



Come a Stranger

Cynthia Voigt

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Although devastated when she is asked to leave an exclusive Connecticut ballet school, Mina Smiths finds solace in her friendship with Tamer Shipp, the summer minister, and learns about his own difficult adolescence, Harlem ministry, and family life.

Come a Stranger Details

Date : Published November 1st 1995 by Simon Pulse (first published 1986)

ISBN : 9780689804441

Author : Cynthia Voigt

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Young Adult, Fiction, Realistic Fiction

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From Reader Review Come a Stranger for online ebook

Melusine Parry says

I hate ballet stories but this one isn't about dancing around in silly tutus, it's about body changes, adolescence and race. Beautiful.

Colin says

Aaaah! These books are sooo good! I love how each book adds more layers to the story and the family. I teared up at the end of this one. I just know when I get to the end of these, I'm going to wish there were more. I love it when I wish that characters I read about in books were real.

Reyna Ruiz says

Mina Smith is a young African American girl that realizes that racism is brought up against her due to the color of her skin. She loves dancing and is extremely excited when she got into a ballet camp with a scholarship. Her best friend unfortunately didn't get in it because her parents could not afford it. Mina goes to the camp and writes back to her family and best friend. She always tries to do her best at dancing and is told plenty of times to try harder. I noticed throughout the book that Mina's dance teacher doesn't like her and treats her differently because of her skin color.

Mina was lucky to go to that camp which was taught by one of the best dancers only because she had a scholarship but the girls rest of the girls were white and their parents could afford to send them every summer. Mina's teacher would say she needed more practice which would make Mina think she wasn't as good as she thought she was. Close to the end of the book Mina is told that she shouldn't dance at all. Mina was just a kid so I couldn't imagine how she must of felt when she is told this and is far away from home. Her friends are one of the few people that helped her get through it because they are white and they were still friends with Mina. They had little group talks in the dorm which made Mina feel comfortable. This made Mina believe that she could dance and commit to what has always been her dream.

I really liked this book because it's about a very strong girl who loves dancing and doesn't care about what people say about her skin color. She doesn't let anyone bring her down. This book really shows how you shouldn't judge people by their skin color. You have to treat others the way you want to be treated. It's a very interesting book and I recommend it to anyone who loves dancing and wouldn't give up at it for anything.

Julie says

I think this may be my next favorite, after Dicey's Song, of the Tillerman series.

Jenny Leiva says

This has been my favorite book of the Tillerman Cycle so far. I was hooked from the beginning when Mina went to ballet camp (and it didn't hurt that they danced to my favorite composer, Bartok). I'm not even really sure why I liked this book so much. I mean, obviously, Mina is a great character, and I loved learning more about her. Maybe I surprised myself with how interested I was in the race issues and Mina's view on them. I was looking forward to the point when I knew the Tillermans came into the story, but I didn't find the story lacking at all before that point.

Logan Hughes says

I wanted to love this book, because I loved the first two volumes of the Tillerman saga; and Mina, the main character of this installment, was my favorite character from "Dicey's Song." When I saw that book three of the series was not from Dicey's POV, instead of reading it, I immediately looked to see if there was one about Mina and lo, there was!, so I read this one right away, skipping over books 3-4. I think this was fine - I wasn't lost - but I would definitely read "Dicey's Song" before this one.

The book discusses race in a way that is surprisingly nuanced for a 90's YA novel written by a white person. While I sometimes felt that Voigt wasn't the right person to be exploring these issues (a POC author would have been better), in the context of a series with multiple POV's, it's better, I think, to do your best with a POC perspective than have all the protagonists be white. Voigt does a good job of making Mina's blackness important, but not the only thing that defines her, and of empathizing with the stressful position of being a token minority. She also begins to approach the idea that white people decided what is 'high culture', what's important to learn in school, what to put on standardized tests, and so on, although I would have liked this thread followed a bit more - she doesn't, for example, get all the way to colonialism.

On a moment-to-moment / page-to-page level, I really enjoyed this book and didn't want it to end. I love Mina as a character, and Voigt's prose is always gorgeous, simple and straightforward but emotionally dense. The problem is with the larger structure of the story. I was waiting/expecting Voigt to draw the different parts of the story together, but it never really happened. It's a meandering narrative that takes Mina all the way from fifth grade, through the events of "Dicey's Song" in eighth (and beyond, in an unnecessary epilogue). It lacks the unity of time of "Homecoming" or "Dicey's Song," and loses by it.

Although I was looking forward to getting to Dicey because I love Dicey and Mina's relationship, I unfortunately felt that the book took a dip in quality when we got to the events of "Dicey's Song." The one thing you don't want to do, from a racial sensitivity perspective, is write a book from the POV of a POC character but just make it be all about white characters, and tbh that is sort of what happens once Dicey is introduced? Mina sort of becomes a vessel through which to observe Dicey, which is absolutely not cool at all.

