

Workin' for Peanuts Short Guide

Workin' for Peanuts by Todd Strasser

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Overview

Strasser has stated that he is concerned that there are few books dealing with romance from the male point of view. In *Workin' for Peanuts*, he attempts to rectify this situation by using a male narrator. Strasser explores the effects of social class and money on romance, as well as the importance of acting on one's beliefs, through the actions of Jeff Mead, a likeable teenage protagonist who is unsure of who he is or what he wants to be. Strasser shows Jeff's gradual maturation as he eventually decides to do something with his life. The background setting, a baseball stadium, is presented in a believable manner and serves as a contrast to the wealthy world of Stottswood, the estate of one of Jeff's employers.

About the Author

Todd Strasser was born May 5, 1950, in New York City. He says that he grew up rebelling against the "Establishment;" however, during high school, he tried most competitive sports and he attended Beloit College and graduated in 1974. Since then, he has had several jobs, including newspaper reporter (1974-1978), advertising copywriter (1976-1977), and researcher for Esquire magazine (1977-1978). In 1978, he founded a fortune-cookie company, and like Jeff Mead, the main character in *Workin' for Peanuts*, Strasser has also worked as a street vendor.

Strasser's first novel, *Angel Dust Blues*, was published in 1979 to mostly rave reviews. Since then, his books have won a variety of awards, including American Library Association Best Book selections for *Friends Till the End* and *Rock n' Roll Nights*, and a Notable Children's Trade Book in Social Studies selection for *Friends Till the End*. In 1981, Strasser married Pamela Older.

Setting

Workin' for Peanuts takes place primarily at fictional Eisenhower Stadium and in the nearby suburb of Rivington.

The stadium is home to a major-league baseball team that is never referred to by name, only by its nickname, "The Beautiful Losers." Protagonist Jeff has been a vendor at the stadium for Humphrey Stotts & Sons for four years, working his way up from selling hot dogs to selling beer. The stadium, according to Jeff, employs "a pretty odd bunch of people," each with a colorful nickname, such as "Cut 'Em," "Radio," "Mighty Fine," and "Speed." The stadium is often described as looking like a garbage heap, and its floors are covered with litter and spilled drinks. In Chapter 12, Jeff goes to a concert at the stadium, which he describes as a "zoo" with "50,000 stoned-out kids."

Rivington, where Jeff lives, is a few miles away from the stadium on the outskirts of a large city. It is filled with two-story wooden houses with twelvefoot-square patches of lawn and is relatively safe and crime-free. Its inhabitants, including Jeff's parents, are working-class people struggling to make a living. Jeff's father has been laid off from his job as a painter at an automobile factory, and his mother works twelve-hour shifts driving a bus. To Jeff, his neighborhood is ordinary, anything but glamorous.

Jeff's home in Rivington contrasts sharply with Stottswood, the home of Jeff's would-be girlfriend, Melissa Stotts, daughter of the vice president of Stotts & Sons. In Chapters 18 and 19, Jeff and coworker Rick (Speed) sneak onto the grounds of Melissa's home, which has a lawn as big as a football field. At first, Jeff is a trespasser at Stottswood, hiding in the bushes as Melissa plays Scrabble with another boy. Later, after Melissa invites him to come visit her, Jeff still feels uncomfortable at the house. As the story unfolds, Stottswood comes to represent Jeff and Melissa's social differences.



Social Sensitivity

Like many contemporary romances told from the male point of view, *Workin' for Peanuts* includes discussions of sex, and Jeff and Melissa have a sexual encounter late in the book. Strasser does, however, create a definite distinction between Jeff, who is interested in Melissa as an individual and who would just as soon spend time talking to her, and Rick, who views women only as objects.

Like many of Strasser's other novels, *Workin' for Peanuts* contains profanity and occasional references to drug use and acts of violence. But its protagonist, Jeff, avoids drugs, gangs, and violence except when he defends himself against the Derelicts. Jeff occasionally shortchanges his customers, but he opposes Rick's lawless behavior, particularly his scalping activities, his gang connections, and his thefts. In the end, when Jeff finally confronts Rick, forcing his confession, Strasser clearly rejects Rick's behavior.

The novel does include some stereotypes: Strasser seems to suggest that virtually anyone who is rich is superficial or self-absorbed and that most working-class people are lawless and abusive. Jeff and Melissa, who are fairly well-developed characters, counter these stereotypes to a degree and suggest the possibility of diversity among members of their social groups. Moreover, Strasser tries to provide logical motives for the actions of all the major characters.

Literary Qualities

At first glance, this novel may appear to be nothing more than a clichéd formula romance in which a poor boy tries to court a wealthy girl. But through the voice of Jeff Mead, Strasser manages to go beyond mere formula, creating a novel that convincingly portrays the confusion of first love from the male point of view. Jeff is open and honest as he discusses his feelings, in particular his self-doubt and confusion about Melissa.

