nancy's pristine - and inaccurate - view of her son and the life he led.

Nancy felt Jonathan was a victim. The prose in The Perfect Stranger vilifies Catherine as a predator and characterizes Jonathan as her helpless prey. In keeping the condoms and pornography from Nancy, Stephen is unknowingly contributing to this fantasy. Nancy has built an image of Jonathan and refuses to let it go.

Nancy's cardigan and hat

Nancy's hat and cardigan are symbolic of Stephen's burgeoning borderline insanity, as they are what he believes connects him with his wife most. The author includes these articles of clothing to emphasize how unhealthy Stephen's perceived connection with Nancy is. He does not feel Nancy is with him in a spiritual sense, he is literally wearing her clothes and believes she is there with him collaborating and scheming.

Stephen's mail slot

Catherine reaching and yelling through Stephen's mail slot is representative of the separate realities she and Stephen are existing in. Catherine is still firmly planted in the real world. She begins to deal with her situation, acknowledging that if she does not she may lose her family forever. Stephen exists in his own fantasy world, where Nancy is with him and punishing Catherine is of the utmost importance. Catherine tries to break through into Stephen's reality but is only able to reach an arm through and project her voice over, but unable to fully reach him. This barrier must be broken somehow before Stephen does something truly destructive.

Catherine attacking Simon

Catherine hitting Simon in the face with The Perfect Stranger symbolizes her full descent away from logic and reason. By using The Perfect Stranger as a physical



weapon, Catherine has stooped to Stephen's level, as he has been using the book as a tool to create pain as well.

Nicholas coming out of his coma

Nicholas partially waking up from his coma, but not fully becoming lucid, mirrors Catherine's gradual ascension out of the terror Stephen has put her through. As soon as Catherine tells Stephen the truth of what his son did, Nicholas opens his eyes from the coma. Just as Nicholas is not fully recovered but is headed in the right direction, Catherine's honesty with Stephen put her on the path of recovering her mental, physical, and emotional health.



Settings

Catherine and Robert's house

Located in central London, Catherine and Robert live in a maisonette with a master suite and a spare bedroom. This is where Catherine first finds *The Perfect Stranger*.

Stephen's house

Having not received any maintenance for several years, Stephen's house is in a decrepit state. Stephen's neighbors frequently complain about the look and smell of the house. This is where Stephen carries out his revenge plot against Catherine and her family. Stephen rarely leaves his house and ends up leaving it to Catherine in his will after he dies.

Seville, Spain

Seville is where Jonathan raped Catherine and died saving Nicholas from drowning in 1993. All of the events in Spain are presented as flashbacks or recounting of past events by the characters. It is also the setting of *The Perfect Stranger*.

Jonathan's apartment

Jonathan's apartment was purchased by Nancy and Stephen just before he died. It remained vacant until Nancy decided to move there when she separated from Stephen. She lived there until she was diagnosed with cancer. It is also where Stephen finds the manuscript for *The Perfect Stranger*.

The London tube

The tube is used by many characters throughout the book to travel from one place to another. It is representative of Catherine's fear and isolation.

The hospital

Nicholas recovers at the hospital after suffering a stroke from a drug overdose. Stephen also visits Nicholas here with the intention of killing him, but Catherine interrupts.



Catherine's mother's house

Catherin's mother's house is old with outdated furniture and appliances. Due to her deteriorating mental health, Catherine's mother is unable to keep her home properly clean. Catherine stays with her mother after Robert kicks her out of the house.



Themes and Motifs

Coping with Loneliness

Each of the main characters of the book copes with loneliness one way or another, thematically uniting them and showing the reader situational loneliness is handled differently by different people but in the end all of their tactics are unsuccessful because they do not trust others enough to seek help.

Catherine isolates herself even further after receiving *The Perfect Stranger*. Stephen channels the loneliness from losing his family by constructing a plot to honor them by taking revenge on Catherine. Robert reacts to the loneliness felt from learning his wife slept with someone else by completely shutting her out and trying to get their son to side with them. Nicholas deals with his loneliness from being told his mother does not love him by abusing drugs and alcohol.

Because each character copes with their loneliness individually without the support of others, each ends up only marginally better off than they were before (if at all). Catherine and Robert's marriage is still in shambles, with the distance between them growing. Nicholas is recovering from overdosing on drugs. Stephen is dead, potentially from suicide. The author is thematically showing loneliness cannot be dealt with individually and lack of trust of others is what holds the characters back.

Heightened emotions leading to destructive behavior

A thematic connection between Catherine and Stephen is their tendency to let heightened emotional states spark destructive behavior, creating a parallel struggle and making them both equally desperate.

Catherine at one point has a tense discussion with Nicholas causing her to drink and smoke heavily, then inspiring her read the rest of *The Perfect Stranger*, something she was previously afraid to do. This act is out of character for Catherine as she has up until that point acted in a very feeble manner. The words used to describe her reading the book are vividly chaotic: "She is lost in it, sinking beneath its weight. Its injustice. Her eyes close, the words washing over her, to the sound of a roar from the TV" (45).

