

Reader's Guide
For
A Difficult Boy
by
M. P. Barker
A Debut Young Adult Novel

About the Book

It's 1839. Nine-year-old Ethan Root doesn't want to work for wealthy shopkeeper George Lyman, but it's the only way to pay off the Root family's debt. Ethan tries to befriend Daniel, the Lymans' other indentured servant. Sixteen years old, Irish, and moody, Daniel brushes off Ethan as if he were a pesky gnat. Ethan resolves to ignore the brusque older boy, but is then shocked to see how cruelly Mr. Lyman treats Daniel. Soon, Ethan, too, is suffering Mr. Lyman's blows, and the two boys have only each other to rely on, as no one comes to their aid.

Ethan and Daniel forge a tentative friendship. But when Daniel stands up to the Lymans to protect Ethan from further harm, the boys set off a chain of events that may land Daniel in prison.

About the Author

For nearly ten years, M. P. Barker worked as a costumed historical interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. She got a firsthand taste of 19th-century New England rural life by milking cows, mucking out barns, and doing other tasks which helped her bring realism and immediacy to *A Difficult Boy's* setting and characters. As an archivist at the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Barker visits a different time and place with every diary, letter, and photograph she catalogs. Find out more at her web page: www.mpbarker.net

Discussion Questions

1. How does Mr. Lyman try to strip Daniel of his identity? What might his motives be? What tactics does Daniel use to try to retain his identity and humanity?
2. Ethan has to choose between obeying his father and becoming Daniel's friend. Do you think he makes the right choice? Why or why not? What might have happened if he'd chosen differently? How does Ethan's relationship with his father differ from the relationship between Silas and Mr. Lyman? What can you learn about Daniel's father from the hints provided in the story?
3. How are Ethan and Daniel changed by their friendship? What other characters are changed because of the boys' friendship? In what ways? Discuss the ways friendships can change people, whether in a positive or negative way.
4. Although the story takes place in the 1830s, Ethan and Daniel encounter many problems that people still face today. Discuss some of the ways Ethan's and Daniel's lives are different from yours, and some of the ways they are similar. Don't just think about

physical things (houses, clothes, food, etc.), but think about the way people behave toward each other. What words, customs, objects, attitudes etc. did you find unfamiliar when you read the book? What things seem to have remained the same?

5. Why can't Ethan tell his parents about the way Mr. Lyman treats him and Daniel? What is he afraid will happen if he stops working for Mr. Lyman? Do you think his fears are justified?

Activity

The author based some of the story on her experience working at Old Sturbridge Village. At the Old Sturbridge Village Web site (http://www.osv.org/explore_learn/document_list.php) readers can find out more about 19th century New England through articles and copies of documents and illustrations, or can request lesson plans and packets from the museum to complement discussion of the story. Readers might create their own stories based on such documents or illustrations, or they might write about or discuss similarities and differences between their own lives and life in the 19th century.