



*Strays*

BY RON KOERTGE

### ABOUT THE BOOK

**N**OW THAT TED'S PARENTS HAVE BEEN KILLED IN A CAR ACCIDENT, he must leave behind all he has ever known. Foster parents, two foster brothers, and a new school are just a few of the hurdles Ted will have to tackle to make a fresh start. His new foster parents are certainly different. Mr. Rafter cares only that Ted keep his room and his life clean. Mrs. Rafter seems pleasant enough, but Ted is warned that she hides a frightening secret.

While Ted is trying to cope with his new surroundings, he finds comfort in the presence of animals. There are the imaginary animals who guard him while he sleeps, and he also has a special connection to a variety of dogs he comes into contact with. Ted is somehow able to communicate with dogs and they with him. Ted even seems to prefer the animal world to the all-too-painful human world he must live in.

Astin, Ted's older foster brother, provides some valuable information about the Rafters and how to survive in the foster home. Through Astin, Ted meets Wanda, a young woman who helps Ted find inner strength and confidence. Over time, Ted, Astin, and C.W. (his second foster brother) form their own family. Ultimately, Ted discovers that once he permits himself to care about other people, he loses his ability to communicate with animals. Finally, he finds, the human world meets all his needs.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

- Ted, newly orphaned following his parents' death in a car accident, entering the Rafter home as a foster child
- Astin, foster son already living with the Rafters
- C.W., another young man entering the Rafter home as a foster child
- Mr. and Mrs. Rafter, foster parents
- Ms. Ervin, child welfare worker who places Ted in the Rafter home
- Megan, Astin's girlfriend
- Wanda, Ted's friend and perhaps girlfriend



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### Before reading:

1. Based upon the cover of the book, what do you think the story might be about?
2. What does the title indicate the book will focus on? What does it mean to be a stray?

### While reading:

1. Why does Ted need to have animals guarding him while he sleeps? What is he afraid of?
2. Describe Ted's feelings about his parents by drawing two columns on a sheet of paper. Label one column **Positive Feelings and Memories** and the other column **Negative Feelings and Memories**, then fill in examples.
3. How might Ted's life have been different if his parents hadn't died?
4. Ted's name is O'Connor. In what ways, if any, does he con any of the other characters, and/or who cons him? And is there something magic about Wand(a)? Do other characters have names that reveal something about them?

### After reading:

1. At one point in the story, Ted discovers that he can no longer communicate with animals. What has changed in Ted's life to affect how he relates to people and to animals?
2. How do Astin, Megan, Wanda, and C.W. each, in different ways, help Ted come to understand his own strengths?
3. Find adjectives or phrases to describe the novel's characters as animals. For example, Megan is showy or colorful like an exotic bird, Mr. Rafter is territorial, Mrs. Rafter a kind of sinister mother hen.
4. Trace the animal metaphor and symbolism that run through the novel. Discuss the role of the various animals (such as the giraffe, dogs, and lions) in revealing information about Ted's life.
5. Using *strays* as a verb, who in the book strays? And from what exactly does he or she stray?
6. Consider the story without the talking animals. How would we know as much about Ted as we do?
7. Do you think Ted could actually talk to animals, or was that just a kind of hallucination brought on by trauma and grief?
8. Return now to the questions posed before reading the book. What significance do the title and the cover carry after the reading?

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RON KOERTGE

- Q.** You have written several novels for young adult readers as well as works for adults. Do you prefer writing for one particular audience?
- A.** I tend to write about what arrives on my psychic doorstep, and for the past couple of decades or so that's been fiction for kids. I still write poems, and they're published by presses for grown-ups, but really, any teenager could read my newest poetry book (*Fever*) and like it. I started to write young adult fiction because a friend reminded me how chronically immature I am. So I figured if I behaved like a teenager, I might as well write like one. There aren't many signs that I'm growing up, either, so young readers might be stuck with me for a while.



