

Close Relationships with Strangers

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. In a 2011 interview with *Time Out*, director David Fincher said, “The first scene in a movie should teach the audience how to watch it.” If you apply this idea to literature, what does the first scene in *Close Relationships with Strangers* teach us about how to read the novel?
2. Ben describes Jack Whitlock as a longtime and constant presence in his life “like the mountains, the desert, the sky. Not a choice, but a part of the infrastructure.” Do you believe his assertion that his parasocial relationship with Jack is not something he actively chose?
3. The novel shifts between Ben’s present-day search for Jack Whitlock and his past relationship with Ellory. What does the inclusion of the past timeline tell you about the present one?
4. The novel is situated mostly in the cities of Las Vegas and Los Angeles, but there are also many scenes set in nature—Mt. Whitney in California, the Tushar Mountains in Utah, and the high desert of Nevada, to name a few. How does seeing Ben in the wilderness versus an urban environment affect your view of him?
5. “It’s just like wildlife photography,” Eddie tells Ben when describing paparazzi photography. It’s a sentiment that stays with him as he spends less time in nature and more time chasing celebrities. “The similarities are everywhere,” Ben says. “A subject who doesn’t stand still, doesn’t pose. No control over the light. No ability to redo the shot if it isn’t perfect the first time.” What are the ethics of making this comparison?
6. The paparazzi industry depicted in *Close Relationships with Strangers* is a dying one. Ben arrived in Los Angeles years after the era of six-figure checks and paparazzi driving the same nice cars as celebrities. Why do you think the story is told from this specific point in time?
7. Ellory loves Las Vegas, insisting that it is the most interesting city in the world and expressing admiration for Ben’s status as a third-generation local and an employee at a historic restaurant. Meanwhile, Ben is ambivalent at best. What do these different perspectives on Las Vegas tell us about these two characters?
8. Ben refers to Jack Whitlock as “a real man.” What do you think he means by this and what is the novel saying about masculinity?
9. Many of the characters in the novel are unnamed—the other paparazzi for example, and most of Ben’s subjects and sources. Why do you think Ben uses names when referring to some characters and professions when referring to others?
10. Throughout *Close Relationships with Strangers*, Ben is drawn away from Las Vegas and then back again. Where do you imagine him going next and what do you think his life looks like there?

