

A DIFFICULT BOY by M.P. Barker – Fact Sheet

Title: *A Difficult Boy*

ISBN-10: 0823420868

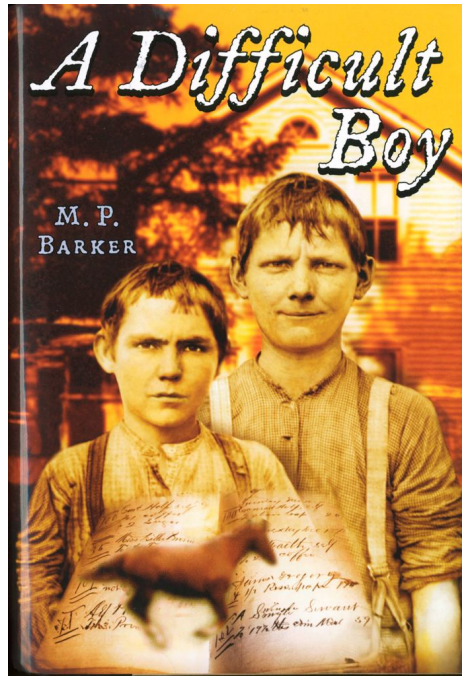
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ABOUT THE BOOK

A Difficult Boy

Historical Fiction

Author: M.P. Barker

Publisher: Holiday House

ISBN-10: 0823420868

ISBN-13: 978-0823420865

Price: \$16.95 (\$18.95 CAN)

Binding: Hardcover, 298 pages, 5.5”x 8.25”

Age range: 10 to 110

Set in Western Massachusetts in 1839, *A DIFFICULT BOY* tells the story of two young indentured servants—one of them Irish—who must overcome their differences to outwit their abusive master and win their freedom.

Because of his family’s debt’s, young Ethan must work for Mr. Lyman, a wealthy shopkeeper. Ethan tries to befriend the Lyman’s other indentured servant, but Daniel, as everyone says, is a difficult boy. Sixteen years old, Irish, and moody, Daniel brushes off Ethan as if he were a pesky gnat. Ethan resolves to ignore the older boy, but is then shocked to see how cruelly Mr. Lyman treats Daniel. Soon, Ethan, too, is suffering Mr. Lyman’s blows. Self-preservation drives the two boys together and they begin to forge a friendship. Then they discover a dark secret about the past that could change their lives forever.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.P. Barker

Writing **A Difficult Boy** allowed M.P. Barker to combine her childhood dreams of becoming a novelist and owning a horse with her grown-up jobs as an archivist and historian. Although she never did get that dream horse, she got to invent one in Ivy, the mare that the boys in the story take care of.

In the 1990s, she did a stint as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village, where she time-traveled on a daily basis to 1830s New England. After Sturbridge, she became an archivist at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, where she gets paid to snoop through old diaries, letters and personal papers.

Turning that information into historical fiction was an adventure and a challenge. She wanted to create characters that readers could identify with, while allowing them to see that those characters aren't merely modern people wearing funny clothes and living without indoor plumbing. Daniel's and Ethan's thoughts and beliefs are very different from ours, yet they grapple with familiar problems: prejudice, abuse, poverty, grief, and loneliness. And they cherish the same things that matter to readers today: loyalty, kindness, trust and most of all, friendship.

Barker is also a historical consultant whose writing projects have included exhibit text, scripts for historical dramatizations, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, fundraising materials, and planning studies. She now works as Circuit Rider for Preservation Massachusetts, a non-profit historic preservation organization

Barker is a member of the Class of 2k8, a marketing collaborative of 27 authors of debut young-adult and middle-grade novels. More information is available at her website: www.mpbarker.net

Reviews of *A Difficult Boy*:

Kirkus Reviews First Fiction Special Issue (15 Apr 2008):

“What was the life of an indentured servant but that of a slave? M.P. Barker brings it ringingly, cringingly to life. ‘In the 1990s I worked as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village, where I time-traveled daily to 1830s New England,’ says Barker. ‘You can research all you want, but nothing’s like sitting with your face against a flatulent cow’s belly and getting slapped upside the head with a manure-soaked tail to give your story authenticity.’ *A Difficult Boy* hinges on the efforts of two boys—one social, one circumstantially remote, soon to be friends—to escape their brutalized existence. ‘I wanted to create identifiable characters, who weren’t merely modern people wearing funny clothes and living without indoor plumbing. Daniel and Ethan’s thoughts and beliefs are different from ours, yet they grapple with familiar problems—prejudice, abuse, poverty, grief and loneliness.’ Then there is Ivy, a horse that bonds the boys and provides their ticket out.”

