

Dracaena Marginata

Donald Greco

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The effects of discrimination are evident throughout these boys' journeys to manhood, making for a compelling and poignant tale.

Alessandro (Sandy) Morelli and Rigley Potter are unlikely friends, drawn together by some strange alchemy that seems to brew when kids sense that the world around them is less than friendly. *Dracaena Marginata*, the third novel in Donald Greco's Youngstown Quintet series, is the story of that friendship, and of Sandy's vow to stand firm in it no matter what life might bring.

A bright, sensitive, naive boy, Sandy, who narrates the tale, comes from a comfortable and loving home. In the 1950s, being of Italian descent puts him at a disadvantage in his rough-and-tumble, working-class neighborhood in Youngstown, Ohio. But what really sets him apart from his peers is his friendship with Rigley, a big, lumbering, mentally challenged boy growing up in poverty, abused by his drunken father and unloved by his neurotic mother.

As the friends grow, so does the contrast between them. Sandy goes away to college, serves in the Vietnam War, finds love, and gets married. Rigley, on the other hand, is unable to rise above his limitations; with his deteriorating mental state and his history of having suffered sexual abuse at the hands of those he thought were his friends, he lands in a mental institution where his tragic fate is sealed.

More than just a coming-of-age tale, Greco's book is also a social commentary. The effects of mental illness, socioeconomic class, and racial and ethnic discrimination are evident in each step of the boys' journey to manhood, making for a rough yet compelling tale. Kids are often cruel to one another, and the story contains frequent scenes of physical, verbal, and emotional aggression, as well as instances of sexual abuse. Adults are portrayed as equally insensitive or cruel; Rigley's severe beatings from his father and others are particularly disturbing. The language used is often crude, as are the attitudes behind it. Yet beneath it all runs a strong current of honor, friendship, loyalty, and compassion.

Greco's colorful descriptions ("She looked like money"; "He couldn't tell now from yesterday, so he chose those moments he liked best, and they became the world he lived in") and to-the-point dialogue bring his characters to life, delving beneath the surface to make interactions emotionally rich. Complex thought processes, often only half understood by the young characters, are convincingly described: "Sometimes I thought he was too dumb to get any kind of job. But how could I tell him that? I had to act the same and think different, like I had a strange kind of secret."

Errors are of the type that careful proofreading would easily correct, including: "it was a pretty-good looking farm"; the use of "hazel" to describe eyes that were really "a mysterious pale green"; "gran mal" (should be "grand mal"); "We've got nothing more to say to you each other"; and occasional errors in word usage, grammar, and punctuation. It is also suggested that the author include a biographical statement and photo, as well as a brief overview of the two previous books in the series.

A poignant tale of the awakening of two boys—one to his tragic disability and the other to his potential to make a difference—*Dracaena Marginata* will appeal to those who struggle to make sense of a world that devalues the disadvantaged.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July 21, 2014)

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