



Dirt

Denise Gosliner Orenstein

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Things are hard for eleven-year-old Yonder. Her mother died and her father has sunk into sadness. She doesn't have a friend to her name . . . except for Dirt, the Shetland pony next door.

Dirt has problems of his own. He's overweight, he's always in trouble, and his owner is the mean Miss Enid, who doesn't have the patience for a pony's natural curiosity. His only friend is Yonder, the scrawny girl next door.

So when Miss Enid makes the cruel decision to sell Dirt for horsemeat, Yonder knows she has to find a way to rescue him. Even if that means stealing Dirt away and sneaking him into her own house. What follows will make you worry, will make you cry, and will ultimately fill you with hope, love, and an unshakable belief in the power of friendship. Especially the four-legged kind.

Dirt Details

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Author : Denise Gosliner Orenstein

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Genre : Realistic Fiction, Childrens, Middle Grade, Animals, Family Law, Fostering, Contemporary

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From Reader Review *Dirt* for online ebook

Korrina (OwlCrate) says

Short and sweet book!

Ryn Lewis says

Yonder's mother has died, and her father has turned from a playful, adoring dad to a grieving alcoholic, wasting away in his bedroom and barely remembering Yonder is alive. Yonder, an elective mute, keeps things together at home, and struggles silently through middle school, the frequent target of a pack of school bullies. *Dirt* is a filthy and overweight Shetland pony, who will eat anything in sight and loves attention. A friendship springs up between the two outcasts, but trouble brews in the form of an overly perky social worker, and *Dirt*'s obnoxious owner, a stingy woman determined to sell the worthless pony for horsemeat. When Yonder is suspended for retaliating against her tormentors, she uses the time to hide *Dirt* from his owner... by moving him into her bedroom. As social services closes in on her, removing her into state custody and her father takes a turn for the worse, Yonder must find a way to save her pony and put her family back together.

While *Dirt* may appear to be a lighthearted tale, and parts of it are certainly humorous, the story is much grittier than the cover suggests. Older middle-grade readers will sympathize with Yonder, her grief, her worry over *Dirt* and her need to connect to something or someone that understands her completely. Although somewhat stereotypical in its negative portrayal of foster families and including a few very two-dimensional villains, *Dirt* is still a powerful story of a girl's journey through grief and the importance of family.

Jana says

I wasn't sure if I would like this book but I was hooked by page 3. I can't wait to share this with my 4th graders.

Valerie McEnroe says

I was excited to read this book. The cover is cute as heck and I wanted some new horse material to recommend to students. I'll give it to the author on the quality of the writing. She has a good sense of character and voice. Because of that I wouldn't go below 3 stars on the rating.

Here's the problem. This book has every negative theme out there in middle grade literature. In fact, I've now decided that not only do I need a bookshelf for teen angst books, but now also a middle grade angst shelf. I'm sad that middle grade books, which I once considered a delightful respite from the "woe is me" attitude in YA fiction, has now become infected with the same darkness. In this book you have bullying, a dead mother, a dysfunctional father, a traumatized girl who skips school and doesn't speak, and foster care. This is what

realistic fiction has been reduced to. That's why fantasy has surpassed every other genre in popularity at my school.

What I was hoping for in this book was a Shiloh inspired book with a pony rescued from its nasty owner, housed in a shed, and taken care of by a child with responsible parents. Maybe a little mischievous behavior from the child by stealing apples from an orchard. That's not exactly what you get. I like the premise of a girl falling in love with a pony. I understand her obsession with saving him from the meat factory. I like her determination to escape from foster care and find him at all costs. All of that makes a good story. I just wish it had been a little more uplifting. And what's with all the clueless adults? The teachers aren't sympathetic. The social worker is incompetent. The foster care mother is obnoxious.

This book came at the same time I reached my saturation point for negative middle grade books. If your students/kids are cool with the heavy burdens of kids in recent literature, then by all means read this one. As I mentioned, the writing is good. I'm on the fence about whether kids will like it.

Edie says

Dirt By: Denise Gosliner Orenstein

Yonder, Dirt, and her father are the main characters in the book who go through a sad time in present day life. Yonder is a eleven year old girl who also loves to read. She is also not social and has no friends , but for Dirt. Dirt is a stray Shetland pony who is overweight and he likes to make trouble. Dirt showed up one day and Yonder was at first scared and then fell in love with him. Yonder has a bully who doesn't leave her alone. He punches her in the stomach and made her gym shorts smell like vinegar and glue. The day he punches her is the book fair which is her favorite time during the school year. Right after he punches her she runs all the way home to find her dad is gone and Dirt has made a mess. Then she gets taken away from her home and to a new house to live and they take Dirt away too. While her dad is in the hospital she tries to run away from the house she is at. She comes back to her house and finds Dirt and her dad waiting for her. I recommend this book for fourth graders because it was easy to read.

