

Charm & Strange
Discussion Guide

Part 1

The novel is structured in alternating chapters in the past and present. Why do you think Kuehn chose to tell the story this way?

Examine the character of Win. How does he change throughout the course of the novel?

Each of the settings in *Charm & Strange* are important to the story. Examine the following settings (the lake house, the carnival, the bridge, Win's school, the party in the woods) and explain their role in the story.

What characters are looking out for Win's well being? What characters seem more intent on hurting him?

When Win goes away to boarding school, he changes his name from Andrew (Drew) to Win. He says that his father's name is Winston. Why would he choose his father's name? What is significant about this?

Examine the idea of predator versus prey in this book. How is Win both?

Discuss the idea between real and imaginary in this book. What is real to Win? What is imaginary?

What is the wolf in Win a metaphor for? What is the wolf that comes out in each family member a metaphor for?

Do you believe that Win really does have a wolf in him waiting to come out? Why or why not?

Discuss the significance of the title *Charm & Strange*. What does it mean? Why is it important in the story?

The book ends with Win thinking:

“Somewhere, somehow, adrift in the sea and far from the stars, I've found faith.

In myself.

And that makes all the difference.”

How has he found faith?

Part 2

The book is divided into two parts. The first begins with a quote from James Joyce:

“Three quarks for Muster Mark!
Sure he hasn’t got much of a bark
And sure any he has it’s all beside the mark.”

Examine this quote. How does it relate to the first section of the book?

How would you characterize Win’s mental state in the present narrative? Find specific examples from the text to support your view.

Why does Win act out using physical destruction? What is significant about this?

Kuehn uses foreshadowing throughout the book to help reveal the truth about Win’s father. Go back to the text and reference specific points where this foreshadowing can be found. Explain how each works to show the reader the secrets of Win’s past.

Each chapter is labeled either “matter” or “antimatter.” Discuss the meaning of the chapter titles. How does it relate to the text as a whole?

Look at the titles of the book Win finds when he goes into the biology lab:

Neuroscience
Biopsychology
Origin of the Species
Philosophical Investigations

What is the significance of these titles? How do they relate to Win and the story?

The school motto is “*Ad astra per aspera*”, which is Latin for “To the stars through difficulty.” Stars are referenced often in the story. Where do we see them? What do they symbolize to Win?

What is the significance of calling the location of the parties that Win’s classmates go to Eden? Students from years past called it Paradise. Why do you think it changed to Eden?

Why does Win’s grandmother seem to hate him? Analyze her view toward him and explain why she might act this way.

Discuss Win’s relationship with Anna. What is her role in the story?

Phoebe tells Win that she heard that his parents were cousins:

“You know,” she began as a wicked smile crept across her pale lips, “your parents are cousins. How gross is that?” Win disputes her comment and thinks, “This upset me terribly. And it couldn’t be true. My parents had met when my mom took one of my father’s courses at the university. I knew that. It explained the

big age gap between them and why my dad was always right and my mom was always wrong. But I hated the fact that Phoebe would even say such a thing.” Why would she say this? Why is it important to the novel?

What role does Keith and Charlie’s relationship play in the novel?

Why does Keith drug Win? What is significant about him making the choice to do that?

Examine the visit to the wolf sanctuary and Keith’s words later about the pack to his brother, “Remember those wolves we saw last year, Drew? Their pack mentality? That guy, he said the lone wolves usually die, so you can’t be a lone wolf, all right? We’re like that pack. We have to stick together, no matter what. Promise me that.” Why is this scene significant? What do his words foreshadow?

Examine the scene in Chapter Twenty-Nine between Win and Lex’s girlfriend. Why does Win do this? What character does he most resemble at this point and what clues show you this?

The second part of the book begins with a quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein:

“We do not say that *possibly* a dog talks to itself. Is that because we are so minutely acquainted with its soul?”

How does this quote relate to the second section of the book?