Publisher’s Weekly (28 Apr 2008):

“Barker’s gift for historical detail illuminates this absorbing first novel, accurately portraying the pleasures and the harsh realities of 19th-century Massachusetts farm life. From describing exactly how to milk a treacherous cow to the precise way a servant ties and knots her shawl over a dress that is ‘the color of an overdone Indian pudding,’ the author adds authenticity to her well-constructed story. Nine-year-old Ethan Root has been ‘bound’ to shopkeeper and farmer George Lyman as an indentured servant. Lyman appears to be generous, and Ethan will have an opportunity to learn a trade. Ethan and his fellow servant Daniel form a bond that grows as they endure beatings and humiliations at Lyman’s hands. Barker uses the burgeoning friendship as background for the quickening pace of the text, as the boys discover evidence of Lyman’s double-dealings. Readers will like this book for its attention to heady issues like early prejudice against the Irish (Daniel is Irish) and the treatment of indentured servants as young as themselves, and for its satisfying and hopeful conclusion.”

School Library Journal (1 May 2008)

“When nine-year-old Ethan leaves his family to be bound out to Mr. Lyman, his father tries to make it sound like an adventure and an opportunity to learn a trade. But Ethan knows that it is a necessity: his father has no other way to pay off his debts to the wealthy shopkeeper. The Lyman’s other indentured servant is a surly teenager who rebuffs Ethan’s attempts at friendship. Mr. Lyman is initially affectionate and gracious to Ethan and warns him against spending too much time with Daniel, a ‘difficult boy’ whom the Lyman’s call Paddy to underscore his Irish inferiority. But when Ethan accidentally breaks a plate, he witnesses how quickly the man’s benevolent demeanor can transform into violent rage, and, after a vicious beating, he and Daniel begin to form a bond. But to the town, and even to Ethan’s parents, the man is a shining example of virtue, teaching these boys a trade and “disciplining” them only when their misdeeds warrant it. As the boys’ friendship grows stronger, Ethan learns more of Daniel’s tragic past and the circumstances that have bound him to the Lyman’s. How Ethan and Daniel bolster each other and escape Mr. Lyman’s tyranny makes for a memorable tale of friendship and a fascinating glimpse into mid-19th-century Massachusetts. Like L. M. Elliott’s *Give Me Liberty* (HarperCollins, 2006), this is an eye-opening look at indentured servitude in American history.”--Kim Dare, Fairfax County Public Schools, VA

Susan VanHecke, on *Authorlink.com* (1 June 2008) and *Adventures in Authorhood* (2 Jun 2008):
“The beautifully written book, set in 1839, is loaded with rich detail, both historical and sensorial.”

“The tale of the stormy relationship of two young indentured servants of 1839 and their struggle to escape their master's abuse, Barker's young adult novel is one of the best historical fiction works I've read in a long time, emotionally authentic, full of period detail, and beautifully written.”

ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents) Online (September 2008):

“Daniel, or “Paddy,” a 15-year-old indentured servant, has been through a lot in his short life: immigration from Ireland to America, subsistence farming with his family, and a tragic fire that left him an orphan. To stay off the public welfare system of 1839 Massachusetts, he is indentured to Mr. Lyman, a wealthy shop owner and farmer. The protagonist, Ethan, comes to live with Daniel when his father is unable to pay off his debts at Mr. Lyman’s store. Ethan and Daniel survive by supporting each other and trying to please the increasingly demanding and dishonest Mr. Lyman. Daniel’s love of horses promotes both his downfall and redemption in the heroic climax of this engaging story.” --Reviewed by Susan Wegmann, Orlando, FL

Children’s Literature:

“Ethan does not want to leave home, but his father explains that the family needs him to go live with and work for Mr. Lyman. Ethan is the only one who can help his family pay off their debt to Mr. Lyman. Ethan tries to make friends and fit in, but he feels nothing but anger from the other servant, Daniel. The more time he spends with Mr. Lyman, the more uncomfortable he feels. But one night Mr. Lyman turns on both of them and Ethan realizes he and Daniel can help each other. Mr. Lyman feels that men like him should be their own masters, but that attitude doesn't apply to men "like Daniel." Ethan becomes aware of some of Daniel's talents and abilities, and others may be noticing as well. But can the two boys survive the cruelty of Mr. Lyman? If Ethan does what he feels is right, he might jeopardize his family's survival. A fast-paced story set in 1839 but applicable to decisions young readers face today.” --Carol Ann Lloyd-Stanger