

Shark Bite Short Guide

Shark Bite by Todd Strasser

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Overview

At a first glance, *Shark Bite* seems to be aimed at the interests of younger or preadolescent readers. Both the themes and the plot seem to underpin such a first impression of the novel. Moreover, even the title of the book appears to support the idea that the novel is intended for such a reading group. A more careful exploration of this text, however, reveals its more complex nature. The story outlined before the reader turns out to be constructed on several levels which invite thought-provoking associations or images that go beyond the stereotypical characteristics of a mere adventure story.

On the one hand, the plot is largely built with the well-known ingredients of an adventure story: exotic places, dangerous situations, fast-paced action. When Ian and Talia first agree to join Stuart and his father on a sailboat trip to Cancun they exactly envision these ideas. Embarking from an exclusive yacht club dock on an even more exclusive boat they believe that they are on a fun voyage across the Gulf of Mexico. Although there have been some tensions between Ian and Stuart, two of the three youngsters, they all anticipate no disturbing events. Ian, who dislikes the way Stuart is showing off his material wealth, is particularly excited about the boat trip because of his interest in sailing.

The situation changes dramatically when a severe tropical storm hits the boat in the middle of the sea. Facing this life-threatening situation, Ian, the youngest among the crew, turns out to be the most experienced and mature in handling the crisis. After Buck Green, the only adult aboard, is injured, Ian takes on the lead and skillfully manages the chaos on the boat as well as the eventual evacuation onto a raft. In contrast to Ian, the two older adolescents Talia and Stuart are frightened by this crisis to such an extent that they are not clear-headed and cannot act responsibly. When they finally have to give up the boat and settle on the raft it is Ian again who is superior in handling the new threat they have to face. As more and more sharks circle and attack the raft, he acts rationally and bravely and thus suppresses his own fears.

The three adolescents and Mr. Green are finally rescued by a helicopter in a spectacular manner, and they are taken to Brownsville, Texas. The last scene of the novel shows Ian, Talia, and Stuart in the Brownsville hospital where they had been treated for minor injuries in the emergency room. Because Stuart's father is kept in hospital for a few days, the three of them decide to find a motel and stay together in Brownsville until he is released.

Despite the action-packed plot and the rather conventional happy end, the novel, however, differs from the traditional genre of an adventure story. These differences derive from Strasser's convincing depiction of the clashing views of the adolescent protagonists at the climax of the crisis on the boat. Confronting his protagonists with an extraordinarily stressful situation, the author explores the models of response as manifested in the behavior of Ian, Talia, and Stuart. In this way he can show the diverse motives and the corresponding individual value systems that inform the protagonists'

actions. Strasser problematizes these motives and describes their impact on the course of events in the text in order to raise a wide range of questions in the readers about their own beliefs and values.

About the Author

Even a brief look at Todd Strasser's long list of books reveals the fact that he is one of the most productive authors of young adult literature. From the late 1970s through the 1990s Strasser has written many novels for young readers which use themes with various subject matters and employ different literary styles. Besides novels for young adults he has also published books for adults, as for instance *The Family Man* (1988), as well as novelizations of well-known family movies such as *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992), and Disney movies *Lady and the Tramp* (published 1994) and *Peter Pan* (published 1994). What is remarkable about the literary achievements of Todd Strasser is the scope of themes he has written about and the diverse age groups he addresses, reaching from young and adolescent readers to adults. Many of Strasser's novels have been awarded with prestigious prizes, including the label of "Best Books for Young Adults" by the American Library Association for *Friends Till the End* and *Rock 'n' Roll Nights*.

Shark Bite 367 Born on May 5, 1950 in New York City, Todd Strasser spent his childhood and adolescent years in New York City. He also went to college there for a few years but dropped out and lived in a commune. Later, he went to Europe and earned his living as a street musician. It was here that he started to write songs and poems and that he came to the decision that he wanted to be a writer.

After his return to the United States he went to Beloit College, studied literature and writing, and graduated from there in 1974. Like many of his writer colleagues he started his professional career as a writer for newspapers. His first employment was at the *Middletown Times Herald Record* followed by the *Compton Advertising Company* in New York City. With the money he received from selling his first novel *Angel Dust Blues* in 1979, Todd Strasser started his own business called the *Dr. Wing Tip Shoo Fortune Cookie Company*. For the next twelve years he made more money in this business than he did from writing books.

At the beginning of the 1990s Strasser, his wife, and two children moved away from New York City. It was then that his most productive time as a writer began.

