



## The Kindness of Strangers

By Katrina Kittle  
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### Introduction

On a quiet street in the suburban Midwest, a popular, seemingly stable family keeps a terrible, dark secret behind closed doors—a secret that will have life-changing consequences for all who know them.

Sarah Laden, a young widow and mother of two, struggles to keep her own family together. After the death of her husband, her high school-aged son Nate has developed a rebellious streak, constantly falling in and out of trouble. Her kindhearted younger son Danny, though well-behaved, struggles to pass his remedial classes. All the while, Sarah must make ends meet by running a catering business out of her home.

When a shocking and unbelievable revelation rips apart the family of her closest friend, Sarah finds herself welcoming yet another young boy into her already tumultuous life.

Jordan, a quiet and reclusive elementary school classmate of Danny's, has survived a terrible tragedy, leaving him without a family. When Sarah becomes a foster mother to Jordan, a relationship develops that will force her to question the things of which she thought she was so sure. Yet Sarah is not the only one changed by this young boy. The Ladens will all face truths about themselves and each other and discover the power to forgive and to heal.

Powerful and poignant, *The Kindness of Strangers* is a shocking look at how the tragedy of a single family in a small, suburban town can effect so many. Told from varying perspectives, *The Kindness of Strangers* shows that even after the gravest injuries, redemption is always possible.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why was Sarah so reluctant to give up her "friendship" with Courtney? What is she holding on to when she refuses to believe in Courtney's guilt? What does this say about Sarah?
2. Jordan's relationship with his mother is complicated. His relationship with his father is more black and white. Which relationship is the more harmful one to Jordan's long-term health? Why?
3. In addition to parent-child relationships, what other relationships of dependence merge in the novel? How do the Kendricks prey on the weakness and vulnerability of others, both children and adults?
4. Consider the relationship between Danny and Jordan. In many ways it is the most difficult, but at the same time it could be argued that it is the most redeeming. Discuss the complexity and evolution of this relationship.
5. Jordan demonstrates a rare psychological sophistication when he rejects Danny in order to protect him from the Kendricks. In what other ways does Jordan behave in more mature ways than this age might predict?
6. Nate, Sarah, Danny, and Jordan all feel guilt at some point, yet those who are genuinely guilty do not seem abashed by their deeds. Examine these various manifestations of guilt; are they justified?
7. What role do domestic pets play in the novel? Why does Jordan take the rabbit to his closet? In what ways does Sarah's interaction with the robin suggest what is to come in the novel?
8. The chick is a powerful symbol in Sarah's first chapter. How does it follow through? What other instances of birds or flight play a significant role in the text?
9. What is the role of food in the novel? How does it create family? How does Sarah's talent as a caterer and cook shape her relationships with others? How does the metaphor of feeding and nourishment extend to the entire novel?
10. Each character in this novel has experienced a loss that has changed them. How does loss connect the various characters in the book to each other?
11. If Sarah's husband were alive, would circumstances be significantly altered? Why or why not?
12. Sarah's perceptions of Nate's behavior has been clouded by his earlier troubles. What allows her to go beyond this perception and to trust him again? What does it take to restore trust between parents and children?
13. The author chooses to begin and end the book in the future. How does this choice influence your reading of the book?

14. Why does the novel begin in Danny's voice rather than Jordan's or Sarah's?

15. The novel has four narratives: Danny, Sarah, Nate, and Jordan. What effect does this have on how the story is told? How does this narrative strategy reveal information about the characters?

### **About the Author**

Katrina Kittle is the author of *Traveling Light* and *Two Truths and a Lie*. She helped found the All Children's Theatre in Washington Township, Ohio, and teaches theatre and English to middle schoolers at the Miami Valley School in Dayton. Chapters from *The Kindness of Strangers* earned her an Ohio Arts Council grant. She lives in Dayton, Ohio. More information is available at [www.katrinakittle.com](http://www.katrinakittle.com).