

asty streak at a rural retreat - Australian, The/Weekend

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Bad Behaviour: A Memoir of Bullying and Boarding School By Rebecca Starford Allen & Unwin, 272pp, \$29.99

BOARDING school tales are compelling. JK Rowling captured the world with her boarding school fictions and now Melbourne writer Rebecca Starford, in her memoir *Bad Behaviour*, brings us a fascinating account of boarding school truths.

They are awful truths for the most part — this is not a story of joyful midnight feasts and jolly sporting tournaments — and it is the awfulness of Starford's experience that makes her book such an engrossing read.

From the moment you pick it up, it is hard to let this book go: the arched eyebrows and malevolent eyes of a teenage girl stare from the cover, commanding you not to look away. And once Sandy Cull's cover design has lured you in, the shocking prologue, with its portent of bullying and damage to the hapless Kendall, keeps you going.

Bad Behaviour is Starford's account of her year at a rural retreat for students of a prestigious private school where she was, at 14, a scholarship student. Although she calls her school simply the Big School and the rural retreat Silver Creek, others have identified the school as Geelong Grammar and the retreat as the school's renowned Timbertop campus that counts Prince Charles, Peter Carey and Missy Higgins among its alumni.

In *Bad Behaviour*, Year 9 students spend the year at Silver Creek away from their parents, without television, computers or phones, and divided into dormitory groups. Starford is allocated to Red House. There she finds herself bunking with the charismatic bully Portia and her sidekicks Ronnie, Briohny and Sarah.

While there are other, kinder friends to be had in Red House, the hitherto good girl Starford finds herself irresistibly drawn to Portia and her cohort. In her efforts to impress them, she begins to behave as badly too and the treatment they consequently mete out to the vulnerable Kendall in particular is shocking and distressing.

Even more appalling is the trick they play on six-year-old Libby, the slightly delayed daughter of Mr Hillman who teaches at Silver Creek and who, together with his family, lives nearby. After cajoling the little girl into the barred-metal washing crate kept in the laundry of Red House, Portia padlocks it closed. Starford's failure to stand up for the little girl brings into stark relief the extraordinary power wielded by Portia, whose frightening behaviour borders on the psychopathic. Starford successfully and skilfully maps her transformation from a studious, well-behaved student to one

who becomes a menace to the teachers as they struggle to control her.

With careful and sympathetic insight, she describes the frustration of the head of Red House, Miss Lacey, as she does her best to care for her unruly and difficult charges. Miss Lacey is a well-drawn character and **Starford's** portrayal of her is layered and incisive. So is **Starford's** examination of her physical separation from her parents, to whom she had always been close.

Craving their help but unable to articulate exactly what it is she needs from them, **Starford's** description of her growing isolation from her parents is heartfelt and powerful.

In the narration of her 14-year-old self, **Starford** shows her skill as a writer. Within the confines of language that is simple and colloquial, she manages to incorporate a descriptive narrative that enables the reader to visualise Silver Creek and its students without ever losing the authenticity of the adolescent voice. Passing references to the Spice Girls and to James Hird as Cleo bachelor of the year help to clearly place Silver Creek within its temporal context.

The description of **Starford's** year at Silver Creek is enough on its own to sustain the reader's interest. Added to this is a second narrative thread, that of the present-day **Starford** who, in returning to visit Silver Creek, considers its effect on her adult self.

At times, I found this narrative problematic. The switch between the two periods is not always clear and, in contrast to the immediacy of the adolescent voice, the voice of the adult **Starford** is not as sparkling. There is a tendency to rush over events that may merit a more leisurely unfolding.

Despite this, **Starford** makes good use of her adult voice to first consider her emerging sexuality and later question her tendency to seek partners who, like Portia, are more beguiling and charismatic than loving and kind.

She is also able to describe her shock at the realisation that her mother's love struggles to stretch far enough to embrace her daughter's identity as a young lesbian.

By juxtaposing her adolescent and adult selves, **Starford** examines the premise that it is impossible to understand ourselves without an unflinching examination of the vital experiences that have shaped us.

Although *Bad Behaviour* is her first book, **Starford** is no stranger to the publishing world. In 2010, together with author Hannah Kent, she set up the literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*. **Starford** is also the former deputy editor of *Australian Book Review* and is now an editor with Text Publishing.

It is therefore unsurprising that she writes with an assurance that belies her status as a debut author. I look forward to her next work. **Suzanne Leal's** next novel will be published by Allen & Unwin next year.