

# **This Stranger, My Father Short Guide**

## **This Stranger, My Father by Robert Hawks**

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

# Contents

<a href="#">This Stranger, My Father Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>

# Overview

This Stranger, My Father raises several questions. What is the basis for loving an individual? If everything we know about someone is a lie, would we still love that person? Do we ever really know another person or, for that matter, do we really know ourselves? Do we all wear masks, and sometimes masks upon masks? Can love survive deceit? While definitive answers to these questions cannot be found in this novel, it does provide opportunities for reflection on their implications.

This Stranger, My Father is a rapidly moving, gripping adventure story. Included are many suspenseful and disturbing situations, occasionally leavened by humor and pathos. Always engaging, the characters and events are believable and fascinating. The main characters are forced to cope with previously unimagined and unexpected events. Yet, considering the father's past, events are logical. The daughter is unaware of the life led by her father twenty years earlier. It is truly a case of the sins of the father affecting the life of his offspring. The daughter's life and world are turned upside-down when a sudden event starts her on a roller-coaster progression to a world and a self previously unimagined. The father's world is also changed, irrevocably, by the sudden turn of events that he knew could happen but for a long time ceased to expect.

In addition to questions about love and relationships raised in This Stranger, My Father, attention is also focused on the methods and procedures of law enforcement agents and agencies. At times, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the "good guys" and the "bad guys." Sympathy grows and remains for the plight of the daughter.

Stripped of her innocence and aspirations, she becomes a worldly wise, hardened yet courageous individual who realizes that the world to which she is accustomed will never be restored. Indeed, her self as she has known it can never be regained.

## About the Author

Robert Hawks was born in South Bend, Indiana, on December 12, 1961, to his parents Robert Hawks, a mechanic and his wife, Barbara Handley Hawks, a restaurant manager. He attended public schools in South Bend and graduated from Indiana State University with a major in English. While a member of the United States Air Force, he attended the University of Maryland Overseas Program.

Despite his wide travels and residency in numerous places including Europe, according to Hawks, he still considers Indiana to be "home." Currently, he resides in Las Vegas, Nevada. Places where he has lived figure prominently in the settings of many of his novels.

Hawks and his wife Lynn Noswinger have two daughters, the elder of which already shows signs of being interested in writing. Hawks reports she is fascinated with her new computer on which she writes stories "all of three pages long." Hawks states he has "always had the urge to write" and began writing seriously at about age fifteen.

Besides his prolific production of novels and other books for children and young adults, Hawks writes jokes for comedians "on the strip" in Las Vegas and elsewhere. For example, he writes jokes for Jimmy Walker who once starred as "J. J." on the television series "Good Times." His propensity for humor is apparent in many of his novels in which he treats profound situations leavened with comedy.

Among other interests, Hawks collects electric trains and various paraphernalia such as time tables. This interest stems from a ride on the Super Chief train of the Santa Fe Railway at the age of nine years. He states that this was an experience never to be forgotten.

Hawks writes occasionally under the pseudonym Hall Nichols. His football series appears under this pseudonym.

# Setting

The J. T. Kreuger Senior High School in Michigan City, Indiana, and San Bavispe, California, as well as various points in between serve as a backdrop for the frantic events in *This Stranger, My Father*. The heroine's journey with her father takes them through seven different states. The setting is marked by highways, stolen cars, diners, gasoline stations, motels, and an occasional shopping center. The setting is conveyed mainly through dialogue between the characters.

The story takes place during a period of less than three weeks, yet the characters are subjected to more experiences of a disturbing nature than most people have over an entire lifetime.

The setting conveys a picture of cheap motel rooms with their ubiquitous television sets, double beds, and small windows. Meals often consist of cold doughnuts and orange juice, sodas, or milk eaten in the motel rooms.