Pat says

11 year old Yonder, an electively mute girl, deals with the death of her mother 4 years ago, a neglectful, alcoholic father, and a school bully who repeatedly picks on her. She befriends a one-eyed Shetland pony who shows up in her yard, and ends up hiding him when her neighbor who owns him tries to sell him for horsemeat. Events escalate and she must deal with her father's stroke, a truancy officer, abused animals from a small town zoo, and foster parents. This first person narrative has an engaging plot and a view of life from a different perspective than most children witness. The story encourages empathy and a sense of responsibility. The realistic ending works; Yonder has grown as a person, making amends with her truancy officer, accepting care from adults, and acknowledging her responsibility in the care of the pony. The author, who introduced a curriculum for children with learning disabilities based on two rescued Shetland ponies, incorporates information about Shetlands into the narrative.

Alena says

A sweet story about some tough issues. 11 year old Yonder has lost her mother and stability at home because her father is so depressed and sad that he spends almost everyday and night sleeping and drinking in his room. He loves his daughter and does his best to care for her, but he cannot get out of the cycle of his grief and depression. In order to cope with all of the pain in her life, Yonder has completely stopped talking, and uses other modes of communication. On top of that Yonder is tormented daily by bullies at school.

A fat, not well-cared for pony ends up escaping Yonder's mean neighbor who intends to sell the pony to a horse meat factory. Yonder finds friendship with this trouble causing pony and is on a mission to save his life.

While there are definitely some sad parts, there are times when you can't help but laugh. Kind of like life.

Megan says

This book was well-written, I have to give it that. But, it is very depressing.

Yonder hasn't spoken a word since her mother died several years ago. Her father has been an alcoholic since her mother's passing, and they are living in poverty. Yonder doesn't get adequate nutrition, nor adequate attention. She is viciously bullied in school, her teachers are clueless about the bullying and blame everything that goes wrong on her, even though she is innocent. In the second half of the novel, she winds up in foster care with an annoying foster mom.

Everything and everyone in her life sucks.

And then, she meets a Shetland pony she calls Dirt. Dirt is filthy, has one eye, and is very obese. Somehow, Dirt worms his way into Yonder's heart. She goes to the ends of the Earth to try and save him from harm.

I don't know if I would recommend this book, unless a student asked me if we had a book they can cry to.

Ms. Yingling says

The idea of therapy horses is very intriguing, especially given the author's experience with them, but this was too far on the quirky/sad scale for me personally. Mother dies, father is unable to cope, main character refuses to speak AND is bullied. I have a deeply personal objection to parents who can't move on after a loss, and I don't have students who request this sort of book. I was also unreasonably irritated that Yonder bought her clothes at the Goodwill, but she bought frayed denim overalls and corduroy pants. Decent jeans would be the same price, at least at every thrift store I've ever shopped at. Definitely take a look at this if super sad books are popular in your library.

Bethany says

Yonder has a lot on her plate. An alcoholic father, a mother who died several years back, poverty and hunger. Her method for coping with all of the loss and hardship: mutism. Yonder stopped talking when her beloved mom died in a car accident.

Now, she's in middle school--still silent--and being bullied. She can't speak for herself, so the bullying goes unchecked, and Yonder is more likely than not to be punished for the pranks and abuses. When the neighbor's Shetland pony turns up, overweight, rude, ravenous, and possessing only one eye, Yonder finds a place to be safe. Dirt is the best kind of pony, with love, patience, and plenty of obstinance to keep Yonder busy and secure.

There's also plenty of wordplay and literary allusion to keep a classroom busy looking for connections. Mutter Street and Mrs. Prattle are in good company with Holler Hollow and Bellow Avenue. Yonder attends Robert Frost Middle School, which might lead readers to explore connections with the poet's work.

The story is one to inspire compassion for those struggling with unseen problems, and it will leave plenty of readers hoping for an incorrigible pony of their own. From the adult side, too much is hard to believe. No teachers or administrators notice *for four years* that Yonder is horribly mistreated by her classmates? No one notices that she's underfed and malnourished? No one steps in to suggest mental health support for a child who stops speaking? In a small town, no one realizes that Yonder's father is a spottily employed alcoholic? It's a stretch, and it makes the book difficult to sink into.