The novel also makes effective use of setting, characters, and language to explore the similarities and differences between Jeff and Melissa and their social backgrounds. For example, Jeff's and Melissa's homes and friends are used to point out their surface differences. Jeff is frequently presented as an outsider, almost always watching Melissa from a distance either when she is at the stadium or when he sneaks over to her house. Strasser also makes effective use of the baseball stadium as a background for Jeff's confusion. The description of the concert in Chapter 12 shows Strasser's ability to use concrete detail to lend credibility to his stories.

In the novel, names and nicknames are used to show the difference between stereotypes and reality. All of Jeff's group of friends, including himself, have nicknames. Even the baseball team is known only as "The Beautiful Losers." In turn, Jeff uses nicknames to identify Melissa's friends. At the end of the novel, however, Jeff rejects his own nickname, Philosopher, after he realizes that there is more to an individual than a name.

Strasser also refrains from presenting the reader with an overly sentimental or unrealistic ending. Although Jeff learns that Melissa is a real person, not just a Stotts, he eventually loses her because she is not willing to accept his background. Jeff contemplates pursuing Melissa, but in the end he does not, recognizing that he cannot change her feelings. Things do look up for Jeff and his family in the end, but he and his father will still have to struggle to make their new painting business a success.



Themes and Characters

The novel's main character and narrator, Jeff Mead, is a recent high-school graduate with no plans for the future.

He is six-feet-two-inches tall, weighs 180 pounds, and has never lost a fight.

He believes that he should not interfere in other people's problems, a point of view that earns him the nickname Philosopher. For Jeff, his job as a vendor at the baseball stadium provides a degree of excitement as well as a second family in the form of his coworkers.

Jeff comes across as having little experience with girls and is unsure of how to approach Melissa Stotts, whom he meets at the stadium. Much of the story focuses on Jeff's insecurities about his job, his parents, and his future—insecurities that seem to arise from dating Melissa. Jeff realizes that his employers care next to nothing about their employees and view them as disposable. At the same time, Jeff struggles with his father's narrowminded attitudes and occasional drunkenness and violence, as well as his unwillingness to look for a job after he is laid off. Eventually, Jeff begins to question his own way of life and starts to plan for a more secure future.

Although Jeff occasionally shortchanges customers, like the rest of his coworkers, he is actually a proponent of honesty and is the only one who balks when coworker Rick tries to scalp concert tickets and later steals from the Stottses. In the end, he confronts Rick about the burglary and, although it ends their friendship, tells Melissa about Rick.

Rick Diner, nicknamed Speed, is Jeff's only close friend. He apparently has no values, feeling justified in vandalizing and robbing Stottswood after he is fired for scalping concert tickets.

He also uses Jeff's infatuation with Melissa to learn where the Stotts live in order to carry out his revenge. In addition, he exaggerates the truth, bragging about the number of prophylactics he supposedly uses each week, and is trying to prove himself a tough guy so that he will be allowed to join the Derelicts, a local gang. At the end of the novel, however, there is a hint that Rick has learned his lesson and may try to do something with his life.

Melissa Stotts is different from her wealthy and privileged friends. She is nice looking, but not beautiful, and is generally sensitive to Jeff's feelings. At the same time, she is naive, a character trait that contributes to her ultimate rejection of Jeff: She cannot believe that Jeff is friends with someone like Rick or that he might be implicated in the vandalism of her home.

The other characters in the novel are for the most part one-dimensional, undeveloped stereotypes who help create a contrast between Jeff's and Melissa's worlds. Jeff's friends at the stadium are a diverse group of characters: Cut 'Em is into betting; Radio



likes monster radios; and Al Packer (Al the Cannibal) is the softhearted and lonely checker at Jeff's vending station. None of these characters is educated or sophisticated.

In contrast, Melissa is surrounded by a group of snobby, arrogant, and shallow people. To Jeff, the people in Melissa's world are initially nameless, so he gives them nicknames such as Mr. Greysuit (Melissa's father) and the Squinter (one of Melissa's boyfriends).

At the beginning of the novel, Jeff's father is also presented as a caricature—a bigoted, beer-guzzling painter who cuffs his son for no apparent reason. Towards the end of the novel, Jeff is surprised that his father is actually sympathetic to his troubles. Like Jeff, his father finally decides to do something constructive with his life and starts a painting company with his son's help.

Workin' for Peanuts is generally concerned with the insecurities and problems created by social class and money.

For Jeff and Melissa, it seems impossible to overcome their class differences, although Jeff is inspired to do something about his own situation by the end of the novel. Throughout the book, Jeff also struggles with the search for his own identity. Like the other vendors and his own father, he is stagnating, not going anywhere. Jeff is also trying to become independent from his parents, a goal that is complicated by the fact that he is not financially selfsufficient. The novel, then, becomes one young adult's quest for personal identity and questioning of his own existence. In the end, Jeff affirms his own value system, determining that he will be successful, but that he will not do it by misusing others, as Henry Stotts has done.



