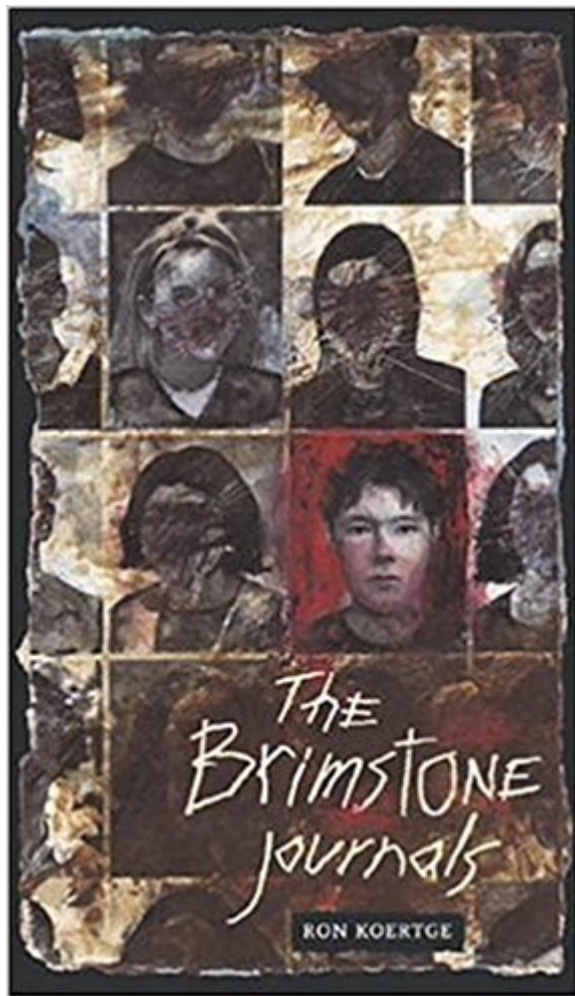


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The Brimstone Journals



Synopsis

In a startling, often poignant student journal, acclaimed poet and novelist Ron Koertge creates a suburban high school both familiar and terrifying. The Branston High School Class of 2001 seems familiar enough on the surface: there's the Smart One, the Fat Kid, Social Conscience, Bad Girl, Good Girl, Jock, Anorexic, Dyke, Rich Boy, Sistah, Stud . . . and Boyd, an Angry Young Man who has just made a dangerous new friend. Now he's making a list. The Branston High School Class of 2001. You might think you know them. You might be surprised. Narrated by fifteen teenage characters, this startling, often poignant poetic novel evokes a suburban high school both familiar and terrifying and provides an ideal opportunity for young adults to discuss violence in schools.

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Customer Reviews

The Branston (a.k.a. Brimstone) High School Class of 2001 has got it all: Damon is the jock, Meredith the slut, Jennifer the good girl, David the computer game addict, Kitty the anorexic, Neesha the sistah, Rob the stud, Sheila the lesbian. And Boyd the angry and scared neo-Nazi with an arsenal in his basement and a list of "everybody who ever blew me off, flipped me off, or pissed me off." Through a series of poetic journal entries from 15 students, author Ron Koertge chronicles the sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, and ultimately chilling lives of fictional high school students in contemporary America. With just a few words from each character in each entry, readers glean more than a glimpse into their complex and often troubled worlds. Koertge's characterizations are compelling, if clichéd, although omitting two or three of the student roles might have made

keeping up with who's who a little easier. Social messages covering racism, classism, homophobia, and an entire high school melting pot of "isms," come across a little heavy-handedly, but work well as an intentionally pointed illustration of the perils young people face today. Subject matter and language make this appropriate for older readers. Koertge is the author of several acclaimed novels, including *Confess-O-Rama*. (Older teens) --Emilie Coulter --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Through poems, Koertge (*Where the Kissing Never Stops*) creates 15 separate narrators, all seniors at Branston (nicknamed "Brimstone") High School, struggling with major problems. Boyd, a white supremacist neglected by his alcoholic father, is staging a school shooting spree. Even the school nurse and at least one teacher are racist: "Our homeroom teacher, / Ms. Malone... / says black/ people have their own Heaven, but it's/ far enough away from ours so we won't/ have to listen to their music." As Boyd prepares a target list (of "everybody who/ ever blew me off, flipped me off,/ or pissed me off"), the other characters reach their own breaking points; some even consider buying guns from him to solve their troubles. While Koertge's pacing allows readers to sense the building tension, the brevity of the poems provides readers with little insight into the characters, so that they teeter on the edge of melodrama: Kitty is anorexic ("I think if I'm thin enough, I can fly"), Sheila wonders if she's a lesbian because she loves her best friend ("I want to go farther with Monica/ than just good-bye hugs"). Despite some memorable lines ("His dreams are like a box I cannot put down," says Tran, a Vietnamese teen who feels pressured by his immigrant father to become successful), the novel does not have enough heft to compensate for a cast that does not seem fully alive. Ages 14-up. (Feb.) Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Branston High School, nicknamed Brimstone by its occupants, is a typical suburban high school in America. You have the jock, the nerd, the fat kid, the lesbian, and every other "label" high school students give each other. In *The Brimstone Journals*, Koertge gives readers a glimpse into the personal thoughts of each of these fifteen students by recording their thoughts and feelings in journal form. What joins the students together, whether they know it or not, is Boyd, an angry young man with a list of "everybody who ever blew me off, flipped me off, or pissed me off" (Koertge 51). When he meets Mike, Boyd begins to plan a Columbine type event where he gets revenge against all those he thinks offended him. Other students are sucked into his plan either by joining in the attack or having their name added to the list. One student bravely thwarts Boyd's plan, and the

