

A great title and a vivid colour—purple background with orange graphics—the hand warding off danger caught my eye straight away.

Chapter headings like a tear-off calendar, and the typical teenage lament of the first sentence trapped me—I had to read on. Soli seems to have the various angst of most boys his age . . . and many girls. As I read into the story I realise that Soli, homeless, unwanted, at last finding a real home with Martha and Sissy, is not like the boys with whom I work in many ways, yet his situation appeals to them because of the obstacles he faces. Often they, too, feel that they get into trouble without even trying! Hazen develops her protagonist well; he is a real adolescent. As you read, you empathise with his predicament. As he rationalises the use of the forbidden car yet again, you, the reader, fully understand just why he has to take it.

His work placement interview that turns into a job—at least for the night—heightens our interest. Here Angelo is offering him a real job. What will he do? Soli admits the truth and, in doing so, earns Angelo's respect and the offer of a job when he is old enough. Anyone who has been short of cash and yet can't accept the offered job will identify with him at this point.

The social workers who are uncaring or so busy they cannot see the individual amongst the stack of files on their desks are chillingly drawn. The plea for humanity is obvious yet even the over-worked Karen is hard-pushed to remain sympathetic.

Language is brilliant—superficially colloquial but rich in images.

This is the sort of book that grabs you right away—it is hard to put down until you have finished it. Even the ending is not mawkish but logical.

I tried it with my DEAR reading group; two boys—year 8, lower stream English—have read and enjoyed it. It fits in great in this sort of programme and is also useful in teaching the idea of Resilience.

**Robyne Ridge, Kinross Wolaroi School, NSW**

*Shifty* by Lynn E. Hazen is a novel written for teenagers that has a main character (Soli) who lives in a foster home in San Francisco. Soli is a likeable character whose skill at driving provides a financial opportunity for him but also gets him into trouble. His foster mother Martha (she has an artificial leg due to being hit by a car) provides a loving home for two other children. Sissy is a seven year old abused girl and Thaddeus is a drug addicted baby whose mother is in rehab. This family is monitored by a "I follow the rules" social worker who makes their lives difficult. The plot focuses on Soli's search for identity and stability in his life. An elderly homeless woman named Annie and her cat Lester also influence Soli's (and Sissy's) personal growth. There are many issues in this text: homelessness, foster care, child abuse, poverty, drug addiction and concepts of 'family'.

This book can relate to students on many levels. The language is simple and the text is easy to read. In the classroom this text can be used as a starting point to raise the above mentioned issues. It can inspire personal pieces and encourage students to empathise with the characters. Students could research their own communities to find information on how they support the homeless and neglected. This book provides a window to look into Australia's own social welfare system even though it is set in the U.S.A.

**Charlotte Pyers, Kurunjang Secondary College, VIC**

I really enjoyed *Shifty*. It was easy and engaging. I liked the way Lynn Hazen tackled the issues surrounding fostering children and the way she portrays the individual character and personality of the children.

I'd believe that anyone who reads *Shifty* will come away from it with a further understanding and hopefully, empathy of the foster situation.

I love the bond between Shifty, Sissy and Chance & Martha – and there's a positive to a great book! Well done. I would recommend it any high school student

**Linda Marx, Mountain District Christian School, VIC**

The more we read of fifteen year old Soli (Solomon), the more we may think his nickname is deserved – a 'good-for-nothing' kid, conniving, drifting from foster home to foster home in a self-defeating cycle, a bad record, a stint in Juvenile Hall, deceitful and untrustworthy, repeatedly driving Martha's van with a fake permit, illegally parking, adopting a 'fake' granny to avoid yet another fine.

All in all, a trouble-making loner, who has had to 'grow up' before his time. But the 'real' Shifty, laid bare by a host of bad experiences in the past, is a victim of circumstances. Found dumped in a Greyhound bus at the terminus in San Francisco and made a ward of the state at age three, he has had to battle to survive, hungry for love, yearning for a home and searching to know his 'home within', put down by the 'jerk at juvie' who told him, "You got nobody. You are nobody". Buried deep down underneath his abandonment and loss issues, he has a heart and seems a concerned young man – after ten months with foster Mum, Martha, he is a caring big brother for Sissy, the seven year old abuse victim who has recently arrived and to baby Thaddeus, a 'jittery crack baby'. 'Fake' Gramma Alice also benefits from his kindness, as he looks after her cat and contributes to her overdue rent.

Easy-to-read, yet written with compassion and honesty, warmth and insight, this simple moving tale of 'a kid gone wrong' will tug at the heart strings; Soli's quest for family and to belong are universal issues. Significant, too, is foster mum Martha and her resolve to provide a supportive environment for these children, despite the interference of an uncooperative and officious social worker. Martha see them as 'kids first', not just foster kids, offering unconditional trust, indeed 'trusting the good in people even when the bad part is showing'.

The book is a perceptive and touching testimony to resilience and hope in the conduct of life, making *Shifty* a worthy addition to the secondary school library for individual recreational borrowing by readers aged 12-15. As a shared class reader or included on a Wide Reading list within the Year 8-9 English curriculum, the promise of a positive resolution offers thought-provoking discussion starter material and creative writing opportunities for students as they explore the children's future. 'This is the best place I ever lived', Soli thinks, wishing for another chance.

**Alison Cassell, QLD**

There's not been much good fortune in Shifty's life so far. Abandoned as a baby, shunted around various foster homes, always moved on because he's trouble... Now he's in yet another home with a struggling single foster-mother (a mother who fosters children), a silent girl-child and a baby born to a crack-addicted mother.

This powerful, fast-paced novel fills the reader with tension. I was on the edge of my seat, positively willing things to go right for Shifty (Soli), who is good-natured, kind and resourceful – he just keeps finding himself in situations where he endlessly has to choose between the lesser of two evils. What gets him through, finally, is his inner resilience. He never gives up: his optimism shines through the most discouraging situations. His encounters with the replacement social worker chilled me: Sheila / Shelley is so ghastly that she seemed like a caricature to me (although I have no doubt that well-intentioned but clueless social workers do exist).

Shifty's relationships with his new family are loving and fraught with anxiety. He wants to protect his loved ones – Martha, Sissy and Chance – from myriad dangers, while managing not to alarm them too much, and his explanations of what, how and why to Sissy are moving and funny. Soli's debts are mounting, and he has to find creative and honourable ways to begin to pay back what he owes. As Sissy's confidence and trust grows, she is able to help Soli weave his way through the maze of difficulties they face.

The least satisfying aspect of this book for me is its cover. My students will always judge a book by its cover, and this one doesn't draw in the reader, nor does it give much indication of the depth of the story within. The colours jarred and I have had to actively push out this book rather than let the kids find it out for themselves. Having said that, I can see the possibility that it could catch the eye for some readers, who might then pick it up and explore further.

I loved this book, and recommend it for any intermediate and secondary school – it's a cracker!

**Jill Hatherly, Springbank School, New Zealand**