

The Magical Appearance of Earthworms

N. A. Moncrief

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Dogs, cats, and the Australian countryside bring light to a boy's dark world in the memoir The Magical Appearance of Earthworms.

N. A. Moncrief's memoir *The Magical Appearance of Earthworms* traces his tumultuous formative years. As a boy, he loved animals and sought stronger connections with his troubled family members.

When young Mick wants to get away from the world, he takes his four dogs to a pond out past the neighborhoods of Tilburn, Australia—thirty miles from Melbourne—where he avoids the terrors of his violent, sexually abusive older brother and the bickering of his hostile parents. In a matter of six years—from ages nine to fifteen—his life transforms, unfolding with drama that is out of his control.

Mick's mother, who raises chickens and ducks for meat in their backyard, leaves Mick, his brother Darren, and his father with no warning to be with another man. Mick is distraught—even more so when, a few months later, she takes Darren to live with her. While Mick is glad to be apart from his brother's abuse, he misses his mother, who was the only one who showed him affection. Mick's inner turmoil concerning this separation is the background to the events and individuals who shape his experiences.

Further upheavals, as when Mick's father moves him to an apartment that doesn't allow pets, and later when his father marries a woman who also has a son and spirals into alcoholism, test Mick at every turn. His relationship with his father is joyful at times and tense at others, carrying the story from Mick's innocent youth through to the forced maturity of his teenage years. Mick's pets, his closest companions, are a constant among the turbulence. He also finds solace in sports, which help to build his confidence and round him out.

Careful details fill in the spaces of the backdrop, resulting in a fleshed-out world and dimensional characters, as when the clanging of a spoon in a mug of morning tea becomes the family's version of an alarm, and with a vicious duck whose habit of chasing Mick becomes a source of comic relief.

The book's ending is abrupt; strands of the plot are left unconnected to the future events it mentions. While its message complements Mick's adoration of animals and the solitude he enjoys in the wilderness, his emotional catharsis feels incomplete.

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AIMÉE JODOIN (April 24, 2020)

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