Besides writing numerous movie novelizations such as *Home Alone 2*, *Free Willy*, and *Jumanji* he also started to work on the "Help! I'm Trapped" books and the "Against the Odds" series. Altogether, Strasser has published over ninety books as well as contributed a number of short stories to periodicals and papers such as the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, and the *New Yorker*.

Setting

The principal scene of action takes place on an expensive, red-hulled sailboat named Big Bucks. This boat is the home of four people during a two-week trip that was planned to go from Galveston Bay to Cancun, Mexico. The author depicts the docks of a yacht club and a hospital in Brownsville as the locales of departure and arrival. These locales function as the background against which the major events of the eight-hundred-mile trip across the Gulf of Mexico are gradually developed and respectively resolved.

Thus, the boat is designed as the textual space from which the element of adventure originates and which constitutes the context for the emerging conflict. By selecting such a setting Strasser creates a site that perfectly suits his literary strategy of conflict building. While the life-threatening situation during the severe storm makes the boat into a battlefield of human against natural forces it also is the site that, because of its spacial limits, challenges and promotes the articulation and negotiation of diverging value systems.

In addition, a prominent role in the novel's setting is assigned to the sea. Taking on several functions in the text, the sea initially stands for adventure and, in the course of events, eventually develops into an image of danger and physical threat as the boat starts to sink and a group of sharks circle the boat.



Social Sensitivity

One of the interesting features of Strasser's novel is the very limited number of characters. While the two adult characters Pops and Mr. Green only play a marginal role in the story, the author's major interest is directed towards the three adolescent protagonists Ian, Talia, and Stuart. In contrast to the adults, the individual characters of the teenagers are developed in much greater detail. In this way the novel is not so much concerned with conflicts between different generations but with exploring the differences and similarities of adolescent identities and the major values attached to these identities. An analysis of the literary characters reveals that Strasser's exploration of these issues does not cross ethnic boundaries but remains within the realm of the white society. He rather concentrates on the construction of the various sources that constitute the process of identity formation in young adults. Throughout the novel, two issues are discussed in particular as relevant sources of this process: social class and family relationship.

Despite their minor impact on the plot of the novel, the two adult characters are still interesting examples of how the issue of social class is treated. Whereas the reader gets only a glimpse of the social background of Pops as a retired shrimp fisherman who seems to be enjoying his life, Buck Green is introduced as somebody who defines himself primarily through financial success. Status symbols such as his yacht, Big Bucks, seem to be more important to him than human relationships. As Ian finds out very early, "Buck Green was making sure I knew my place. Behind his jocular manner was a hard, boastful man who thought he was better than most everyone else." During the first part of the trip, Ian is repeatedly reflecting about Mr. Green's way of seeing things: "It was weird, though, how everything Mr. Green said made it seem as if we were entering some special world that only he had access to. As if those reefs off Quintana Roo really were his."

The social differences that Strasser problematizes become even more apparent in the characters of Ian and Talia on the one hand and Stuart on the other. All three adolescents come from a similar family situation: they are being raised by a single parent. Talia and Ian are brought up by their mother after their father died when they were young. Stuart lives with his father because his parents were divorced some years ago. Yet, the one-parent family situation is the only characteristic the youngsters share. They are raised in very different social settings. While Ian's and Talia's mother has to work two jobs to be able to make a living for the family, Stuart grows up knowing no financial hardships. His father is making a lot of money as a lawyer and he likes to spend for himself and his son. In contrast to Stuart, both Ian and Talia have learned to do their share to ease the family's budget. As Ian tells us: "Every piece of clothing Talia owned, she'd either made herself or bought with the money earned from baby-sitting."

Stuart on the other hand, takes the financial wealth of his family for granted and shows off with it whenever possible. Whenever he feels unable to cope with the situation aboard the yacht he falls back to discredit other people on the grounds of social



difference, as the following conversation with Ian and Talia reveals: Stuart pretended to clap. "Very impressive, Boy, the two of you make some team.

I guess it's important to be practical when you always have to make a little bit go a long way."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked angrily.

"You know exactly what I mean," Stuart shot back. "This is probably the farthest you've ever been away from home, right?"

If it wasn't for my father and me you probably would've spent Easter vacation watching MTV. That is, if your mom can afford cable."

Stuart is viewed by Ian as "your basic spoiled, rich tenth grader" Moreover, Ian does not feel comfortable in the presence of rich people such as the Greens. When he is invited to have breakfast with Stuart and his father in the yacht club restaurant he declines because he could not see himself "sitting at a linen-covered table sipping orange juice from a crystal glass."