Another problem is that pivotal scenes from "Dicey's Song" are just sort of summarized, I think in an effort to keep from being repetitive. But I think this should not have been a worry! Most people reading the series in order would have had two books in between, and even I, who read "Dicey's Song" immediately before this, still would have preferred to see the relevant scenes play out in detail. Most disappointing was not getting the triumphant feeling of watching Mina completely Perry Mason a whole English class to defend Dicey from accusations of plagiarism. From her POV this could have been even better, but it's sort of glossed over in a way that it wouldn't be if "Dicey's Song" didn't exist. I think the goal for an "alternate POV" book like this should be that it stands completely on its own and is satisfying even if, for some reason, you've never read the original it's remixing.

The biggest disappointment was the final chapter, a totally unnecessarily epilogue in which Mina exists only

to witness the introduction of new character Dexter. It just is such a terrible idea to introduce a new character in an epilogue. It's extremely unsatisfying and also does a disservice to Mina to again be a vessel to observe someone else (at least it's another black character this time). Mina is amazing and bombastic and should not be relegated to the sidelines in her own book!

Punchup

There is plenty of good material here, but it is really two (or more) books:

1. Mina's summers at ballet camp could have been an entire book. She was supposed to have three; in the book, she only ends up going twice, but I think it would have been better, especially if expanding this part of the book to the length of an entire middle-grades novel, to keep the third summer, making each of the three hit different emotional notes. e.g. first summer: happily oblivious to racial weirdness, just glad to be there; second summer: realizes she's a token minority and subtly treated differently, feels resentful/isolated; third summer: she starts MAKING TROUBLE. I think that an arc like this would have been more satisfying and more explanatory of who Mina is and why, and giving this storyline more breathing room would have created more opportunity to make explicit some of the lessons about race, culture, and identity that are implied. While one of Voigt's strengths is hinting at emotional lessons without knocking you over the head, I think when it comes to race - especially for white readers who may not have had to consider these topics much - it's better to make the message very clear.

2. The book that is essentially "Dicey's Song" from Mina's perspective. Considering this as a distinct narrative would probably also have improved it, because as it is, I feel like it's unclear what we're supposed to get from seeing the same scenes from Dicey's book but from Mina's perspective. The coolest part is learning the backstory with Tamer Shipp that draws various threads together and informed Mina's persistence in trying to befriend Dicey despite her prickliness (something that needed explaining from "Dicey's Song"). But, that explanation cannot be the entire point of taking us through all the beats of Dicey and Mina's relationship again. I would have liked to see other things going on at the same time (so that Dicey wasn't the only important thing in Mina's life at this time, just as Mina isn't the only important thing in Dicey's life in her book), and I also would have liked more of an exploration of who Dicey is to Mina, and why the relationship becomes meaningful in its own right, beyond her original intention of introducing her to Tamer Shipp.

Queer Readings

There is no overt queer content in this book. It is my private headcanon that Mina is bisexual and that Mina and Dicey are in love. (So I guess one of the reasons I lose interest toward the end is that love interests for both of them are introduced.) Mina does spend a lot of time admiring women's beauty in this book. The book TELLS you that she has a crush on Tamer, but it SHOWS you how gorgeous she thinks Tamer's wife Alice is.

JoAnne says

Not my favorite in the Tillerman Cycle, but it was worth reading for the closure that was given to characters who had suffered in past books, especially coming right after "The Runner". Both books seems like the flip side of the same coin. There are so many differences between characters and their personalities, the outcome of their actions, yet both main characters ("Bullet" Tillerman and Mina Smiths) grew up in the same town, faced hardships growing up, dealt with racism in some manner (though one was white, the other black, so we read it from different sides). It didn't matter that one was from a later generation, was more likable than the

other, or (arguably) a better human being; both characters learned and grew (of course, following different paths), and came to some sort of conclusion / peace with life, and in the end of the second story, met up (sort of) in a satisfying way. My only gripe with "Come a Stranger" is the first half of the story, and I believe that's more personal preference rather than poor story telling. I was just not as interested as I could be to read about ballet camp full of prima donnas, but once that was left behind (literally and figuratively and with some amount of drama), it was good reading.

Gabby says

The main character Mina is a young girl that realizes that racism is brought up against her due to the color of her skin. She's so passionate with dancing and is extremely excited when she got into a dance camp with a scholarship. Her best friend unfortunately did not get in because her parents could not afford it. Mina goes to the camp and writes back to her family and friend. She tries her best at dancing and is told repeatedly to try harder. Midway through the book I understood that Mina's dance teacher does not like her and treats her differently due to her skin color.

