Could life as a foster kid lead to unexpected benefits? A teenager’s link to animals gives way to human connection in a smart, incisive new novel.

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.

My Personal Review:
It's in our nature to resist change. The strange and unfamiliar are hard enough to accept when we know its 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 cant rely on just animals for companionship. The question is: Can he learn how to live with people in the same way?

Anyone familiar with Koertges 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 Teds 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, Teds foster parents. Mr. Rafter could easily have been the stereotyped taskmaster, and while he certainly doesnt 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 --- Teds 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. Its an interesting element, but I dont think it accomplishes what the author wants. Still, there is no denying the power in Koertges storytelling and how he is able to handle the difficult topic of losing ones 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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