His sister Talia, however, shows a more open and mature approach towards Stuart even though she does not always like his behavior either. She feels that he deserves a chance since "Just because he's rich doesn't make him a jerk."

By relating the views and behavior of the adolescent protagonists to their family and social backgrounds Strasser engages the reader in reflecting on his own experiences with people in his or her school, neighborhood, or community. The tensions between Ian and Stuart and the way they are negotiated in the novel can serve as an example for the reader to question the prejudices (on both sides) that arise on the basis of social difference. As we can see in the text, after taking a long time Stuart discards the notion of social superiority and eventually accepts Ian because of his competence and values that were paramount to their survival.

The relationship between Stuart and Talia could be considered as yet another topic in this novel that is of special relevance to the reader. Despite the fact that this topic only plays a secondary role, it is nevertheless worthwhile to have a closer look at Strasser's literary treatment of this relationship. First of all, it is depicted primarily as a "crush" that Stuart has on Talia, who pretends not to notice his advances. For her, Stuart is just another boy she knows from school. Stuart, however, expects Talia to admire him for his material wealth and hopes that the boat trip will bring them closer together. Observing these advances several times, Ian dismisses them as awkward, and he concludes: About the only thing Stuart was interested in was staying close to Talia. I was almost embarrassed for the guy. He was so awkward and obvious in the way he kept trying to accidentally rub her shoulder or take her hand. Talia responded with unending patience, always skirting his touch and making light of it with a laugh. It was just hard for me to believe that Stuart wasn't getting the message.



Yet, Strasser's overall portrayal of the shy advances on the side of Stuart refrains from ridiculing them. He rather proves himself to the reader as a sensitive observer of the emotional manifestations accompanying the process of growing up. At the same time, by having his narrator Ian take a different view based on his younger age, Strasser gives a believable representation of this topic.

Literary Qualities

The literary achievements of the novel derive particularly from the literary strategies employed in narrating the story of adolescents facing and coping with a crisis of physical survival. The most interesting of these strategies is Strasser's use of point of view. He selects the youngest character as a first-person narrator giving his account of the story.

The construction of the text through the perspective of Ian perfectly meets Strasser's intention of aiming at pre-adolescent readers. First of all, even though Ian seems to be rather mature for his age, Ian is still modeled as a "regular kid" whom readers can easily identify with. Second, throughout the entire story he is constructed as acting more competently and responsibly than the older protagonists. Third, Ian's reflections and assessment of the events are delineated in a believable way both in their contents as well as in their language. He never comes across as a know-it-all or as a mere didactic device of his author. His language is colloquial with occasional uses of teenage slang.

It is obvious that the novel is clearly structured according to the reading competence of the young reader. Strasser tells his story in thirty-six brief chapters that chronologically develop the plot. This structure as well as the fast-paced events invite the young reader to participate in the suspenseful action of the novel. Whereas the first part of the novel is dominated by reflective monologues, the suspense, which reaches its climax with the shark attacks, and the last-minute rescue is essentially built through dialogue. The dramatic quality of these scenes is particularly achieved by Strasser's vivid style, even if some of the images of the sharks seem to be exaggerated for the sake of sensational adventure, as in the example in the following scene: "1 [Ian] grabbed the last remaining parachute flare. I was about to fire it when Talia screamed. I looked out of the canopy. A huge shark was barreling straight toward us with its jaws open. We could actually see its teeth."

With the foreshadowing in the opening scene of the book, the author provides abundant hints of the dramatic situation to come.

As much as this strategy may be made legitimate by its aim of getting the attention of the reader, it also tends to make the plot rather predictable by giving away too much too early.

The optimistic or happy ending of the novel is logical in that it is convincingly based upon the previous experiences of the three protagonists. The challenges they went through together have contributed to build a genuine friendship between them.



Themes and Characters

The topics of sailing and adventure seem to be the center of the story. This should create a special interest in young readers because the voyage on the boat across the Gulf of Mexico evokes exotic images that are very remote from everyday experience.

A closer analysis, however, reveals a much more complex thematic interest that is developed in a very subtle way. By introducing characters that represent starkly different social backgrounds, Strasser prepares the ground for constructing the themes of the novel.

