

## Making Friends with Monsters

**Sandra L Rostirolla**

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*Making Friends with Monsters is a sensitive novel that tackles themes of mental health and family dynamics from the perspective of a boy who's determined to persevere.*

Equal parts heartbreaking and hopeful, Sandra L. Rostirolla's novel *Making Friends with Monsters* is a tale about the tragic effects of grief and loss, but also about the ability to overcome both.

Twelve-year-old Sam feels like his life is spiraling out of control. Ever since learning a secret, his once loving older brother Ben has become combative and distant. In response, Sam's bubbly younger sister Abby has become teary and quiet, and Sam's parents shout and threaten Ben. Then, in a series of tragedies, Sam loses both his arm and his brother, and the family descends further into chaos. Sam knows that the monsters that live inside people are to blame, and he sets out to discover how to tame them before they swallow him too.

Told from Sam's perspective, the narrative is descriptive and poignant. Sam's syntax mirrors his emotions, with short sentences representing sudden realizations or small steps forward, as when Sam reunites with his mother. Strong imagery abounds, with the family's drought-ridden Australian farm symbolizing their lack of joy and a closing rainstorm mirroring the emotional relief they finally discover.

The plot is dark, with tragedy after tragedy striking Sam's family and with people, including Sam's mother and uncle, making choices with terrible consequences. Yet its message is not one of hopelessness. Sam is driven to the edge of despair as he watches his world crumble, but he finds hope and support in unlikely places. He discovers a role model in a fellow amputee and the leader of the local biker gang, Cliff, and finds a shoulder to cry on with Ben's ex-girlfriend, Stephanie. Later, he uses his lessons about resilience to help his school crush, Becky, deal with the suicide of her father.

The book is unflinching in its presentation of heavy topics, including suicide, violence, and depression, yet it manages to examine them without glorifying them, showing the consequences that such issues have, particularly on children. Rostirolla makes a deliberate decision not to use the term "suicide," instead referring to it as a monster swallowing someone whole. The monster motif is ingenious: it allows for a way to talk about mental health in its entirety rather than just in terms of one manifestation, like depression or anxiety. The story progresses alongside Sam's understanding of what a monster is. Whereas he initially views negative emotions as something to be repressed, he comes to understand that grief and anger are a necessary part of healing and that they need to be dealt with and expressed in the right way.

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VIVIAN TURNBULL (January 3, 2023)

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