

Book Club Discussion Questions and
A Conversation with Fern Schumer Chapman
Author of
**BROTHERS, SISTERS,
STRANGERS**

(Viking Books)

Questions for book clubs:

What are a sibling's responsibilities to a brother or sister? What are a sibling's responsibility to an estranged sister or brother? Would you do what Fern did to help her brother out of a dark place?

How do you think your childhood informed your relationship with your sibling? Would you consider your relationship with your sibling close, limited, or distant?

How has your relationship with your sibling changed with each life stage? Do you find yourself becoming closer or more distant, depending on life circumstances? Explain.

Are you estranged from any of your siblings or family member? Do you think there's any chance of reconciliation? Are you willing to try?

What would you do if two of your children were estranged? Did you feel empathy for Edith, Fern and Scott's mother, who felt caught between her children as a result of their estrangement?

Fern and Scott may not have been able to rebuild their relationship. Did Fern's oldest son make a persuasive argument as to why she should not get involved with Scott again?

Have you found friendships that feel like sibling relationships or fictive kin?

Why do you think the estrangement haunted Fern? Why couldn't she simply cut off from her brother and accept the estrangement?

Why did the author choose to highlight her Cradle experiences?

How did the book, Brothers, Sisters, Strangers, change your understanding of sibling relationships?

A Conversation with Fern Schumer Chapman:

You and your brother Scott were estranged for nearly 40 years. What changed so that you finally mended your relationship?

My brother was suffering with depression, and my mother didn't know how to help him. She called and begged me to intervene. That crisis was the catalyst that led to our reconciliation.

Why did you decide to share Scott's and your story and write this book?

For years, I simply couldn't understand the estrangement. I ruminated endlessly about it. I felt I was mourning the living. Many who are estranged suffer in silence, isolated from our sibling and from some social support against the loss. I wrote this book for those who have no relationship with a sibling, to offer comfort, to help mitigate the stigma of estrangement, and to tear down the walls of isolation.

How common is sibling estrangement? People commonly talk about their divorce or not getting along with a parent but when it comes to talking about not getting along with a sibling, they aren't so open. Why is this?

Sibling estrangement carries a deep stigma. Most people project onto others their own notions of what a family *should* look like. Society tends to cherish an idealized version of family in which relationships are foundational and indissoluble. Many who are estranged don't discuss the cutoff, fearing others will judge or blame them for their circumstances. Consequently, siblings are reluctant to admit on surveys that they are estranged, and therefore, researchers can't accurately assess this phenomenon. However, many researchers report that sibling estrangement is "epidemic."

What are some risk factors for sibling estrangement?

Siblings are at risk for estrangement when:

- They are raised in a chaotic, traumatized family.
- They never develop communication skills to address their differences.
- Their parents favor one child, resulting in intense sibling jealousies and competition.
- The siblings have deep political differences.
- The siblings argue over inheritance and elderly care
- The family struggles with alcoholism, addictions and mental health issues.

What personality types are more vulnerable to sibling estrangement?

Siblings raised in narcissistic families find it difficult to sustain relationships, especially if the sibling is also narcissistic. As children, these siblings often competed and were pitted against each other. Many experienced narcissistic triangulation when a family member tried to control the flow, interpretation, and nuances of communication. Children reared in narcissistic homes rarely feel connected to one another as adults.

What is the best plan for approaching reconciliation?

Feuding siblings may need to decide in advance of a meeting on specific rules for peaceful interactions in limited circumstances. Certain topics, jokes, or stories may be off-limits. Sometimes

an unbiased mediator is necessary to negotiate these terms, especially in cases of sexual abuse. My brother and I talked to a therapist to help us begin the process of reconciliation.

What is the biggest hurdle in reconciliation and what is your recommendations for getting beyond it?

For four decades, I felt a chronic sense of rejection and betrayal because I had no relationship with my only sibling. Questions constantly nagged at me: *How did I contribute to the cutoff? If my only sibling didn't want a relationship with me, who would? Would I ever be able to find a sense of balance and well-being?* The biggest hurdle for me in reconciliation was getting beyond the sense of betrayal and reestablishing trust. Consistent contact and honesty with each other helped me learn to trust my brother and to build a mutually satisfying relationship.

Are there any circumstances under which reconciliation with a sibling isn't advised?

When there is an “ongoing negative relationship”—such as abuse, neglect, incest, alcoholism, addiction, or criminal behavior—therapists often recommend that a sibling cut off from a family member. Often, those who cut off from a sibling are protecting themselves.

What role do parents play in sibling rivalry in estrangement and how can they prevent it?

First, children raised in chaotic, abusive, or neglectful families run the greatest risk of estrangement. A sense of disconnection in childhood can lead estrangement in adulthood, as these children lack early attachment experiences and a sense of ‘belonging’ to a family.

Second, when parents don't model the necessary skills—listening, apologizing, cooling off—to resolve conflicts, small disagreements can escalate. Those who have poor communication skills may handle stress or strife in a relationship by simply shutting down and cutting off.

Third, when a parent favors a child, that sibling may become more egotistical, and that can lead to estrangement. The “golden child” places his or her needs above the family. Parents need to teach that child that the family comes first and the individual comes second.

How does sibling estrangement affect other members of the family?

My mother felt sad, disappointed, embarrassed, and angry during the decades when my brother and I had no relationship. She didn't know what to do when, for example, she was invited to my nephew's wedding and my family was not invited to the event. For family members, it's very difficult not to take sides. It's even harder to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.