I took to understanding that Mina was lucky to go to dance camp which was taught by one of the best dancers only because she had a scholarship but the rest of the girls were white and their parents could afford to send them every summer. I believe Mina's teacher didn't really show any strange behavior towards Mina until the end. Mina's teacher would say she needed more practice which would just make Mina think she wasn't as good as she thought she was. Near the end Mina is told that she shouldn't dance at all. Mina was just a kid so I couldn't imagine how she must have felt when she is told this and is far away from home. I think her friends are one of the few people that helped her get through it because they are white and they were still friends with Mina and had little group talks in the dorm which made Mina feel comfortable. This made Mina believe that she could dance and commit to what has always been her dream.

Cherie says

This was a wonderful story, beautifully written and seamlessly tied into the other books that Cynthia Voigt has written in this series. It is hard to see where it is going at first, but such a wonderful character study of an exceptional young woman and her family. Told from yet another perspective as only Cynthia Voigt can do, filled with people the other stories have introduced.

Vannessa Anderson says

Mina learned about racism through experience. The experience wasn't all bad because it helped her to see life as it really existed and through that experience, Mina was able to see people for whom and what they were, especially the adults. And at the same time, she learned a lot about herself; she became self-aware. Come a Stranger was well written and left nothing to the imagination.

I'd never heard of author Cynthia Voigt before Come A Stranger and am looking forward to reading more of her books.

Kirsten says

This is a warm, contemplative, and moving novel. Like most of the other books in the "Tillerman series" (which starts with the excellent *Homecoming*, this book could stand on its own easily, but gains even more depth and emotional resonance when one has read the previous novels in the cycle.

This book centers on Mina Smiths, who readers of *Dacey's Song* will remember as the young black woman who decides she's going to be Dacey's friend, come hell or high water. It fleshes out Mina's family and gives her a background that is well worth reading about.

When Mina goes to dance camp and realizes that she is the only black girl there, she begins to question her identity and her place in the world. Voigt follows her through several years as she grows into a strong, confident, and questioning young woman with the help of friends like Tamer Shipp (the visiting summer preacher) and eventually Dacey and her family. The book raises the issues of what it means to be black and a black woman very forthrightly, but not in a way that feels overly pedagogical; there are many thoughtful conversations that explore these issues, but always in a way that seems natural rather than preachy.

Despite this being one of those books where "nothing really happens" in terms of action, I found myself so sucked into Mina's world that I had trouble putting the book down, even when company came over.

The only real critique I have of it is that Voigt does not make it very clear what time period the book is set in. It was published in 1986, but since the majority of the events take place prior to the events in *Homecoming* (which came out in 1981), one can place it somewhere in the late 70's, which makes sense. It just struck me that many readers, especially those who have not read Voigt's other works, might not be able to pick up on these cues, and it feels like a bit of a failing on Voigt's part not to make it a little more clear.

Misti says

Mina has always loved to dance, so she's thrilled to get a scholarship to a summer ballet camp. That first summer is everything she dreamed it would be (even if she is the only minority student), but when she goes back for the second year, things have changed. The camp director tells Mina that she no longer has the right build for ballet — but Mina has to wonder if perhaps she doesn't have the right skin color, either.

It's so hard for me to pick a favorite book in this series. Sometimes it's this book. The issues of race addressed here seem particularly timely in the current climate.

Jessica says

This is one of my favorite books by Cynthia Voigt, along with *Izzy Willy Nilly*. Mina was my favorite character and I loved how the Tillerman family intertwined with her coming of age story.

Elsa K says

I am going to be sad when the Tillerman cycle is done. Mina is such a fun character and I loved getting to

know her and her family more. I don't know what those of African American background would think, but I remember reading this as a girl and wanting to do anything I could to fight racial inequality. One of the things I love about quality literature-good themes really shape your character and beliefs. I also love that not much happens in these books in way of action, but I still find them page turners. I love the depth of character development.

I seriously did not remember Tamer Shipp being in this! Interesting to see the few bits that stuck with me. It was a pleasant surprise. My one frustration was that I didn't like seeing that Mina had ulterior motives for befriending Dicey! I also am curious to see if anything happens with Dexter, who was added in the last few pages.

Katie M. says

Books by white authors about characters of color - particularly African Americans - are... well, it's complicated. But it was the 90s, and I loved this book, and Cynthia Voigt is a fantastic writer, so I guess at least there's that. She phones it in a little bit when going through the scenes (from Mina's perspective) that are included in other books, but that doesn't end up being a fatal flaw. All the Tillerman novels are pretty excellent really; I used to love (um. Clearly still do.) going back to Crisfield with Dicey and Mina and Jeff.