# Social Sensitivity

Although *This Stranger, My Father* focuses on events, character traits, and conditions that are not desirable, these are treated with sensitivity. When her father becomes the hunted felon, his identity becomes so alien to Patty that he becomes a real stranger. His subsequent petty crimes can be disassociated with his role as father. Patty's pain as she is forced to be a part of the new life foisted upon her is real and convincing. Her fear at handling a gun will inspire empathy for her. What she does with the gun is logical because of her personality and the context in which she is placed. While the reader is led to expect violence at any given time, little violence actually occurs.

Dialogue is in standard English peppered only with expressions popular among teenagers, but no profanity.

The novel is a story of how profoundly lives can be changed by lies and deceit.

# Literary Qualities

While the major plot of *This Stranger, My Father* is straightforward and simple, the progression of events from the start of the story to its climax is complex and suspenseful. The fifteen chapters of the novel are connected and continuous. The author uses several literary devices to sustain interest and engender excitement.

The events in *This Stranger, My Father* take place in real times and places.

While the events are fictional, they could have happened. More frightening is the idea conveyed that the events might happen to anyone under even the most ordinary of circumstances. A sense of reality is heightened through the author's use of actual historical events of the time of the crime that precipitated the current events. The current time of the story is twenty years after the 1960s when John F. Kennedy was President of the United States, haircuts were short, and the Beatles were just another English group trying to make the big time. . . . Missiles were new. . . The first Minutemen were being constructed in Montana and the Dakotas and the Russians had nothing to compare with them.

Patty's interrogation by the FBI takes place in the Federal Building in South Bend, Indiana, the St. Joseph County Seat. In her effort to escape from the FBI agents, Patty thinks of hiding places such as Lake Michigan, the Indiana Dunes, and Rye Springs. When Patty and her father head west, they stop in the Bloomington Municipal Public Library to prepare fake birth certificates. They shop in a mall to buy necessities for their trip: "toothbrushes, tooth paste, soap, shampoo, towels."

When their destination turns out to be San Bavispe, California, the author is precise in pinpointing its exact location "about a hundred miles east of the coast and fifty miles north of the Mexican border, just south of a hilly range called Chocolate Mountains." As Patty reflects on their whirlwind journey, she recalls places such as Six Flags Over Mid-America, the big amusement park just outside of Wichita; Hoover Dam in Nevada; Las Vegas, New Mexico; Enid, Oklahoma; Amarillo, Texas; Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Flagstaff, Arizona.

The author uses vivid descriptions to impart not only geographic information but to create a sense of the mood and color of a place: "The town had a Mexican atmosphere about it. Mexican food was everywhere"; "There were sort of an outdoor market in the downtown area; The weather was cool but not cold; the sky was sharp and blue."

Likewise, vivid description gives insight into characters; for example, Patty observes, "Another problem was developing and I couldn't think of a way around it. . . I wanted my dad back, but instead he stayed inside himself, the guy who had driven us here. He seemed involved in something and almost unfriendly."

I figured it was nerves. It would pass when his mind was settled.

Occasionally striking images are created by the author to emphasize a condition. Patty observes: "My eyes were hollow and bloodshot, I was pale and my hair was totally trashed. I washed my face and stuck out my tongue at the image looking back at me. My teeth were wearing little wool sweaters, but I had no toothbrush, so I just rinsed my mouth with some cold water and went out to the living room." And later: "Walkins looked like the type of guy who has his conscience surgically removed at a very young age."

Despite description and explanation, however, the story progresses largely through the characters' dialogue. Kimmers's thinking is quite explicit in her advice to Patty about how to deal with an unwanted date. "Anyway," she says, "It's simple. Just go with Mark and if Larry shows up at your house, that's his problem." Patty responds, "Just stand him up? I can't do that, it's so mean." Kimmers responds "Life is mean, Patty. Adjust to it." An aspect of Dad's philosophy is apparent when he tells Patty, "Money is not going to be a problem, I promise. But remember something...once outside the law, always outside it. I tried to be perfect once. For you. It doesn't work. This is what happens because of it. You can't try to live your life by two sets of rules."

