

Blood Orange Soda

Jim Larranaga

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Blood Orange Soda, by James Michael Larranaga, is a coming-of-age young adult novel about a teenage vampire in the American Midwest. Funny, poignant, and honest, the book is well written and engaging.

Darius is just like many teenage boys: he is going to school, attempting a social life, and dealing with bullies and first loves. He is different, too, as he is Goth, meaning he has the potential to become a vampire if he stops taking pills called “Reds” that suppress his craving for blood. After discussing the situation with his uncle and sick mother, he stops taking the pills and begins drinking the illegal Blood Orange Soda to accelerate his transformation into a vampire, so he will be able to stand up to a bully.

Larranaga has crafted a quality book with believable characters, even if some of them are vampires. He has created a realistic setting in St. Cloud, Minnesota, where the current world knows about vampires, and there are even laws regarding their behavior, such as the illegality of biting for blood. The author has a wry sense of humor, seen in his portrayal of Darius, the dark clothes- and metal-wearing goth, who says things like, “Security at Stearns County High is tighter than a choke collar, and I should know because sometimes I wear one.” He uses humor to keep the book upbeat in what could be a dark, depressing novel, with the main character’s mother suffering from illness.

Blood Orange Soda is honest and poignant, using vampires as another type of clique and making an affecting statement when Darius’s best friend, Weezer, who is unsure if he wants to become a vampire like the rest of his family, says, “Once you’re a Vampire, you’ll always be different. You’ll always be an outsider.” Darius also makes good use of the fact that, “People put you into boxes and categories.”

The characters’ relationships are believable, with the goofy but musically talented best friend, the “normal” (non-goth) girl who is just a friend (or is she?), and the new girlfriend. Larranaga successfully crafts interactions that realistically portray high school students.

There are wonderful descriptions throughout the book, one of the best being Darius’s initial encounter with Bao, the bully: “Flat on my back along the 20-yard line, I’m looking up at a football player. How much does his battering ram of a body weigh?” Strong descriptions propel the story forward, creating a picture in the mind.

Blood Orange Soda is a solid book about coming of age. Doesn’t matter if you are a vampire, goth, or “normal.”

BETH VANHOUTEN (February 28, 2014)

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