With Ian and his older sister Talia, the reader gets to know two adolescents that come from a single-parent family. Brought up by their mother, who has worked two jobs to support the family ever since her husband died, Ian and Talia have experienced financial hardship. Since they have never been anywhere besides visiting their aunt in Tulsa and going to New Orleans for a Mardi Gras weekend they are very excited about the boat trip. Ian explains that: Even though I was in seventh grade and a year and a half younger than Talia, I was sent along as a chaperone. Second, Buck Green needed a crew for the trip across the Gulf, and as far as I knew, Stuart didn't know a jib from a mainsail. On the other hand, I'd been totally in love with the sea since the first time Mom took Talia and me to the beach on Galveston Island.

In contrast, Stuart Green comes from a very different family. His father, Buck Green, is a well-off tax lawyer and therefore has all the financial means to spoil his son with materialistic things. Similar to Ian and Talia, Stuart is raised by one parent because his father divorced his mother. Knowing and liking Talia from school, Stuart invites her and Ian to come along on the boat trip.

When the reader meets this trio of characters for the first time, he learns that Ian is suspicious of Stuart because of his bragging about his family's wealth. Ian dislikes Stuart since he has known him as a spoiled student from school. His sister Talia, however, feels comfortable in being courted by Stuart.

Stuart's father, Buck Green, plays a marginal role in the novel. He is described as a self-confident and arrogant man "who always took the lead in any group."

The character of Pops, who is only present in the text at the very beginning, is introduced as an old and experienced fisherman. Ian has a conversation with Pops before leaving for the trip. When Pops tells him about his feeling that there might be a storm ahead, Ian is hesitant to believe him.

For the reader, Pops represents an important clue with regard to the future course of events. He foreshadows the dramatic situation that is to come.

In the final analysis, the conflicts the young protagonists have to face during their struggle to survive the storm physically are less important than the challenge this

situation creates for their strength of character. Thus, the themes of the novel are closely related to the value systems manifested by the three adolescents. The crisis on the boat during the storm serves as a literary element of suspense with a specific function: it prepares the groundwork (as well as attracts the reader's attention) for constructing the goal of the novel. The novel's purpose is to subject its characters to various crises in order to explore how their various identities will react. Strasser skillfully outlines different attitudes towards life by contrasting the behavior of the literary characters on the one hand and by reflecting about the motivation for their behavior on the other. Strasser selected Ian, the youngest of the three youths, to describe the characters and events to the reader in a first-person narration. In this way, the novel succeeds in constructing a fresh and convincing adolescent perspective on major topics relevant to young readers such as friendship, differences in social status, and similarities and differences in the value systems of adolescents, as well as strategies of negotiating these differences.

Besides these major themes Strasser depicts the more general topic of sailing, providing the reader with many interesting insights into the handling of a boat, as well as the technical terms related to sailing. As in many of his other novels, the author invites the reader to share his fascination with this activity.



Topics for Discussion

1. Describe Ian's and Talia's family situation and compare it to Stuart's.
2. Why did Ian and Talia decide to accept the invitation for a sailboat trip to Cancun? Explain the different attitudes of Ian and Talia towards the trip.
3. What does Ian think of Talia's relationship to Stuart? What is it that Talia finds admirable in Stuart?
4. Contrast the two male protagonists Ian and Stuart and characterize their behavior at the beginning of the novel.
5. Describe the literary purpose of Buck Green and explain his relationship to his son.
6. Discuss the character of Pops and his function in the opening scene of the text.
7. How do the adolescent protagonists cope with the storm? Describe their emotional reactions to the dramatic turn of events.
8. In which way does the dangerous situation on the boat during the storm reveal the characters of the three youths?
9. How do you explain Ian's responsible behavior and lack of panic during the crisis of the storm? How do Talia and Stuart cope with this crisis?
10. In which way do the scenes on the raft change the relationship between Ian, Talia, and Stuart?
11. How do the adolescent protagonists come across in the hospital scene? What is the nature of their relationship after the rescue?
12. How has the experience on the boat changed the lives of Ian, Talia, and Stuart?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss the opening scene of the novel.

What perspective does the narrator offer on the upcoming events?

2. Explain the author's choice of narrator.

What difference does it make to have Ian narrate the story?

3. Describe the metaphors employed by the author to characterize the different statuses of the adolescent protagonists.

4. By which narrative devices does the author create suspense and how does he sustain it until the end of the novel?

5. Explore the values represented by the adolescent protagonists in relation to those of the adult characters in the novel.

