

***The Devil You Know* by Leonie Norrington**

Set in the warm tropical climate of northern Queensland, Damien meets many life challenges that need to be resolved. In developing the plot, the author uses illustrations drawn by the main character to add depth to the emotions that Damien is experiencing.

The split family situation adds to the many dilemmas that Damien faces. His mother, who has been physically abused by his bikie father, struggles to keep her emotions together on this journey with her son. Damien's father, commonly called '88' returns to the family and immediately Damien becomes extremely defensive. He has seen what this huge man can do to his mother and refuses to trust 88. Family violence is an issue in all societies and Norrington takes an interesting perspective from Damien's point of view. Later in the novel another form of family violence is intimated and relates to possible physical and sexual abuse. Damien is disturbed by a friend's father's actions on a sleepover. Indigenous themes run through the life of Damien. Ruby and Old Codger join in the plot with old tales from their past and apply them to Damien's current situation. These lessons relate to family, friendships and the intriguing issue of revenge. This latter issue is sure to stir up some questions from teen readers.

All teen experiences have a strong link to friendship groups and the influence they hold over their lives. In the story, Damien is portrayed as a bit of a loner due to his recent enrolment at his new high school. He spots Alexander and aspires to be part of his group but there are a few steps that need to be taken first. So Damien has to seek other options for friendship and certainly Kreena and Jack help out. There are many humorous highlights in the story and the manner in which Damien has to handle two school girls Crystal and Angel, is well compiled by the author.

The fickle state of teen friendship is brought up by Norrington as finally Damien completes a deed that receives recognition from Alexander. Damien is IN! Damien's relationship with Jack and Kreena suffers at that point. Moving from one friendship group to another causes angst amongst the different groups.

All the time however, Damien has to live with a bikie who drinks heavily and who is still a risk to his mother.

Protective behaviour themes are also touched as Damien heads off to Alexander's place for a sleepover. It certainly adds to the tension of the plot at that stage. Thanks to some aboriginal magic, Damien manages to escape this confronting scenario.

This novel is a great social comment on family life and the bonds which bind each member. Damien does come to the realisation that it is better the devil you know, especially in relation to 88's return to the family.

Trevor Dangerfield, Elisabeth Murdoch College, Vic

Damien and his mother are often on the move. This time, the move is to be near his father, who won't pay child support unless he can see Damien some times. 88 is a bikie with a fearsome and unpredictable temper, and in the past, Damien and his mother have been on the receiving end of his drunken fists.

School is a drag and Damien just always seems to find himself in trouble. His teacher Ms Hartland has decided he's a hopeless case, only Mr Greegan the Principal has any time for him, which is just as well, because Damien spends a lot of time in Mr Greegan's office.

Damien starts to make a few friends but they seem to be the other misfits in the school. If it wasn't for his mum and his ability to draw, Damien's life would be completely shot. 88 wants to move back in with Damien and his mum but every fibre of Damien's body wants him to be somewhere else.

Mum wants to give it a try, so what can he do – he's 14.

This is a terrific story, told by a master storyteller. Leonie Norrington perfectly captures the mind of a troubled and mixed up teen and the use of illustrations perfectly complements the emotion and characterization of this book. The characterization is strong, drawing the reader into Damien's world, carrying us right through to the traumatic but uplifting conclusion.

I loved this book. I approached it with some reluctance at first, but the writing is so good and the story so engaging, that I found myself really rooting for Damien and wanting him to come through. I recommend this for senior students who like a thought-provoking read, and I think this book will stay with me for some time to come.

Debbie Williams, Mountain District Christian School, Vic

Leonie Norrington's stated purpose in composing *The Devil You Know* is that she "wanted to write a book about the incredibly brave children who live with violence and show how they learn to cope in education systems that are not designed for them. [she] also wanted to acknowledge that there is often enormous love, care and joy in families suffering domestic violence and explore the seesaw of joys and destruction they experience." The novel explores ideas of domestic violence from the point of view of Damien and his mother. The violence explored is less the physical and more the insidious emotional abuse and intimidation that is harder to diagnose and define.

Damien, the protagonist, is often the victim of his parents' troubled relationship. He lives on tenterhooks, trying to accommodate his father, 88, who has come back into their lives and please his mother, who wants the relationship to work out. Damien is often lonely and has an intense desire to be accepted by those around him, but is often the victim of bullying. Damien begins to exhibit some of the 'learned' behaviours from his brutish father. For Damien, his escape is his drawings and the book features some elements of graphic novels as a way of telling the story which form an important feature of Damien's coping mechanism.

The text could ultimately form part of a wide reading unit of work. Alternatively, the novel could form part of a unit of work on discovery and/or identity. In particular, the novel could spark many classroom discussions about the nature of the abuse, how to detect it, who is the 'real' bad guy and so on.

If you visit Allen & Unwin website you will find both printed and spoken extracts of the novel. Link <http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=94&book=9781741758665>

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