Topics for Discussion

1. In Chapter 1, Jeff says that his motto is *Nisi ego vexo te, to non me vexas*, or "Don't mess with me and I won't mess with you." To what extent does Jeff really live by this motto?
2. Why is Jeff initially attracted to Melissa and how do his feelings change when he learns her identity? Why do you think Melissa agrees to go out with Jeff?
3. Why does Jeff continue to work as a vendor? According to Jeff, what are the particular appeals of his job?
4. Why is Rick trying to become one of the Derelicts? Why is he such a braggart?
5. In what ways is Jeff different from his father? Are there clues that, despite their differing political views, Jeff and his father are rather alike?
6. In what ways does Stottswood differ markedly from the houses in Rivington?
7. What is Jeff's relationship with the other vendors? Why does he ultimately leave them to take a job as a checker, and how do his new co-workers differ from his old ones?
8. Rick tells Jeff that the rich do not care about hurting anyone, that when they get in trouble they "just pay someone off." In terms of the way Strasser presents the story, is Rick's contention true? Why or why not?
9. How have Jeff, Melissa, and Jeff's fathers changed at the end of the novel? What accounts for these changes?
10. How have Jeff's feelings about Melissa changed at the end of the novel? Why does Jeff decide not to go down to Seahaven to look for her?
11. What is the significance of the many nicknames in the novel? To what extent do these names accurately describe the people to whom they belong?
12. Why does Rick help to burglarize Stottswood? To what extent is he guilty of the vandalism that takes place there?
13. Rick accuses the Stotts of not caring for anyone else, of merely using other people to get what they want.

Are Jeff, Rick, and the other vendors guilty of this same attitude?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. A number of adult novels, such as *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, are about romances between poor young men and wealthy young women. Read one of these novels and compare the relationship between its protagonists and those in *Workin' for Peanuts*.
2. Compare and contrast Strasser's treatment of social class with that in another young adult novel, such as S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, M. E. Kerr's *Gentlehands* or *Him She Loves?*, or Strasser's own *Angel Dust Blues* or *A Touchy Subject*.
3. Discuss the symbolic use of setting in this novel. What, for example, do places like the stadium and Stottswood represent to Jeff?
4. At the end of the novel, Jeff and Melissa break up, probably never to see each other again. Discuss whether or not the novel has an unhappy ending, based on its major themes.
5. Discuss the role of minor characters such as the vendors and Melissa's friends. To what extent does Strasser use stereotypes?
6. A number of characters, including Jeff, his father, Rick, and Melissa, seem to be wasting their lives, waiting for something to happen to them. Compare and contrast the extent to which these characters eventually change.

For Further Reference

Cuseo, Allan A. Review. *Voice of Youth Advocates* 6 (1983): 209. This positive review argues that Strasser manages to prevent his characters from becoming caricatures.

Jameyson, Karen. Review. *Horn Book* 59 (1983): 175. A positive review that emphasizes Strasser's sensitive handling of Jeff's relationship with Melissa and with his father.

Strasser, Todd. "I Was a Teenage Boy."

Media and Methods 19,6 (1983): 10-12.

An interview with Strasser in which he discusses his attempt to write books that will appeal to male readers and help them to become interested in books.

———. "Stalking the Teen." *Horn Book* 62 (1986): 236-239. Strasser describes how he does research to accurately represent contemporary teenagers and their lifestyles in his novels.

———. "Todd Strasser." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*, edited by Don Gallo. Urbana, 111.: NCTE, 1990: 203-205. A short autobiographical sketch that focuses on Strasser's teenage years.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review. *Booklist* 79 (1983): 871. A synopsis of the novel followed by a review that praises Strasser's characterization of Jeff.

Zvirin also suggests, however, that Melissa is undeveloped and that the plot is tied up too neatly.

Related Titles

Although *Workin' for Peanuts* is not part of a series, it shares concerns with several of Strasser's other works, such as his books about Gary Specter and his rock band. First romance from the male point of view is a common theme in many of the books, including *Angel Dust Blues* (1979), in which Alex Lazar eventually falls in love with a rich girl named Ellen, and *A Touchy Subject* (1985), in which seventeen-year-old Scott Tauscher breaks up with his rich girlfriend, Alix, and helps his neighbor Paula escape to North Carolina. The effects of wealth and social class are also topics in these two books as well as in *Rock n' Roll Nights* (1982), *Turn It Up!* (1984), and *Wildlife* (1987), all of which involve the rise to celebrity of a teenage rock band.

Workin' for Peanuts, with its lowerclass young protagonist who is infatuated with a wealthy woman, shares plot elements with adult novels by other authors, including *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is also comparable to recent young adult novels such as S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and M. E. Kerr's *Gentlehands* (1978). *Workin' for Peanuts* was also made into a fairly faithful HBO "Family Showcase" Presentation in 1985.

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