

The Stranger on Netflix: A world of secrets, unraveled

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The Stranger is an eight-part British miniseries now available for streaming on Netflix. It is based on a 2015 novel of the same title by mystery author Harlan Coben.

Adam Price (Richard Armitage) is a well-to-do middle class lawyer living in a wealthy enclave near Manchester. He leads a comfortable life with his wife Corinne (Dervla Kirwan) and sons Thomas (Jacob Dudman) and Ryan (Misha Handley).

While attending his son's football match, Adam is approached by a young stranger (Hannah John-Kamen) who reveals to him a shocking secret: that Corinne had faked a pregnancy and miscarriage two years earlier, apparently in an effort to pressure Adam to stay in the relationship. Adam, appalled by the revelation, demands that the stranger tell him how she obtained her information, but she leaves without divulging her identity or motives.

Adam confronts Corinne, who doesn't deny the accusation, but insists to Adam that, "This isn't what you think. There's more to this." She promises to tell Adam the truth at a later time. That night, Corinne vanishes.

Meanwhile, two police detectives, the veteran Johanna Griffin (Siobhan Finneran) and the youthful Wesley Ross (Kadiff Kirwan) investigate a grisly scene where an alpaca has been beheaded on a city sidewalk, with bite marks on its legs that apparently came from human teeth. While checking out a nearby alpaca farm, the detectives find the nude and unconscious body of teenager Dante Gunnarsson (Kai Alexander). Further investigation reveals that Gunnarsson had taken part in a raucous party of local teens the night before. Alcohol and drugs had been in abundance; so had various forms of vindictive behavior.

Detective Griffin, approaching retirement and newly

rejuvenated after ending her stagnant marriage, resolves to take a long-planned vacation with friend Heidi Doyle (Jennifer Saunders). Doyle, however, is approached by the same stranger who had confronted Adam and informed that her daughter has been offering herself up as a "sugar baby" (prostitute, essentially) on a website that pairs young women with wealthy older men. The stranger demands thousands in blackmail money to keep the information from becoming public. As Doyle is preparing to pay, she is attacked and murdered by a man demanding information about the stranger. The man is later revealed to be Patrick Katz (Paul Kaye), police officer and colleague of Griffin and Ross.

As Adam hunts for clues as to the whereabouts of his missing wife, Griffin investigates the death of her friend. The setup teases the viewer with a number of mysterious questions. Where has Corinne gone? What happened to Gunnarsson and the alpaca? Who is Katz working for? And who is the mysterious stranger?

Twists and turns abound, some more plausible than others. By the conclusion, the seemingly disparate events are revealed to be, in fact, quite closely connected, woven together by a web of secrets and lies in which nearly every character is implicated.

Coben, as we have noted before, is an adequate, though uninspired mystery writer, capable of putting together an intriguing premise, but lacking the artistic ability to develop anything much beyond that. His books are the sort that sound more interesting on the back cover than they end up being on the page.

There are some appealing elements here. The various mysteries are set up in an intriguing fashion, and the pace with which the events come into focus is well managed, at least for the first several episodes. The series holds the viewer's attention, so long as the unresolved questions remain cloaked in uncertainty.

There is an effort made to ground the various twists in psychological reality, an effort aided by fine acting from Armitage and Finneran in particular.

Certain subplots touch on social realities. A client of Adam's, Martin Killane (Stephen Rea), is fighting to protect his house from demolition by a real estate company that seeks to "develop" the property for luxury apartments, while cloaking their intentions with the claim that 25 percent of the flats will be reserved for affordable housing. (Adam: "You have no intention of providing affordable housing. Once construction starts, you'll claim that costs are rising, and that this 25 percent will shrink to 20 percent, and then 10 percent...") Doyle's daughter is driven into prostitution due to the rising cost of higher education. Enormous medical costs lead another character into a desperate, self-destructive spiral.

As the series moves toward its conclusion, however, the events move from the intriguing, to the implausible, to—finally—the absurd. The urge to surprise the viewer with the unexpected overtakes all other concerns. The credibility of the story, already strained, breaks completely with a final, ridiculous twist.

Mystery writers of an earlier era, despite working under difficult social-political circumstances and dealing with the limitations of the genre, were nonetheless able to create affecting portrayals of a society with a deep sickness at its core. The works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and James M. Cain, for example, had a potent social realism to them. They looked unflinchingly at the corruption, vice, greed and violence that existed in America's seamy underbelly, in which the forces of "law and order" were as implicated as any criminal enterprise.

Coben and his collaborators, on the other hand, remain largely on the surface. Despite populating a story with characters each of whom carries a painful secret of some kind, the issues raised never probe beyond a superficial topicality: teenage drug use, the phenomenon of internet "revenge porn," steroid use in sports, etc. The police, notwithstanding the "bad apple" Katz, are unambiguously heroic. The explosive violence in the story's climax seems driven more by the needs of the genre than by the psychologies of the characters or the social realities in which they live. We are merely expected to swallow that suburban middle-class types with no history of violence can commit acts

of enormous brutality and criminality with no other explanation given than, "None of us know what we're capable of until the time comes."

The stranger, whose self-appointed mission is to expose secrets of every kind ("A secret revealed is a secret destroyed"), is apparently uninterested in bringing larger social truths to light, opting instead for exposing interpersonal betrayals and untruths of varying degrees of significance. Nonetheless, the revelations set in motion events that lead to murder and mayhem. The question is raised: is revealing the truth more destructive than living with a lie? A typically noncommittal attitude is taken, and the issue is left unresolved.

It should also be noted that the change of setting from suburban New Jersey (where the book is set) to Manchester creates some difficulties. Several story elements, including the cutthroat competitiveness underlying middle class suburban life and the desperation of a parent facing their child's massive medical costs, clearly seem designed with an American context in mind, and translate awkwardly to the new setting.

In any case, this is an occasionally engaging, but ultimately slight story. It toys with some interesting elements, but doesn't make much of them. There are, of course, plenty of secrets to be exposed in modern capitalist society. But it will take a more artistically committed effort to root them out.



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