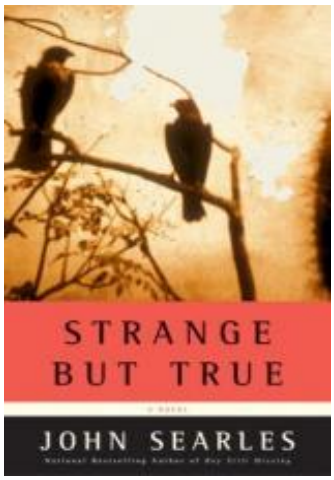
Strange But True

by John Searles



About the Book

After a mysterious fall from his New York City apartment, Philip Chase has moved back home with his mother, Charlene, a bitter woman who has never fully accepted the death of her younger son, Ronnie, five years earlier. Numb from watching too much television, rereading a tragic biography, and trading snipes with his mother, Philip is in stasis.

But everything changes late one windy February night when Ronnie's high school girlfriend shows up on their doorstep. A sad young woman who still bears the scars of the accident that took Ronnie's life on the night of their prom, Melissa has unexpectedly found hope. She is nine months pregnant. And the father, she claims, is Ronnie.

So begins this startling tale, which moves from one breathless surprise to another as Philip and his mother confront not only Melissa's past but their own. Their desperate search for answers takes them on a poignant and emotional journey, ultimately placing them in the path of murder and revenge.

At once a moving story of redemption and a heart-stopping work of suspense, **Strange but True** confirms John Searles's place among the most gifted voices of his generation. Beautifully written and charged with a sublime wit, the novel brings to vibrant life a cast of characters that no reader will forget.

Discussion Guide

1. Philip sees tremendous distinctions between his hometown and New York City. How do these two locales form key aspects of his identity? Where is he more genuinely at home?

2. The title phrase, **Strange but True**, is mentioned in the novel as one character's favorite newspaper column. How did you react when the truth was revealed regarding Melissa's pregnancy? Does society seem to prefer mysterious miracles or logical proof, or some balance of the two? Which do you prefer?

3. Discuss the author's use of timelines in the novel. What is the effect of storytelling through flashbacks, with historical revelations made throughout the narrative?

4. John Searles gives us insight into many points of view, including that of Philip's stepmother. How did these merging perspectives shape your opinion of the characters? Discuss the scenes that are re-visited in the novel from another character's point of view, such as the moment when Gail slips the eviction letter under Melissa's door or when Philip calls Charlene to say that he is not coming back.

5. What was the root cause of Philip's fall, and what are its repercussions? How does his Manhattan rescue contrast with the one at the end of the novel?

6. Among the many relics that Ronnie left behind, the Mercedes looms large. What does it say about him, and what is its role in shaping the plot?

7. The scenes leading up to Ronnie's death depict a classic high school relationship, with fantasies of prom night tempered by parental restrictions. How does Philip's experience with love and sexual awakening compare to that of his brother? Do the brothers experience a similar loss of innocence?

8. What are your impressions of Ronnie? Does he deserve the heroic memory his loved ones have ascribed to him? Discuss the moment when Charlene reveals the truth about why Ronnie and Chaz set out to date the Moody twins.

9. Consider the parenting approaches illustrated by the Moodys and the Chases. Which tactics more closely resemble your own upbringing?

10. What caused the novel's villain to bring such violent behavior so daringly close to home? What does this character's presence say about danger and suburbia?

11. What role does financial power play in the novel? What does it take for Melissa and Philip to leave home? Are they truly experiencing independent living?

12. Discuss Philip's unusual friendship with Donnelly. In what ways do he and his menagerie provide Philip with a new family? Is his new life enough to heal the scars of high school bullying?

13. The poetry of Anne Sexton is woven throughout the novel, yet Charlene wants Philip to embrace Robert Frost, whose style and imagery were more traditional than Sexton's. Still, both poets wrote about feelings of despair and loneliness. What does this literary tug-of-war indicate about the Chase household? What does Philip's own poetry reveal? What is the significance of the Anne Sexton passages quoted in the story?

14. What does Philip learn about himself while working with the restaurant's many immigrants? What bridge does this experience create for him?

15. Discuss the many ironies in place as Melissa gives birth, such as the memories that reveal the father's identity and Charlene's transformed personality. What future do you predict for Melissa's son?

16. Losing a loved one is a nearly universal experience. What coping strategies do the Moodys and the Chases use? How would you have endured such a tragedy?

17. The image of birds appears consistently throughout the novel. What do they represent? Discuss the significance of the book's closing line.

Author Bio

John Searles is a *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author of four novels. His books have been published in over a dozen languages and have been voted ?Best of the Year? or top picks by *Boston Globe, Entertainment Weekly, Salon* and the American Library Association. A frequent contributor to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post,* John was a top editor at *Cosmopolitan* for two decades, first hired by Helen Gurley Brown.

Critical Praise

"This is a page-turner with characters you can never forget."

Strange But True
by John Searles

Publication Date: August 1, 2004
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 320 pages
Publisher: William Morrow
ISBN-10: 0688175716
ISBN-13: 9780688175719