

Candy from Strangers Reading Guide

Print these questions and use them to lead a discussion about *Candy from Strangers* by Mark Coggins.

1. *“A straight, curmudgeonly private eye and a gay—and chronically unemployed—computer engineer”*

This is how private eye August Riordan characterizes himself and cross-dressing crooner Chris Duckworth in the first chapter of the book. There is an unlikely friendship. How do they compliment each other? Where do they butt heads?

2. *“You’re making me feel like a bad mother.”*

Ellen Stockwell seems to have made mistakes in dealing with her daughter Caroline and her disappearance. Are they understandable given the situation in the household, or are there things she should have done differently, regardless of the circumstances?

3. *“My parents haven’t cared what I did since I got my belly button pierced.”*

Is it unsafe or improper for young women to put up a web site like Caroline’s and her friend Monica’s? If you had a daughter their age (18) would you condone posting of content like Monica’s? Caroline’s? Is the content Caroline has on her pages any different than what you might typically see on the pages of a social networking site?

4. *“What you need is a baggy, floor-length housecoat from Sears Roebuck.”*

Monica goes out of her way to tease and entice Riordan, and Beth, the guru’s ex-disciple is clearly attracted to him, but he is only interested in one woman in the book. Why does he choose her? What is the basis of the attraction between the two of them? Given the circumstances, are they wrong to get involved?

5. *“And by the way, if you like the thong, you can bid on it tonight on eBay.”*

Monica is a tease, manipulative, is covetous of the finer things in life, but is still loyal in some ways to photography instructor Robert Wesson and to her friend Caroline. Is she truly a bad person? Or does she have some redeeming qualities?

6. *“I dreamed I was in a all-night diner eating a solitary meal when the rest of my teeth fell out.”*

What significance does Riordan’s dream with Monica have? Does it influence your opinion of Monica in any way?

7. *“Me and my crippled legs paid for the house. With the settlement I got from the automobile accident.”*

Beth has endured many hardships in life, including being taken advantage of by guru Sri Atma Nidhi, yet in the end seems to have coped remarkably well. Of all the women in the book, would you say she has the most stature? If not, who does?

8. *“You, Riordan. Junior G-Man on a pogo stick.”*

Riordan and Lieutenant Stockwell spar throughout the book—both physically and verbally. At bottom, do you think they have a grudging respect for each other? Why or why not?

9. *“What we are talking about, in effect, is the objectification of women. To create a something out of a someone.”*

Riordan and Odile, the French psychiatrist, share a theory that Caroline’s kidnapper may know her from another context, but has become emboldened to act as a result of seeing her posed in fetishistic pictures on the web. Do you agree that the real danger of young women having web sites like Caroline and Monica’s may come from the people they already know, rather than strangers who find them on the Internet?

10. *“He visited her the same night Riordan did.”*

The kidnapper visits Caroline in the hospital one night and asks her to do something. She agrees. Why do you think she does?

11. *“What this whole thing has been about.”*

What is the ultimate motivation for the kidnapper to commit the crimes he or she does? Do you agree with Lieutenant Stockwell’s assessment at the art college?

12. *“I’ve been waiting a long time for a fresh look at the private eye story. Mark Coggins has delivered it here.” –Michael Connelly; “Coggins recreates the private eye novel from scratch.” –Joe Gores*

In their comments about *Candy from Strangers*, Connelly and Gores suggest that the book in some sense freshens or reinvents private eye writing. How is the book different than the typical PI story, and how are Riordan and Duckworth different than the typical PI and partner?