Stephen acts similarly desperately when he finds the lewd photos of Catherine. In order to make sense of it he breaks into Jonathan's old apartment and rummages around for clues, which eventually leads him to the manuscript of *The Perfect Stranger* and his entire destructive revenge plot.

Both Catherine and Stephen are driven largely out of desperation. Catherine to continue to conceal her lie and Stephen to properly memorialize his dead wife and son. This makes them seem not so different in the eyes of the reader, creating a link between the two of them.



Voyeurism

Voyeurism is present as a theme to establish Stephen's motivation and play on the reader's desire to learn more about withheld details of the story.

Stephen is destroying Catherine's life from afar, watching her meticulously and plotting his moves based on her and her family's routines and behaviors. He gets a voyeuristic thrill, which is egged on by his delusions of his dead wife.

The author has the reader share in this experience by having the chapters about Catherine and her family be told from a third person. Now the reader is the voyeur, just like Stephen. The reader learns things Stephen does not yet know, such as what actually happened between Catherine and Jonathan in Spain, creating dramatic irony.

The reader getting to experiences a plot in a similar manner to Stephen creates a more engaged reading experience.

Strangers

All the main characters feel like some of their loved one's are strangers upon learning new information at some point in the novel, linking them all thematically and heightening their feelings of isolation.

Catherine is shocked at Robert's harsh reaction to reading *The Perfect Stranger*. She cannot believe her husband kicks her out physically and shuts her out emotionally upon learning she supposedly had an affair 20 years prior without even asking her for her side of the story. She expected him to be hurt by the discovery, but his aggressiveness and insensitivity toward her take her completely aback. In return, Robert feels Catherine is a stranger in return. He is shocked and crushed to find out she supposedly had an affair 20 years ago and never told him.

Stephen's world is turned upside down when he learns his son was a rapist and his wife might have known. He had bought into his wife's vision of their son as an innocent victim to Catherine's treachery, so to find out the situation was actually the opposite - making Jonathan the predator - is sobering to Stephen and ultimately more than he can bear, as it is alluded to at the end of the book that he commits suicide.

The characters already feel assaulted based on what happens to them, but being unable to confide in their loved ones creates a greater sense of isolation and loneliness. By having this as a shared theme, the author is able to further the parallels between the characters, uniting their struggles as common plights. These common threads amongst the characters makes each character sympathetic in their own way making it difficult for the reader to pass extreme judgements on them.



Loss of identity

Related to the theme of people closest to them being strangers, the main characters in Disclaimer experience a loss of identity when they discover things and people are not what they have always been assumed to be.

Stephen's assumption of Jonathan's identity on Facebook to lure Nicholas into some sort of trap highlights a theme of loss of identity present throughout the text. Stephen has completely lost himself. He is acting on "Nancy's" instructions and now embodying "Jonathan" to continue the plan. Stephen no longer has a place in the story, rather it is him acting on the behalf of his loved ones. Stephen no longer feels like an assassin, rather as a weapon to carry out the attack.

Catherine has also lost her identity. The life she built for herself has all but disappeared. She no longer is herself in the way she and her family have known her for the past 20 years. She is someone new and she must cope with that.



Styles

Point of View

The novel shifts between third person, omniscient, and first person depending on the which character the chapter focuses on. All chapters about Stephen are told from a first person perspective allowing his unstable mental state to become increasingly evident to the reader. His own narration of his thoughts exudes his illness. Chapters focused on Catherine (and later Nicholas or Robert) are told from a third person omniscient perspective. This allows the reader to learn about these character's actions and motivations as an observer and thus making the narration more trustworthy (whereas Stephen's first person perspective is unreliable, as it is only his perspective of events).

The other impact of shifting voice within the narrative is framing certain characters as predators and others as prey. Stephen is the predator. He speaks for himself and is in control. The third person voice frames the Ravenscroft family as prey. The reader watches Catherine, Robert, and Nicholas from afar, just as Stephen does. Stephen torments the family with *The Perfect Stranger*. The family feels they are being watched by Stephen and reader shares in that watching.

Language and Meaning

The contemporary setting of the novel lends itself to a fairly standard vocabulary. Due to the story taking place mostly in London there is heavy use of English slang, but most references can be inferred contextually. The language used in *The Perfect Stranger* is much more flowery than the rest of the novel, as it represents Nancy's voice, rather than the author of *Disclaimer*. The passages from *The Perfect Stranger* are written in a style of a romance novel, salaciously describing sexual tensions and encounters between the characters. "He saw her light cotton dress trailing on the ground beneath her chair; her long, tanned leg a shimmer of gold, stretching out from the split, which ran from the top of her thigh...It was a robe which declared modesty but whispered at the heat beneath" (152). The difference in this use of language from the rest of the book highlights the possible fictional nature of *The Perfect Stranger*, which is confirmed later when the sexual encounter between Catherine and Jonathan is revealed to be a rape.

