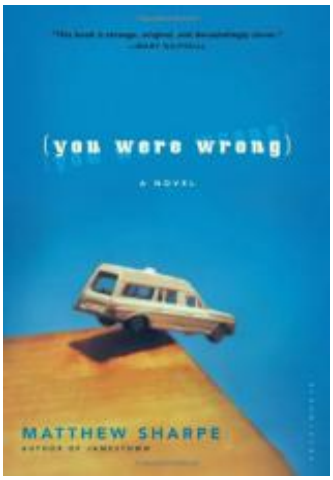
You Were Wrong

by Matthew Sharpe



About the Book

Karl Floor has only one thing to look forward to: someday he will be a homeowner. His deceased mother left her house to her second husband and Karl with the stipulation that stepfather and stepson must live there together. Karl, a 26-year-old math teacher, has no further ambition than to outlive his stepfather.

After being viciously attacked by two of his students, Karl stumbles home to find a robber in his house --- a gorgeous young robber, Sylvia Vetch. As sparks fly, Karl helps Sylvia make her getaway and joins her at a surreal party. Karl doesn?t remember much from that night --- only that he fell in love with Sylvia, and was scared off by her handsome protector, Stony. Karl finds himself entrenched in Sylvia and Stony?s on-again-off-again relationship, and as his frustration comes to a head, Karl learns that most of his simple life --- house, family, infatuation with Sylvia --- is built on lies. Now Karl runs the risk of never owning anything, including his own heart.

Discussion Guide

1. Consider the title of the novel. Who has been wrong about what? What ?wrongs? are corrected, and which misconceptions remain until the very end?

2. You Were Wrong opens with a short summary of Karl?s life: ?At 26, Karl Floor had had a hard life: father dead, mother dead, stepdad sick and mean, siblings none, friends none, foes so offhanded in their molestations that they did not make a crisp enough focal point for his energies? (1). Does this snapshot biography sum up Karl, or is there more to his personality? Do these hardships justify his unhappiness? Why or why not?

3. Soon after Karl meets Sylvia Vetch in his home, ?There was the unsettled question of whether her intentions toward Karl were mean or nice, whose answer would not influence his feelings, only their consequences? (26). When do Sylvia?s intentions, ?mean or nice,? become clear? Does she have positive or negative intentions toward Karl?

4. Compare the three Long Island houses in **You Were Wrong**: Karl and Jones?s shared home, Sylvia?s party shack, and Stony?s estate. Why are houses so important to the characters who own them? How does each house reflect its owners?

5. What are Karl?s first impressions of Stony, and how do his impressions change or remain the same over time? In which moments does Stony show some vulnerability?

6. Discuss the relationship between Karl and his stepfather, Larchmont Jones. What fundamental lies have shaped their relationship? Does Karl intend to kill Jones, or is he surprised by his own violent impulses toward his stepfather?

7. What is the role of race in You Were Wrong? How does Karl react to the racial identities of other characters?

8. Although she died years ago, Karl?s mother continues to have a significant impact upon her family. How does Karl express his mourning for his mother? How does her memory serve to keep Karl and his stepfather together, and how does her absence drive the two men apart?

9. Consider Karl?s impressions of Brooklyn. How does he view the city as he drives in from Long Island? How do the scenes set in Brooklyn differ from the rest of the novel?

10. In the end, why does Sylvia marry Stony? Who benefits from this marriage, and who suffers the consequences? What role does Karl play in their relationship? Is he able to protect Sylvia, as promised? Why or why not?

11. Sylvia calls Karl ?this innocent, adorable, melancholy weirdo who?s just himself, who isn?t machinating or striving, who wants nothing more than to carry on with his unambitious, unremarkable life? (164). Do you agree with Sylvia?s view of Karl? Why or why not? Why does this aspect of Karl?s personality appeal to Sylvia?

12. You Were Wrong contains several violent scenes, including Karl?s after-school beating, Jones?s near-death by pool cue, Stony?s failed attempt to cut off Karl?s finger, and Stony?s stabbing. How is violence depicted in the novel? When do violence and dark humor intersect?

13. Arv, Paul, and Hal --- Stony?s sidekick, and the two high school students he hires to attack Karl --- make an unusual backdrop of minor characters in **You Were Wrong**. What motivates these three characters? How do they come to a peaceful resolution with Karl?

14. In a surreal moment of the novel, a nightingale swoops into Karl?s bedroom and exchanges hearts with him. What does this black bird symbolize? What effect does this ?black bird heart in his breast? (107) have upon Karl, as he faces the news of Stony and Sylvia?s wedding?

15. After stabbing Stony, Sylvia tells Karl, ?You?re somebody?s stepfather now? (180). How might stepfatherhood change Karl?

Author Bio

Matthew Sharpe is the author of the novels **Jamestown**, **The Sleeping Father** and **Nothing Is Terrible**, as well as the short-story collection**Stories from the Tube**. He teaches creative writing at Wesleyan University. His stories and essays have appeared in *Harper's Magazine, Zoetrope, BOMB, McSweeney's, American Letters & Commentary, Southwest Review*,and *Teachers & Writers*. He lives in New York City. For more information, visit http://www.bloomsburyusa.com/books/catalog/you_were_wrong_pf_871

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