The author uses flashbacks sparingly and only to help the reader understand present action and conditions. Foreshadowing is used to heighten suspense. For example, the reader senses impending danger when Patty's dad provides her with a gun and gives her instructions on its use.

At its most basic level, *This Stranger, My Father* can be read as an adventure story. At that level, it is exciting, entertaining, and suspenseful. At a deeper level contemplation of the ethical questions raised at the outset is inevitable.

Older readers will have no difficulty in perceiving the deeper meanings of the events and actions of the characters.

The novel can be recommended for young adults aged fourteen or older.



# Themes and Characters

Patricia (Patty) Neely, alias Karen Peterson, is the heroine and first-person narrator of *This Stranger, My Father*.

The most fully developed character in the story, she reports not only the events but also the results of her observations and reflections. Patty undergoes drastic and permanent changes physically and emotionally as a result of the experiences and events into which she is thrust. From a typical teen-ager at the start of the story, Patty changes to anything but typical at its end. Before the critical event that turns her world upside down, Patty has stayed out of trouble and maintained average academic and attendance records at school. Her major concerns, when the story starts, involve how to tell the first boy she has promised a date that she has changed her mind and decided to accept a date with someone else. She is also concerned with whether or not she will pass an upcoming Indiana driver's license test.

These problems that worry Patty soon become inconsequential.

Patty considers herself easy-going and highly sensitive to the needs of others. Her father considers her to be naive, and she is called a "noodle" by her best friend. Patty believes in sparing other persons discomfort if at all possible. Having lost her mother early in life, Patty is often lonely and she clings to her father whom she admires.

She is also close to her best friend whom she has known since second grade. These relationships do not assuage her loneliness, however. Patty is given to spending time in deep thought.

Kim Marz (Kimmers) is Patty's best friend and the opposite of everything Patty represents. Kimmers is beautiful while Patty is somewhat plain. Kimmers is outspoken and cares not at all about who may be offended by her sharp remarks. Kimmers's family is more traditionally structured than is Patty's. She has a father who can rescue her when she gets into trouble with school authorities. She has a mother who sometimes even "mothers" Patty.

She has a brother who is a companion in some of her escapades. Constantly at war with the world, Kimmers is something of a crusader against things she sees as wrong. Often advising Patty, Kimmers cannot help her when the "chips are down." Kimmers's appearance at the beginning of the story is brief but her influence on Patty is significant.

Patty knows her father as Douglas Meely until he is arrested and she is told that his real name is Casper Pelling. Called "Dad" by Patty, he worked the "Swings" and "Mids" at the Lacington Steel Mill and had Fridays and Saturdays off. Except for "heavy drooping eyelids," there is nothing in Dad's appearance to suggest he may be hiding a secret. Once he did show Patty a good hiding place named "Rye Springs" if she ever needed to run away. Dad is admittedly brilliant and clever, an expert at stealing automobiles when needed and a master of disguises, but Patty never knew these things about her dad

before the crisis occurred. Dad loves Patty and looks out for her though he cannot replace her need for a mother.

A variety of less developed though important characters play significant roles in maintaining the mood and furthering the action of the story. Prominent among these are the FBI agents Walker, Munroe, and Heller who investigate the case of Casper Pelling and track him down. The Gizzales are the couple who provide foster care when Patty is taken into custody. Although his appearance is brief and near the end of the story, David Borrego befriends Patty, is genuinely fond of her, and helps her when the clashes with the law become climactic.

# Topics for Discussion

1. When Dad's past caught up with him, he became a stranger to Patty.

How did Dad change?

2. Dad had a number of character features that could only be considered as good traits. What were these character traits? Support your answer with reference to sections in the novel that apply.

3. In order to affect a disguise, Patty had to undergo several changes. Describe these changes. Which do you believe to be the most damaging?

4. Throughout the story, Patty expresses her feelings of loneliness. Were these feelings shown in her actions?

What was the basis for Patty's loneliness?