Examine Chapter Thirty-Six. What is the importance of the juxtaposition of the opening lines, “We leave Eden,” to what is revealed in this chapter.

When Lex and Jordan take Win back down from the mountain, Win thinks:

“I know where we’re going, but I don’t understand how any of this came about. I don’t understand why they’re doing this for me. They are not my friends. I have gone out of my way to make sure of that.”

What has he done to guarantee that they are not his friends? Do you agree with him that they are not his friends? Why or why not?

Examine the scene in Chapter Thirty-Six. Win is convinced that he saw his sister in the woods. Do you believe he has? Why or why not?

When Win talks to the doctor at the end of the book about what happened at the bridge with his siblings, the doctor asks if wanting to live was selfish. Win says, “Yes. Siobhan and Keith, they knew what we were. What the future held for us. And we all made a pact not to come...that. To never grow up and hurt anyone. But I wasn’t strong enough. I’m weak. And so I lived.”

- What is it that Win and his siblings believe they are?
- Do you believe that Win is weak? Why or why not?
- Do you believe Win has grown up and become what he predicted? If he hasn’t, do you believe he will? Explain.

Examine the night when Anna and Ricky kill a man. How is this event significant to the story?

When talking about his brother, Win says, "I'll never know what kind of magic my brother believed in. What I do know is that more than anything, Keith wished for less suffering in the world." Where does the reader see Keith trying to create less suffering in the world?

In Chapter Seven, when Win talks with his Chemistry teacher, Mr. Byles, they discuss about matter. Win says, "I'll admit those talks helped me, and when I read about the sea quarks, I understood why. They contain particles of matter and antimatter, and where the two touch exists this constant stream of creation and annihilation. Scientists call this place "the sea." And it's what pitches inside of me as I hurry away from his furrowed brow, his worried frown."

In Chapter Forty, when speaking about Lex and Jordan's relationship, Win says, "The attraction part is a given, but maybe opposites really can coexist in piece." How does this relate not only to Lex and Jordan, but also to the novel?

When Jordan and Lex visit Win in the hospital, Jordan asks if it's helped Win. Win thinks, "*Yes, it's helped...but you've helped more.*" How has Jordan helped Win? How has Lex helped him?

While at the hospital, Win tells Jordan, "My doctor says that sometimes when things happen to kids, like really little kids and really terrible things, they don't know how to make sense of it all. So they come up with ways of understanding the world that don't look like how other people think things work. Almost like a new language." What is Win's language? How does he make sense of things?

Kuehn starts the book with the sentence, "I don't feel the presence of God here." The last chapter takes the reader back to that opening line, "I still don't feel the presence of God." What affect does this have on the story? What does it reveal about Win and the journey he has made?

When Win reflects back to standing on the bridge with his siblings, he says, "I looked at Keith and he looked at me. I didn't have to pull my hand back before they jumped. He let go." Why do you think Keith let go?

Part 3

We read books for enjoyment, but sometimes we discover that books can teach us things. What has *Charm & Strange* taught you? Describe in detail.

Charm & Strange is written in first person POV. Select a scene in the book and re-write it in a different POV. How does this change the novel? What POV do you like better? Explain your view.

Who are the secondary characters in the novel? Explain how each of these secondary characters is important and what they contribute to the novel.

Do you believe that people can escape their pasts? Why or why not?

One of the major themes in the book is discovering who your true self is. Where do we see examples of this? How does this theme develop throughout the book and how does it affect the outcome. Cite specific textual examples to support your responses.

Additional Question: Can you think of any other stories, poems, movies, or songs that have this same theme? Describe them.

Identify another theme or central idea in the book. Where do we see examples of it? How does this theme develop throughout the book and how does it affect the outcome? Cite specific textual examples to support your responses.

What statement is the author, Stephanie Kuehn, making about family? Explain using specific examples from the text.

One could argue that this is a coming of age story. Support this claim using specific examples from the text. Then, dispute this claim. How is this not a coming of age novel?

This guide aligns with Common Core Standards ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10.