6. Discuss the title of the novel. How far does it or does it not reflect the themes of the book?

7. Compare the relationship of the three adolescent protagonists at the end of the novel with that of the beginning.

8. Interpret the end of the novel. Do you find the happy ending convincing and why?

For Further Reference

Donelson, Kenneth L., and Alleen Pace Nilson. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

An indispensable book for teachers, librarians, and all those working with young people. It explores the interdependence of adolescent psychology with young adult literature, discusses and evaluates contemporary texts for young readers, and views the role of professionals dealing with their books. Each genre chapter is accompanied by "30 Recommendations for Reading" that provide valuable ideas for teachers and librarians on preparing book discussions.

Hendrickson, Linnea. *Children's Literature: A Literary Guide to the Criticism*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. A standard source for those professionally working in the field of children's and young adult literature.

It offers a well-structured bibliography with an annotated listing of criticism on authors and their books as well as subjects, themes, and genres. It also includes a comprehensive list of the major resources in children's literature up to the mid-1980s.

Moore, John Noell. *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary Theory in the Secondary Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1997. Intended particularly for teachers both in secondary and higher education, this book offers a complex investigation into interpretive possibilities inherent to using young adult novels in the classroom. Based on the discussion of theoretical key concepts and terms in the first part of the book, Moore then introduces new and intriguing interpretations of several young adult novels. The solid grounding in applied theory provides a valuable starting point for teaching any work of fiction and will be most appreciated by those who look for ways of enriching the classroom discussion. Each of the ten chapters ends with a bibliography that covers the most important sources discussed and invites the reader to further exploration.

Roginski, Jim. *Behind the Covers: Interviews with Authors and Illustrators of Books for Children and Young Adults*. New York: Libraries Unlimited, 1985. A collection of interviews with various authors of children's and young adult literature, including Todd Strasser. In these interviews authors comment on issues such as the creative process of writing, the function of reviewers, and the role of the readers. Thus, a wide spectrum of professional views and personal backgrounds of writing children's and young adult literature are presented. The comprehensive bibliography concluding the book provides important sources for further explorations of the topic.

"Strasser, Todd." In *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 123. Detroit: Gale, 1988. This volume offers detailed biographical as well as critical sources on the author Todd Strasser.

It also includes excerpts from interviews with Strasser that give an insight into his understanding of the function of literature.

Sutherland, Zena. *The Best in Children's Books: The University of Chicago's Guide to Children's Literature, 1979-1984*. Chicago: UniShark Bite 375 versity of Chicago Press, 1986. An invaluable collection of reviews on about fourteen hundred American and British books for children and young adults published between 1979 and 1984, including Todd Strasser's early novels *Angel Dust Blues* and *Workin' for Peanuts*. In addition, the collection provides an extensive index to titles, developmental values, curricular use, reading level, subjects, and types of literature that make it a most useful guide for teachers, librarians, and professionals alike.

Temple, Charles, et. al. *Children's Books in Children's Hands: An Introduction to Their Literature*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998.

A most valuable source for teachers, librarians, and parents. Exploring comprehensively various genres, subject matters, and styles of children's and young adult literature past and present, the book concentrates on discussing major questions of the relationship between text and child reader as well as numerous didactic strategies of creating a literature-based classroom. Each of the fourteen chapters contains special sections on teaching ideas, recommended books with annotations, resources, and references.

Related Titles/Adaptations

With regard to genre, *Shark Bite* certainly shares many characteristics with Strasser's three other novels (*Grizzly Attack*, *Buzzard's Feast*, and *Gator Prey*) published in the 1990s as part of a series titled "Against the Odds."

In all of these books the thematic focus is on adventures that feature young protagonists and their efforts to cope with extraordinary challenges. The literary strategy employed in these texts follows a clear structure of a chronological plot that eventually is resolved in an optimistic ending. Intended for the younger reader, the fast-paced stories are accordingly constructed through dialogue rather than extensive narrative chapters.

Several of Strasser's other novels, both for young and adolescent readers, deal with the topic of sailing. Among these, books such as *Beyond the Reef* (1989) and *The Diving Bell* (1992) take a prominent place. Both titles show similarities to *Shark Bite* with regard to the relevance of sailing and maritime adventure as important constituents of theme and setting. Despite the obvious differences in narrative structure and subject matter due to the intended reading age, all three novels similarly portray the fascination with, as well as the challenges of, the sea.

Related Web Sites

"Toddstrasser.com." <http://www.todd-strasser.com> (November 10, 2000).

A comprehensive and well-designed website that provides abundant information about Strasser's books, his life, and recent book and film projects. Both readers and critics will find this website a valuable source for exploring the production, distribution, and reception of Strasser's work. It includes links to professional sites and excerpts from novels but, more importantly, presents reviews by young readers themselves and therefore inspires them to communicate with the authors as well as with the reading community.



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