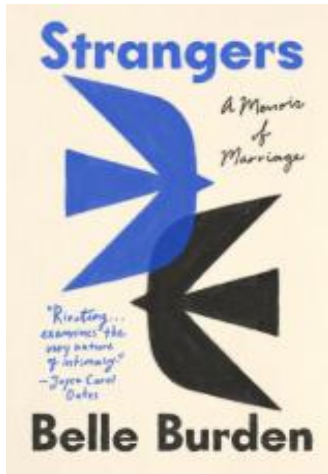


Strangers: A Memoir of Marriage

by Belle Burden



About the Book

A gorgeous memoir about the sudden end to a seemingly happy marriage --- an aching, love-filled and transcendent account of surviving betrayal and discovering joy.

?Riveting...examines the very nature of intimacy.?

? Joyce Carol Oates

It was a great love story, one for the ages. The speed of our beginning and the speed of our ending felt like matching bookends. They both came out of nowhere. He wanted it, he wanted me. And then he didn't.

In March 2020, Belle Burden was safe and secure with her family at their house on Martha's Vineyard, navigating the early days of the pandemic together --- building fires in the late afternoons, drinking whiskey sours, making roast chicken. Then, with no warning or explanation, her husband of 20 years announced that he was leaving her. Overnight, her caring, steady partner became a man she hardly recognized. He exited his life with her like an actor shrugging off a costume.

In STRANGERS, Burden revisits her marriage, searching for clues that her husband was not who she always thought he was. As she examines her relationship through a new lens, she reckons with her own family history and the lessons she intuited about how a woman is expected to behave in the face of betrayal. Through all of it, she is transformed. The discreet, compliant woman she once was --- someone nicknamed ?Belle the Good? --- gives way to someone braver, someone determined to use her voice.

With unflinching honesty and profound grace, Burden charts a path through heartbreak to show the power of a woman who refuses to give up on love. *STRANGERS* is a stunning, deeply moving, compulsively readable memoir heralding the arrival of a thrilling new literary talent.

Discussion Guide

1. The events of *STRANGERS* would be devastating to anyone, at any time. But the fact that they occur for Belle Burden right at the beginning of COVID lockdown makes her isolation that much starker --- and that much more painful. Discuss the pandemic's influence in the book.
2. In what ways does the ospreys' annual return to their nest symbolize the stability and fidelity that Belle believed her own family embodied --- and, of course, the marriage she thought she had?
3. Belle recognizes her privilege as a wealthy white woman. How does she reckon with her so-called good fortune in the midst of her unenviable devastation? How does financial security look different for Belle, James and each of their families of origin? What does *STRANGERS* have to say about the relationship between wealth and happiness?
4. How might James' childhood experience of his father's disappearance have shaped the way he understands parental love and commitment?
5. What does this memoir suggest about the cyclical nature of abandonment --- and the ways that unexamined trauma can echo across generations?
6. Belle is encouraged by members of her family and community to take the high road, i.e. not admitting the extent of James' betrayal and not writing her "Modern Love" essay (and, eventually, this memoir). Why is it so important for her to share her truth? What do you imagine might have happened if she hadn't?
7. How does this truth-telling also represent growth for Belle, and a rejection of the parts she's played her entire life?
8. Who in Belle's life shows up for her when she's at her lowest --- and what are the ways that touch her the most? Who reacts unexpectedly --- or even harmfully? Who do you think would show up for you? How have you supported your own loved ones through painful experiences?
9. What role does Belle have to play for her children's sake during the events of the book? If you have children, discuss a time you had to tamp down your feelings to protect them.
10. Talk about the moment, toward the end of *STRANGERS*, when Belle sees James on the street after the long unraveling of their marriage. How does this scene literalize the book's title? And how did it make you, the reader, feel?
11. If there's one question you could ask Belle --- about her life beyond this book; the writing process, or what she hopes readers will take away from *STRANGERS* --- what might it be?

Author Bio

Belle Burden is an attorney specializing in juvenile immigration cases. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*. Belle attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Harvard College and received her JD from New York University School of Law. She lives in New York City with her three children.

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