Still, it's a good pick for animal lovers, and it seems like an interesting book to study in a classroom.

Brittany says

I want to adopt Yonder.

Yonder's mother has died, and she is so traumatized that she has gone selectively mute, to make matters worse, her father is drinking excessively and he is neglecting his parental duties, causing Yonder to have to raise herself.

At school, things are even worse. Yonder is being bullied relentlessly. Emotional and physical assaults happen daily, and they are too much for her to endure, so she leaves school...permanently. This decision causes a chain reaction of pain which leads to a landslide of conflicts this poor girl must deal with...alone.

I was so enraptured by Yonder. Despite her lack of words, her actions show a bravery and commitment that had me rooting for her the whole time. I wanted to reach through the pages and beat up every single person who did her wrong, and I wanted to take her home and feed her and hug her....

In the end, things aren't tied up neatly (not to give away too much), but that is how life works. Everything can't be fixed very easily. I really enjoyed this book. Super cute. Can't wait to put it in the hands of my students.

Peggy Tibbetts says

Pippi Longstocking meets Black Beauty in this satisfying summer read. Eleven-year old Yonder lives with her dad in a little crooked house in Shelter, Vermont. When her mom died four years earlier her dad said, "We can choose to stop moving up that rocky path or we can decide something else." Yonder chose to stop talking and her dad chose to withdraw from life in an alcoholic haze. Yonder and her dad are dirt poor and for that, as well as her name, she is bullied endlessly at school. When an unsympathetic principal suspends her for two days, Yonder decides she won't go back. In the midst of her stay-cation, Yonder finds a wayward pumpkin which attracts the neighbor's Shetland pony to her yard and they bond as he devours it. Even though the one-eyed pony is fat, rude, and caked with dirt, Yonder falls in love with him and aptly names him Dirt. But mean old Miss Enid plans to sell Dirt for horsemeat. So Yonder steals Dirt and hides him in her bedroom. Life is good for Yonder and Dirt until the authorities find out. Yonder shoos Dirt back to Miss Enid's and the authorities take her to a foster home. But that doesn't last very long. At first chance Yonder escapes and embarks on a rescue mission to save Dirt -- and herself -- before it's too late. "Dirt" is an emotional adventure that will tug at your heart strings and make you smile.

Audrey says

A young girl dealing with grief and abandonment finds a friend in an overweight, overly ornery, Shetland pony and together they face a hostile world. The main protagonist, Yonder, and "Dirt", the pony, are well formed characters but the other characters didn't feel "real" at any time. It is a cute story. Unfortunately, the reading level is about 6th grade while the story will appeal more to someone at a 3-4th grade level making it a hard book to recommend unless you have someone who reads above their grade level.

Cindy Mitchell *Kiss the Book* says

Dirt by Denise Gosliner Orenstein, 214 pages. Scholastic, 2017. \$17.

Language: G (0 swears); Mature Content: PG; Violence: PG

BUYING ADVISORY: EL, MS – OPTIONAL

AUDIENCE APPEAL: AVERAGE

Yonder's mom has died four years earlier and her dad has withdrawn into his room and the bottle. She knows that even her screams would not bring back her mom and has decided to stop using her voice completely. Now, however, bullies are riding her mercilessly at school, and the teachers do not see the abuse, blaming her for the ensuing disruptions. When she encounters a shaggy, fat, one-eyed Shetland pony who's wandered into her yard from the neighbor's to eat the pumpkin off her porch, she's found a soulmate. By week's end, they are fast friends. The pony seems to be the only one who can hear her inner voice and respond to her needs. When Yonder is removed from her home by Child Protection Services, she is more determined than ever to save her pony from an awful fate.

This is an intriguingly quirky but emotionally sad story. Inviting your best friend into your home, even though he is a fat pony, is quirky. Being removed from your home due to neglect and malnutrition is sad. Despite such heavy circumstances, there are moments of humor and interesting freshness. It is a gritty realistic fiction book without gritty language. The violence comes in the form of bullying, and mistreating animals. While most of the characters are not very fully developed, Yonder's adventure is crazy, showing extraordinary effort, ingenuity, and courage in the service of her animal friend.

P. K. Foster, teacher-librarian

<https://kissthebook.blogspot.com/2018...>