Structure

The majority of the plot takes place in the Summer of 2013. In the first act of the book, Stephen's chapters take place in summer of 2011. These flashbacks serve to set up Stephen's motivation for his revenge plot. Flashbacks are also utilized in several other ways, as well as shifting to alternative texts within the book, including *The Perfect Stranger* and Nancy's notebook. Excerpts from *The Perfect Stranger* offer one version of the events in Spain while flashbacks from Catherine provide the true nature of what happened. The true events are revealed deliberately slowly, allowing the reader to make

his or her own judgements about the veracity of *The Perfect Stranger*. Nancy's notebook is used similarly in allowing the reader to guess what Nancy's true intentions were in writing the manuscript for *The Perfect Stranger*.



Quotes

The whole experience left me with a sensation that I had reached down into a blocked drain and was groping around in the sewage trying to clear it. But there was nothing nothing solid to get hold of. All I felt was soft filth, and it got into my skin and under my fingernails, and its stink invaded my nostrils, clinging to the hairs, soaking up into the tiny blood vessels and polluting my entire system.

-- Stephen (chapter 6)

Importance: This is Stephen's reaction to finding lewd photographs Nancy had hidden before she died. It is originally implied that the photos are of Nancy but it is later revealed they are of Catherine, taken by Jonathan before raping her. These extreme emotions lead him to seek revenge on Catherine.

The smell came from the corner near Nancy's desk. I approached it, hand clamped over my nose and mouth, and there it was. A body. Rotting. Neck Broken, mouth open, teeth bared, giving off that inside-out stench of putrefaction. I should have known. Death. Always leaving its predatory stench, like a lusty tomcat long after it has left the scene. I found a plastic bad in the kitchen and, wearing it like a glove, picked up the whole thing, trap and mouse, and disposed of it in the kitchen bin.

-- Stephen (chapter 8)

Importance: These lines are said by Stephen as he is searching through Jonathan's old apartment. The extreme language reflects how heightened Stephen feels after discovering the photographs of Catherine.

It's so bloody complicated. She wants him to be a grown-up but she also wants him to remember how much he loved her once.

-- Narration about Catherine (chapter 9)

Importance: This quote encapsulates Catherine's relationship with Nicholas. She feels distant from him. She wants to allow him to be an adult but also wants to feel maternally fulfilled.

Such a pity she hadn't realised that doing nothing would be such a deadly omission.

-- Read by Catherine in "The Perfect Stranger" (chapter 10)

Importance: This is the final line in The Perfect Stranger. It is the most direct threat toward Catherine in the text. It is later revealed Stephen added this line in and was not part of Nancy's original manuscript.

We're not ready yet, Nancy and I. I've brought Nancy with me.

-- Stephen (chapter 16)

Importance: This is the first sign of Stephen's mental illness. This is the first time he refers to Nancy as actively helping him even though she is dead.



The front of number 54 has been partially torn out and replaced with glass, oversized slabs of glass, as if the building's mouth has been forced open and these glinting tombstones shoved in to prevent it from ever closing again. A building permanently trying not to gag. It is a humiliating expression for this once noble facade.

-- Stephen (chapter 20)

Importance: This is Stephen's description of Robert's office. It represents what Stephen wants to do to Catherine and her family: expose them for all to see and gawk at.

A shock wave which had taken twenty years to travel from her to him, and now has smashed down the defences she had constructed around their life together.

-- Narration about Catherine (chapter 23)

Importance: This quote describes Robert finding out Catherine has kept an enormous secret for so many years. It also foreshadows how devastating the revelation of this secret will be to their marriage.

It's a tool of her trade, something he's always admired: her ability to persuade people to things they'd prefer not to.

-- Narration about Catherine and Robert (chapter 25)

Importance: Robert realizes that one of the attributes he has always admired so much in his wife, her persistence and ability to use people to do as she pleases, has been used against him.

But now she is alive again - my constant companion. I hear her voice and I speak to her regularly.

-- Stephen (chapter 31)

Importance: Stephen now believes his dead wife is with him, demonstrating his worsening mental state.

And she concealed for weeks, until it faded, the telltale mark on her neck. And the bruise on her thigh was already a yellowy green. Easily missed.

-- Narration about Catherine (chapter 45)

Importance: The revelation about Catherine having bruises after being in Spain foreshadows the reveal that Jonathan and Catherine did not have a romantic dalliance, but rather Jonathan raped Catherine.

They dare not leave Nick's side in case he speaks. It is possible. And they don't want to miss his first words.

-- Narrations about Catherine and Robert (chapter 55)

Importance: This is symbolic of Catherine and Nicholas' relationship starting anew. Catherine does not want to miss his first words after he comes out of a coma, just as a mother hopes to hear their child speak for the first time.



He allowed her to stroke his back and hold his head, and she was overcome with gratitude for the chance he was giving her to get to know him at last.

-- Narration about Nicholas and Catherine (chapter 57)

Importance: The final line of the book signals Catherine's second chance with having a relationship with her son.