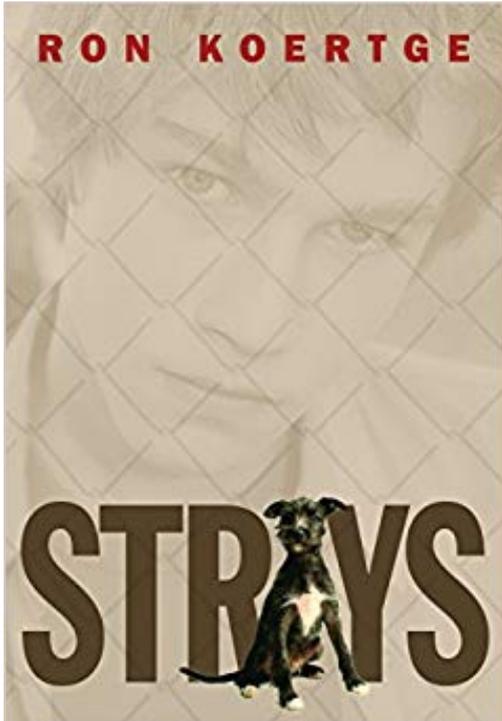


Strays by Ron Koertge



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"By turns insightful, devastatingly funny, and suffused with loneliness . . . this thoughtful novel about the lost and abandoned is a hopeful one, in which some strays find a place to belong." — **BOOKLIST**Sixteen-year-old Ted O'Connor's parents just died in a fiery car crash, and now he's stuck with a set of semi-psycho foster parents, two foster brothers — Astin, the cocky gearhead, and C.W., the sometimes gangsta — and an inner-city high school full of delinquents. He's having pretty much the worst year of his miserable life. Or so he thinks. Is it possible that becoming an orphan is not the worst thing that could have happened to him? Master novelist Ron Koertge brings his best work yet, a smart, surprising story full of trademark wit and sharp insight about a boy learning to run with a new pack.



Reviews of the *Strays* by Ron Koertge

Hrguig

Lots of swear words which i dont like but other than that it's a good book i like it but it's not my

favorite book.

Bloodray

I was very dissatisfied in this book, so much so I didn't even finish reading it. The fact that the main character can talk to animals threw me, but what happened with his foster mother is not something that I want to read, nor want my students and children to read. I know the foster system is not the best, but I don't think that this is a realistic depiction of what it is like to be a foster child.

Orevis

This book is way to "edgy" for young teens to read. I notice it had been purged from some public library as well.

bass

I first "met" this author when I read his book *Where the Kissing Never Stops* a few years ago. The book wasn't perfect, but I was drawn to the author's descriptions and his quiet way with words. I've been wanting to read this one for a while, and finally got a hold of a copy.

The concept is intriguing: if you are cast out of your life, through no fault of your own, into a strange new one, how would you react? Would it be better? Would it be worse?

In this case, sixteen-year-old Ted's parents have died in a car crash, and he's been put into the foster system. He never quite fit in before - his parents owned a pet store, and seemed more concerned with the animals than with him. His classmates didn't like him because he was so odd ~ and smelled like a pet store. He has the ability to talk to animals, a fact he doesn't actually share with anyone.

Ted is ushered into this new life by Ms. Ervin, a fluttery social worker, and his foster brothers, C.W. and Astin. Ted goes to a new school, and has new parents, the Rafters. His foster mother has a very strange quirk, and his foster father is a disciplinarian.

This is not a typical kid-in-foster-care story. It's more the story of Ted finding his way in the new world, and how opening up can change his life. It's touching, thoughtful, and sympathetic. The characters are all original, and felt very real. C.W. and Astin are of course dealing with their own problems ~ and the telling enhances Ted's story.

As another reviewer stated, I wish the author had spent more time on Ted's ability to talk to animals. When it first appeared, it seemed forced and out of place. It then comes to be an important - and sweet - part of the story. I also wish the book was a bit longer. I will definitely look for more books by this author.

Wafi

Ted's parents die in a car crash, and he is placed in foster care in a nearby town. His foster parents are a bit odd, but life will be stable in their home as long as Ted, and two foster chums, Astin and C.W. follow the rules. Ted's own parents, who owned a pet shop, were just plain awful: his mother was a bleeding heart for animals and spent more time nurturing them than her son. His father was a skinflint who made inappropriate comments to his son ("you don't have a sibling because I can't breed in captivity"), as well as giving him bad advice ("wear a bowtie so as to be approachable"). Ted was a social outcast, his former schoolmates claimed he smelled like animals and bullied and tormented the boy who didn't fight back. But, happily, Ted shares a special clairvoyance with

animals--in conversation he offers kindness and understanding, they offer guidance and support. The characters in this fabulous coming-of-age story are all loners who seek footage as individuals in the world. This story, told by Ted, and interspersed with his thoughts, is truly heartwarming. Moreover, the reader is not an isolated onlooker, but actually feels as if he is in Ted's skin--by golly, this is no mean feat.

Sha

It's in our nature to resist change. The strange and unfamiliar are hard enough to accept when we know it's coming, but when change is thrust upon us, we can either surrender to the despair that wants to come along with it or we can rise to the challenge and figure out how these new things fit into our lives. And then there are those who think they're surrendering but answer the challenge with a rare blend of courage and insight.

In STRAYS, we meet 16-year-old Ted O'Connor, recently placed in foster care following the untimely death of his parents. In the care of the Rafters, he meets C.W. and Astin, two other boys who introduce Ted to life as a foster child, a world seemingly apt for someone who now considers himself a "stray." As Ted acclimates to a new school and tries to process life without his parents, he comes to understand a self-reliance he never knew in his old life. His ability to communicate with animals -- he has conversations with several --- means he never has to be alone. But Ted knows he can't rely on just animals for companionship. The question is: Can he learn how to live with people in the same way?

Anyone familiar with Koertge's past novels knows to expect a taut, multi-layered narrative. Indeed, STRAYS delivers in spades, offering readers a deceptively simple story that is rich with a gamut of levels to explore and contemplate. The heart of the story is Ted's journey as he struggles to figure out what life means on his own and comes to understand that there is a home out there for any stray willing to make one.

I found myself most intrigued by the Rafters, Ted's foster parents. Mr. Rafter could easily have been the stereotyped taskmaster, and while he certainly doesn't hold back his opinions, you feel sympathy for him as he tries to keep moving forward in life while caring for his addled wife. Koertge also does an excellent job of placing Ted in the middle, unsure how to respond to either parent but determined to listen to the advice of his foster brother, Astin, and toe the line until he turns 18.

The fantastical element --- Ted's ability to communicate with animals --- is probably the least developed aspect of the book. I was never sure if he was actually having the conversations or if they were in his head. It's an interesting element, but I don't think it accomplishes what the author wants. Still, there is no denying the power in Koertge's storytelling and how he is able to handle the difficult topic of losing one's parents and treat it with respect and sensitivity.

The perfect book to take to the park and dig into on a warm summer day, STRAYS is funny, touching, thoughtful and a must-read for Koertge fans.

--- Reviewed by Brian Farrey

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