- Q.** *Strays* began as quite a different story. Would you talk a little bit about the process that took it from one story to its current incarnation?
- A.** It sure was a different book—different title, different tone, different everything. *Taste of Night*, an early version of *Strays*, was an experiment in seriousness. In it, Ted was depressed and marginally suicidal. It wasn't necessarily a gloomy book (I don't mind trying "serious," but I don't do gloom), and though it was good, it wasn't *really* good. So at some point in its editing, my editor and I decided to rethink things. *Strays* uses some of the original novel's main characters' names but not a lot else. I knew I'd done the right thing, though, when the new draft, the one that turned out to be *Strays*, went so well. And then the animals started talking, and I was really excited.
- Q.** *Brimstone Journals* was a novel in verse. *Strays* is prose. Does the story suggest the form you use for telling it?
- A.** Absolutely, the story suggests the form. The first things I wrote for *Brimstone* were rat-a-tat notes, compared to the opening page or so of *Strays*, which was clearly a story that would spool out. *Brimstone* seemed like a puzzle, where piece after piece finally fit together to make a picture of those kids and their lives. *Strays* is a movie; *Brimstone* is a mosaic.
- Q.** Were you at all concerned that having Ted speak to animals and be able to understand animal talk might not appeal to teen readers?
- A.** My experience is that young readers are more open to possibility than adult readers. When I was a kid, I talked to everything—animals, trees, the furniture in my bedroom, oatmeal. Lots of little kids do stuff like that, and teenagers haven't forgotten how. I hoped that readers would see how wrecked Ted is from his parents' death and how, under those circumstances, really bizarre things might happen to him. Also, the animals are funny. And who doesn't like witty critters?
- Q.** The germ of an idea for a story can be described as the tiny grain of sand in an oyster. It is a little piece of something, occasionally even an irritating piece, that gradually grows and becomes coated in layers of fine material. For you, what is the sand in the oyster? Do you begin with a character, a setting, a feeling?
- A.** I've begun with all three. To me, writing is a matter of availability. I tend to just say to the stories roaming around out in the ether looking for writers, "Hey! Here I am. I've got a couple of pens and a lot of time. Check me out." *The Arizona Kid* was a setting book. I love Arizona and horse racing. *Margaux with an X* is a character book. Margaux was a girl in a short story, and she would not leave me alone until I wrote a whole book about her. *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* started with a boy who'd lost his mother and wanted a way to process those feelings, and what better way than poetry? Once a story has picked me over another writer and has settled in here, I tend to say, "Let's have a good time, OK? We're going to be together a lot for eight or nine months." Then I show up every day, and little by little we get the work done.

## OTHER BOOKS TO COMPARE AND CONTRAST

*Cages* by Peg Kehret (Puffin Books, 1991)

After losing an acting role and fighting with her alcoholic stepfather, Kit is arrested for shoplifting and ordered to work, as part of her sentence, at an animal shelter.

*The Last Chance Texaco* by Brent Hartinger (Harper Tempest, 2004)

Troubled teen Lucy Pitt struggles to fit in as a new tenant at a last-chance foster home.



*Ball Don't Lie* by Matt de la Peña (Delacorte Press, 2005)

Seventeen-year-old Sticky lives to play basketball at school and at Lincoln Rec Center in Los Angeles and is headed for the pros, but he is unaware of the many dangers—including his own past—that threaten his dream.

*Stoner & Spaz* by Ron Koertge (Candlewick Press, 2002)

A troubled youth with cerebral palsy struggles toward self-acceptance with the help of a drug-addicted young woman.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ask Ron Koertge what he brings to the realm of young adult fiction, and the seasoned author responds matter-of-factly. “I write dialogue well, and I’m funny,”—an assessment few would argue with. “I like iconoclasm and practice it in my fiction. I don’t like pretense or hypocrisy. I’m almost always irreverent.”

Koertge recently retired as a faculty member at Pasadena City College, where he taught everything from Shakespeare to remedial writing for more than thirty-five years. He is now teaching in a low-residency master of fine arts in children’s writing program located at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. Ron Koertge is the author of several acclaimed novels, most of them for young adults.

Some of Koertge’s well-known and award-winning titles include *The Brimstone Journals*, *Margaux with an X*, and *Stoner & Spaz*. In his newest book, *Strays*, Koertge says that an early draft was awakened by the addition of talking animals, and the book took on a whole new direction as he discovered, with his main character, Ted, what they had to say.

Ron Koertge grew up in an agricultural area in an old mining town in Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri. There he learned to “drive a tractor and buck hay bales, which are clearly useful skills in Los Angeles,” he quips. He and his wife live in South Pasadena, California.

## OTHER BOOKS BY RON KOERTGE

*The Arizona Kid* (HC) 978-0-7636-2542-9

*The Arizona Kid* (PB) 978-0-7636-2695-2

*The Brimstone Journals* (HC) 978-0-7636-1302-0

*The Brimstone Journals* (PB) 978-0-7636-1742-4

*Margaux with an X* (HC) 978-0-7636-2401-9

*Margaux with an X* (PB) 978-0-7636-2679-2

*Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* (HC) 978-0-7636-2116-2

*Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* (PB) 978-0-7636-2939-7

*Stoner & Spaz* (HC) 978-0-7636-1608-3

*Stoner & Spaz* (PB) 978-0-7636-2150-6

*Where the Kissing Never Stops* (HC) 978-0-7636-2543-6

*Where the Kissing Never Stops* (PB) 978-0-7636-2696-9

Discussion guide written by **Teri Lesesne**, who teaches young adult literature in Texas and is the author of *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time* (Stenhouse Publishers, 2003) and *Naked Reading* (Stenhouse Publishers, 2006)

