

## **The Stranger Next Door** **by Peg Kehret and Pete the Cat**

About the book: Alex's only friend in his new neighborhood is his pet cat, Pete. When a boy his age, Rocky, moves in next door Alex has hopes of getting a friend. But Rocky is mysterious about his past and avoids Alex's invitations to come over. After Rocky moves in street signs are taken down and arson fires destroy homes in the development. Is it the bullies at school who resent their dirt-bike trails being ruined by construction or is it the new neighbor? Is there another, more mysterious explanation? The story is told partly from the viewpoint of Pete who, unbeknownst to his family, can read and write.

About the guide: This guide includes discussion questions and projects appropriate for children's book clubs, literature circles, and classroom discussions. It is intended to provoke thought and insight into the themes of this book which include bullying, fear, bravery, friendship, blame and pet relationships.

### Author Interview:

1. What inspired you to include the cat's perspective?

One day I left my office for a few moments to get something to drink. When I returned, there were several lines of gibberish typed into the manuscript I was working on, and my cat, Pete, was sitting on my desk. I realized Pete had stomped around on the keyboard while I was out of the room.

A few days later, the same thing happened: I left for a short time, and when I returned Pete had walked on the keyboard, adding a lot of nonsense to my book.

I laughed and told my husband, "Pete wants to help me write my books." Then I began wondering what Pete would write if he really could, and I knew that any book Pete wrote would star Pete himself as the brave hero. Before long, I began experimenting with telling part of the story from Pete's viewpoint.

2. All of your books have great action to them. Is this the type of book you like to read most too?

I read many different kinds of books, both fiction and nonfiction, adult books and books for kids. Although I do enjoy some fast-paced mysteries, I tend to read more philosophical books that deal with emotional problems.

3. What do you think our pets teach us?

The most important thing animals teach is how to give unconditional love. They are so much more forgiving than humans are. They also live in the moment, enjoying each hour as it comes without worrying about the future or regretting the past.

4. What is your process for revising a novel?

Revision is my favorite part of the writing process. I do quite a bit of revising as I go along, rereading what I wrote the day before. At some point, I print out a hard copy, then go through it and make corrections by hand. I usually go through this process several times before I finally can't find anything more to correct. However, I don't read my books once they're published because when I do, I always find something I want to change.

5. Do you ever think about what your characters are doing after the close of the book? Do you ever consider writing sequels?

Yes, I've written sequels several times – including a sequel to The Stranger Next Door. It's called Spy Cat and it's co-authored by Pete. A third book with Pete, Trapped, will be published in 2006.

#### Discussion Guide:

1. Describe Duke and Henry. Why are they bullying Alex and Rocky? What is the best way to deal with bullies? What does Rocky do to the bullies? Would you have done that? Why or why not.
2. Clifford is yanked away from everything he has known all his life. What do you think this must be like? How would you feel if it were you? Who and what would you hate to leave behind?
3. Why do you think the author decided to add Pete's perspective to the story? What does it add to the book? What do you think your pet thinks? Do pets know more than we give them credit for?
4. Why do the Kendrills think that the Morris family is wealthy? Do people have preconceived ideas about rich families? Do you think people with money are really happier than people with less? Why? Is Rocky happier?
5. Benjie is a little brother with an active imagination! What types of things does he wish for? Why do you think some people are very imaginative while others aren't? How does a person develop and keep a vivid imagination?
6. Both Alex and Rocky are new to Valley View Estates. What types of things are difficult about moving into a new home and school? Have you ever moved? What can be good about moving?

7. Who do you think cut down the signs in the neighborhood? Why is this more dangerous than it seems? Has there ever been vandalism in your own neighborhood? What happened? Did the vandals get caught?
8. What is arson? Why do people commit this crime? What type of evidence can be gleaned from a fire scene?
9. Do you think Alex should have told his parents about the threat that Duke and Henry made? Would you have told? What would it have prevented?
10. Why did the Lexton family need to change their identity and move so suddenly? Would you agree to testify? Why or why not? How did Rocky feel about learning about his biological father?
11. Summarize how the arsonist was caught. Who recognized him first? What happened as a result of his brave actions?
12. Will Alex and Rocky become friends? Do you think Rocky will ever disclose the truth about his past to Alex?

#### Projects:

##### Language Arts:

Write a goodbye letter from Clinton to his best friend, Nathan but don't reveal why he must leave.

Write an additional scene after the close of the novel through the eyes of Pete.

##### Science:

Study the element of fire. Develop at least five questions about the topic and then research the answers. Be sure that if you use the internet as a resource that you check the reliability of the source. Turn in all your notes with titles of resources (and websites). List any interesting facts you learned that weren't on your original list.

##### Art:

Create a collage based on the book. You can use images from magazines or create them yourself. Explain your piece in a brief journal.

##### Music:

Create sound effects to go with one scene in the novel. Record them and explain how you created the different sounds.

#### Internet Resources:

<http://www.arsonpreventionbureau.org.uk/Kids/>

Website for arson prevention by age group  
UK based but great information

<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/kids/flash.shtm>

Fire Safety

This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and author of the book *Sketches from a Spy Tree* (Clarion). Visit her website to find many more guides to children's literature!