

Reading Guide for *Lucky Strike* by Nancy Zafris

About [Lucky Strike](#)

In her second novel, Nancy Zafris once again creates a cast of colorful characters who, in their search for uranium deposits, find themselves along the way. *Lucky Strike* is a sometimes zany, always poignant look at the unexpected friendships that develop among this group and the ties that bind them.

It's the 1950s and the U.S. government's atomic weaponry program has fueled a demand for uranium. Jean Waterman is a young widow living in the Midwest with her two children, one with a debilitating illness. Desperate to leave this life behind, Jean packs her car and, along with her children, travels to the canyon lands of the Southwest, hoping they will strike it rich and join the ranks of "uraniumaires." Jean and her children arrive in Utah equipped with inadequate gear and a few government pamphlets that glamorize uranium mining, ready to claim their fortune and start their lives anew. They meet up with a small band of townspeople from all walks of life, all prospecting to change their circumstances. What ensues is a tangle of unlikely events that miraculously lead these prospectors to not only discover uranium ore, but more importantly to mine the wealth of their relationships and to find something far more valuable as the adventure becomes a personal journey for each one.

About the Author

Nancy Zafris is the fiction editor of *The Kenyon Review* and author of two novels, *The Metal Shredders* and *Lucky Strike*. She received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction as well as the Ohioana Library Association Award for her story collection, *The People I Know*. Her stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines.

Zafris teaches fiction at *The Kenyon Review's* summer workshops for writers. She lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Discussion

1. The title of this novel, *Lucky Strike*, is also the name brand of one of several Geiger counters that the characters use to search for uranium. What significance does this title have to the story? Do the characters experience any lucky strikes?
2. What significance does the landscape play in the novel? Is there irony in the fact that this barren Utah desert, where the story takes place, holds the promise of great wealth from its uranium deposits? In the richness of these deposits and the effects of uranium poisoning?
3. Even though she doesn't believe the get-rich-quick claims in the government pamphlets, Jean Waterman still takes her children, leaves her Midwestern home and joins the ranks of uranium prospectors. How does her relationship with her mother influence her decision to set out on this adventure? The death of her husband? Charlie's teacher? Charlie's illness?

4. How is Charlie's illness central to the story? How does it influence the interactions among the other characters? Why does Jean try to keep the nature of Charlie's illness a secret from the others? Why does she refer to it as "the visitor"?
5. Jean claims her family makes this trip to satisfy Charlie's scientific nature. Yet in many ways, Beth figures more prominently in the story as she records the group's misadventures in her book *Beth Waterman, Uranium Girl*. What role does Beth play in the story? What does her perspective of the events lend to the story?
6. When Jean and her children first meet Harry Lindstrom, he is training himself not to drink water because he believes that "then nothing bad will happen." Later, Harry struggles with his polygamist background and his embarrassing experience in the Airstream. How do his relationships with Jean, the children, Jo, and others impact him?
7. Many of the characters' names are as eccentric as the characters themselves. Miss Dazzle, Jimmy Splendid, Vincent Flaherty, Leonard Dawson, Timothy Carle—what do these names reveal about their characters?
8. When Jean leaves Ohio, she does so against her mother's wishes. Jean says that her life will be normal as long as she can keep from reaching a truce with her mother. How does Jean's relationship with Jo Dawson and Miss Dazzle compare to her relationship with her mother? Does it change after she is shot?
9. According to Beth, adults are mysterious—sometimes their mysteries are interesting; sometimes they aren't. About teachers, she says, "Now and then duty called upon them to impersonate people of wisdom." What does she mean by these comments?
10. Despite this story's serious overtones—illness, slippery characters, underhanded actions, uranium poisoning and nuclear testing, unrequited love—the story is filled with humor and irony. What effect do these techniques have on the story?
11. Beth describes herself as resilient, exploratory, loyal, and radioactive. Do these words accurately describe her true nature?
12. At the end of the story, Beth gets several warning messages: *Leave. You shouldn't be here. You see what I'm trying to tell you?* What does she make of these messages? Why do Beth and Charlie run toward the bomb at the end of the novel?
13. How are the issues of love and loyalty addressed in the novel? Violence? Polygamy? Disillusionment? Ethics? Hope?

Praise for *Lucky Strike*

"Zafris...invests her offbeat material with deep emotion and tragic undertones. Charlie's debilitating illness and the effects of uranium poisoning (unknown at the time) sit in counterpoint to the loopy banter and endearing cast of characters. Like Marianne Wiggins' quirky, superb *Evidence of Things Unseen* (2003), this novel is both disturbing

and hypnotic."
—*Booklist*

"What a wild ride this book is. The characters are plucky, sympathetic, and memorable, the situations sometimes laugh-out-loud funny and sometimes bittersweet, and the pacing just right. Zafris is a keen observer of the human comedy; highly recommended for all libraries."
—*Library Journal*

"In this lovely book, Zafris finds power in the slow, mute strangeness of everyday anxiety, the blossoming of hope in a barren desert and the terrible irony of what uranium means to those who seek it."
—*Publishers Weekly*

"Funny and touching."
—*PAGES MAGAZINE*

Recommended Reading

Nancy Zafris. *The Metal Shredders* (2002)

Alistair MacLeod. *No Great Mischief* (2001)

Annie Proulx. *Postcards* (1992)

Raye C. Ringholz. *Uranium Frenzy: Saga of the Nuclear West* (2002)

Marianne Wiggins. *Evidence of Things Unseen* (2003)