



The Dogs by Allan Stratton

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?Mom left Dad when I was eight. She says he'd been acting strange since forever. I have flashes of things, but I'm not sure what's real, what's dreams and what's things I overheard Mom say to my grandparents.? That's how things stand just five pages in at the start of Chapter Two, and they're going to get a lot worse for 15 (I think) year-old Cameron before they get even a bit better. He and Mom are on the run, somewhere in North America, maybe out West since this is empty country. Maybe it's Canada, since Calgary's the only city mentioned (and even that's a lie to cover Cameron's tracks from inquisitive questioners); and Allan Stratton is a much-published and highly regarded Canadian author.

Sorry if this is a bit confusing, but that's the way things are. Mom and Cameron are on the run because Dad is a violent, remorseless threat. They've moved house five times, but Mom's scared he's still on the scent; when he finally shows up, you realise she was dead right to be scared. In their latest attempt to disappear without trace, Cameron and his Mom end up in remote Wolf Hollow, renting a run-down farm-house peopled by talkative ghosts (maybe) who themselves have lived and died in a tale of abuse and (maybe) murder. Not that long ago either, so there are folks in the community who knew these ghosts in the flesh; among them, it turns out, relatives of kids at Cameron's new school (he's always at a new school). And then there's the guy from the next farm over, who says a lot less than he knows.

There's layer upon layer of concealment here and it's all too much for Cameron. Since he's sharing the story with us, and since he's unsure what's real and what's dreams, neither are we. The language of his narration might belong to your everyday teenlit teenager, but the demands upon the reader here are subtle, exciting and ? for those who hang in to the end ? satisfying. To do so, they'll need to handle some edgy, even bloodthirsty stuff involving Dad and a pack of savage dogs - or maybe they are coyotes, unless of course they and the ghostly voices are only in the mind.

This could be a new and intriguing reading experience. The challenge to the young reader runs something like this: you'll have to take on 300 pages layered in psychological complexities where the stressed-out narrator ? someone around your age ? is unsure whether some of the people he talks with actually exist. Whether they do or they don't, they have something to say which he needs to hear. Some of the adults around him, especially his Mom, are not going to be a great support, since they are as stressed as he is, but trying not to show it. The violence, when it comes, is genuinely frightening. And neither Cameron nor you will get much relief and certainly not a lot of laughs. Worth it, though.

Read a [Q&A interview](#) [4] with Allan Stratton.

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