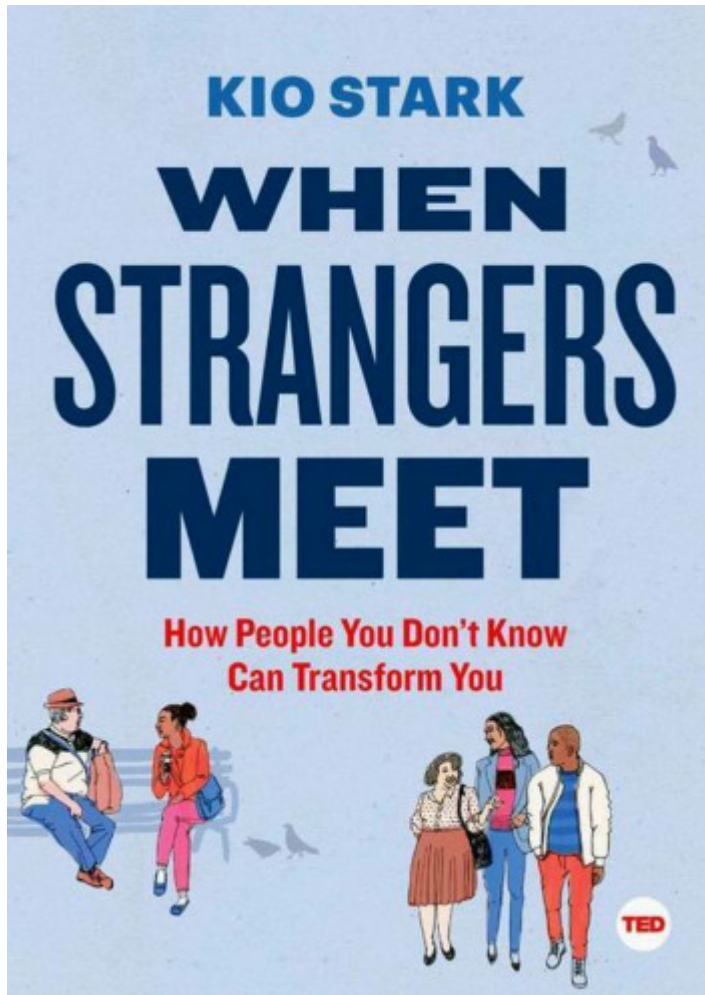


Conversation Starter: 'When Strangers Meet' a delightful little manual

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"When Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You" by Kio Stark. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016, 128 pages, \$16.99.



"Talking to strangers is good for you," Kio Stark asserts near the beginning of "When Strangers Meet: How People You Don't Know Can Transform You," her new primer on the art and science of making new friends. "Talking to a stranger is, at its best, an exquisite interruption of what you were expecting to happen when you walked down the street or rode on a bus, shopped at the grocery store or wandered around a museum, whiled away some time on a park bench or waited in a long, slow line."

"When something unexpected happens it calls you to full attention, turns your awareness outward to the world," she continues. "You are awake. When you interact with a stranger you're not in your own head, you're not on autopilot from here to there. You are present in the moment. And to be present is to feel alive."

Stark has gained considerable acclaim for her advocacy of meeting and interacting with people you don't know. After reading her current offering, I can see why. Her cultural analysis tends to be spot-on and

her empathetic examination of the human emotions that often arise when we reach out to strangers is surprisingly insightful and remarkably perceptive. She draws heavily from her personal experience; I found myself relating to many of the vignettes she includes in a highly intimate and unpredictably visceral way. Consider the following passage from "The Mechanics of Interaction," the fourth chapter: "Today everyone's talking. The contractor wants to talk about my shoes. 'They're good for my back,' I tell him. 'Usually I slouch.' I drop a shoulder forward to show him, and he taps it with one finger. 'Bad habits' is all he says. The butcher likes my scarf. 'Emergency purchase,' I tell him, 'One day it just got cold all of a sudden and I had no choice.' He smiles. 'That's the only way to shop.' Out on the street a little boy backs up against his mother's legs and stares at me. 'Your hair is red,' he says. It's true. It's the color of a fire engine. He's terrified."

These are obviously the kind of ordinary, mundane exchanges we all have on a daily basis. But once you read Stark's interpretation of the underlying meaning behind what we all tend to take for

granted or ignore altogether, you may have a greater appreciation for the power a simple word or phrase can often have on the quality of our lives – and not just in the short term. In fact, her explanation of the unconscious processes involved in our decisions about whom we approach or respond to was perhaps the most fascinating aspect of her overall contribution to our collective understanding of human nature and how it influences every aspect of our existence. Stark goes beyond simple taxonomy, however, as she delves deeply into the dynamics that seem to evolve whenever we engage in a conversation with someone who is otherwise unfamiliar to us. She focuses on the unwritten rules and trust issues that invariably accentuate or impede our ability to make authentic connections.

Several passages reminded me of my father. This may be more of a generational characteristic, but he always seemed to be able to strike up a conversation with people he had just met, pretty much regardless of the circumstances. Every year when we were on vacation, for instance, within about five minutes of checking into the motel he would be talking with complete strangers as if he had known them his entire life. I always admired that ability he had.

“When Strangers Meet” consists of an introduction, four relatively concise chapters and an epilogue. The book is beautifully illustrated with a series of photographs, drawings and other graphics that serve to enhance the various points she is making. I found that these actually added to the poignancy of her prose in a way that I had not anticipated. It is obvious Stark spent a considerable amount of time selecting images that would promote more in-depth self-reflection than is possible through mere words on a page.

A rare feature of this delightful little manual is the inclusion of a series of “expeditions” that help the reader translate her ideas into action. Personally, I found these exercises, including “people watching,” “say hello to everyone” and “you don’t belong here” to be the most thought-provoking dimension of her work. Certainly, they helped bring the strategies and techniques described earlier to life in an entertaining, spirited and thought-provoking manner. For instance, consider the following expedition she refers to as “the question.”

“You approach someone who is in a hurry and ask them if you can ask them a question on camera. Some people may be willing to answer you but not on camera – that’s fine! The point is the conversation, not the recording. Start recording before you pose your question, but don’t give them any examples of answers. Your job is to listen. If the person seems comfortable talking, you can ask follow-up questions, but don’t be too hasty. Give people a chance to fill in their own silences. That’s often when the magic really happens.”

Before she decided to drop out and pursue other interests, Stark completed some doctoral work at Yale University’s American Studies program. Her résumé includes various jobs in journalism, advertising, community research and game design, including a stint at New York University’s Interactive Telecommunications Program. In addition to serving as a regular adviser to the Knight News Challenge competition, she consults with a wide variety of international companies, agencies and organizations and is in demand as a conference speaker. Her previous books include “Follow Me Down,” a novel, and “Don’t Go Back to School,” an independent learning handbook.

If you want to know whether you should invest in this neat little volume, you might want to check out the author’s highly popular Ted Talk, “Kio Stark: Why You Should Talk to Strangers,” which was filmed in February at an event in Vancouver, British Columbia. The 12-minute clip, which can be found at www.ted.com, has already been viewed by well over a million people from around the world.

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