5. With regard to their outlooks on life, Patty and Kimmers were decidedly different. Why were they best friends?

6. At the end of the story Patty found herself in possession of a sum of money that had been hidden by her father for over twenty years. How did Patty decide to use the money? Did she make the right decision?

7. Patty planned to meet her father again after a year. Is it likely that she will meet him?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Identify and describe the features of *This Stranger, My Father* that justify its classification as an adventure story.
2. If *This Stranger, My Father* were told only by descriptive narration with no dialogue, how would the story change?
3. Select some relevant passages that account for suspense in *This Stranger, My Father* and explain why they nurtured suspense.
4. Who were the "bad guys" in the story? Identify these and explain your rationale for so classifying them.
5. Identify three or more incidences of the use of symbolism in *This Stranger, My Father* and indicate what these represented in the story.
6. In Chapter 15, resolution of the conflict is reached. Given the series of events and character changes preceding it, could the ending of the story be different? Write a new but logical ending for the story.

## For Further Reference

Bomboy, Pamela K. "Robert Hawks, The Richest Kid in the World." *School Library Journal* 38,5 (May 1992). This article summarizes the novel, *The Richest Kid in the World* and mentions the humor conveyed. It is recommended for recreational reading for students grades 4 through 8.

Estes, Sally, ed. "Young Adult Fiction."

Booklist 84,17 (May/June 1988): 1510.

This article provides a brief summary of Robert Hawks's *This Stranger, My Father*. The author states that "what will grip readers from that first scene of her father's arrest is the terror of the familiar world turned strange."

Review. *Kirkus* (February 15, 1988). The reviewer states, "Hawks makes his debut in YA literature with a highcaliber thriller, with a plot reminiscent of Cormier's *I Am the Cheese* in its convoluted intrigues and doublecrosses. Fast-moving and thoughtprovoking."

Review. *School Library Journal* (March 1988). Reviewer states *This Stranger, My Father* is "a well-written, fastpaced, and involving story, and readers should be drawn into Patty's moral dilemma and awkward new relationship with her father."

Roback, Diane and Richard Donahue, eds. "Young Adult Fiction". *Publishers Weekly* (December 20, 1991): 82.

The authors summarize *The Richest Kid in the World*. They call attention to the "comical moments found in the energetic story line."

## Related Titles

Several contemporary novels for young adults highlight themes similar to those giving substance to *This Stranger, My Father*. Principally, these themes involve father-daughter relationships, family problems, the search for love, and finding oneself in a brand new world because of the occurrence of a critical event. Among these are: *If You Need Me* by Carole S. Adler, *Ramona and Her Father* by Beverley Cleary, *Following the Mystery Man* by Mary Downing Hahn, and *Sweet Friday Island* by Theodore Taylor.

In *If You Need Me*, thirteen-year-old Lyn finds her world threatened by her father's attraction to her friend Brian's mother. Lyn becomes incredibly worried as tension grows between her beloved stepmother and her father. Lyn's faith in her father becomes shattered as she becomes acquainted with a side of him she had not known before.

Stockard Channing narrates the story of *Ramona and Her Father* by Cleary in a sound recording. Ramona becomes worried when her father loses his job and starts smoking too much. Her world becomes changed because of the loss of her father's job which requires, among other things, her mother to be away working. Ramona has difficulty as she tries to restore order to her life.

In *Following the Mystery Man*, Madigan becomes convinced that Clint, a handsome, mysterious stranger who rents a room in her grandmother's house, is the father that she has longed for but never met. Following the mystery man leads Madigan into a series of adventures that are not pleasant but instructive.

In *Sweet Friday Island*, fifteen-yearold Peg and her father vacation on what they believe to be an uninhabited island. What started out as an adventure turns into a fight for survival. Not only does the novel emphasize fatherdaughter relationships but its location near Baja, California resembles certain aspects of the locale of *This Stranger, My Father*.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996