aftermath of the "event" showcases teenagers at their best: living in the moment. Although a few students have their lives changed like Sheila opening up to her mother about her struggle and Allison telling the counselor what her stepfather is doing to her, most students immediately go back to the frivolous cares of high school. Damon, the controlling boyfriend jock, immediately goes back to wondering when his girlfriend will come back to him. Rob still doesn't understand why he was on the list. Even Lester, the hero of the book, contemplates his actions for a minute and then immediately thinks about going to prom with Meredith. Boyd exemplifies this even further as with one sentence he is choosing to help kill his peers and in the next, he's thinking about a tattoo. Boyd was gonna drop out of school until Mike got me to see how we need People who can lead the foot soldiers. Somebody the grunts can look up to. So I'll march up there and shake some totalphony's hand. Plus, Mike's springing for a tattoo when I get my diploma. (Koertge 31) Although Koertge gives a voice to the average high school students in this book, the book felt incomplete in some way. Because there were fifteen voices to hear in only 113 pages, some voices were not developed completely nor did their few entries do their stories justice. However, the many voices join together cohesively to tell the unified story of a high school on the edge of an attack by one of its students. Each unique voice tells a different side or perspective of the story that the reader would not have seen if the story had been written in standard prose. The pattern of the poems (some one sentence in length while others two pages) resonates the disjointed feelings of teenagers. Each day, millions of teens around the country go to school with different problems and situations in which they feel isolated and alone. In this book, Koertge gives them a voice. High school teachers could use either individual poems or the book in its entirety to start discussions about these problems too many people want to sweep under the carpet. The book is a quick read that would spark great discussion and self-reflection as students could write about their own lives. In addition, the poems lend themselves to discussions about character traits, development, and change throughout a story. [...]

I really liked Ron Koertge's book, *The Brimstone Journals*. It was an interesting quick read about suburban high school kids and it gave me some insight into the mindset of kids who plot shooting rampages. I was equally intrigued by what the author wrote at the back of the book, "Usually I choose characters and settings that are humorous and off beat. *The Brimstone Journals*, however, chose me. I began the book before the tragedy in Colorado, and the characters woke me up at night." There are fifteen haunting student voices. All are seniors at Branston, a suburban high school. This story, written as journal entries, focuses on the many problems that suburban teens find themselves struggling with. The journal opens with the geeky kid, Lester, playing with his

father's gun and toying with the idea of "getting back" at the jocks and girls at his school who have "dissed" him. Damon is one of those jocks and is also very controlling with his girlfriend, Kelli who is struggling to break his hold on her. Then there is Sheila, who wonders if she's a lesbian because she loves her best friend, Monica. Boyd is an outcast at school and neglected and abused at home by his alcoholic father. Joseph is an environmentalist and the offspring of two "weird" parents who "drink a lot of wine and boogie to the Grateful Dead". Allison is being sexually harassed by her stepfather, who her mother makes excuses for when she complains. Kitty is the fat girl, Jennifer, a religious zealot and Meredith has "loose morals". Neesha, Tran and Carter are the minorities. Neesha has black revolutionary leanings, Tran, Vietnamese, is under pressure by his immigrant father to fulfill the American dream and Carter is a rich black kid who flaunts cashmere sweaters and drives an expensive sports car. The plot centers around a plan by the geeks to do a "Columbine" at their school targeting the minorities, jocks and anyone else who crosses their newly-formed secret brotherhood. Interesting, easy to read, good insight into suburban high school life.

Welcome to Branston High, nicknamed Brimstone by its students. As in "fire and brimstone." As in Hell. And if they don't act fast, a demon will break loose. Through a series of short, journal-like poems, acclaimed author Koertge catapults us into the lives of some Branston students. The cast of characters is all too familiar and almost too dysfunctional --- each with their own burdens to bear. There's the fat kid, the smart kid, the rich kid, the anorexic, the jock, and so on. Rounding out the mix is Boyd. Left to his own devices by his alcoholic father, Boyd has become a white supremacist with a major chip on his shoulder. Tension within the school is mounting. Mercilessly, Boyd compiles a list of people he hates, his "hit list," student by student. And around him, everybody else's problems are ripping them apart. You'll have to read this inventive and engrossing poem-novel to find out what ultimately happens. THE BRIMSTONE JOURNALS explores the timely and all too real topic of teen violence in a story that is as haunting as it is illuminating. --- Reviewed by Tammy L. Currier

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