

**33 Snowfish**  
Adam Rapp  
Candlewick Press, 2003

**Plot Summary**

On the run in a stolen car with a kidnapped baby in tow, Custis, Curl, and Boobie are three young people with deeply troubled pasts and bleak futures. As they struggle to find a new life for themselves, it becomes painfully clear that none of them will ever be able to leave the past behind. Yet for one, redemption is waiting in the unlikeliest of places.

With the raw language of the street and lyrical, stream-of-consciousness prose, Adam Rapp hurtles the reader into a world of lost children, a world that is not for the faint of heart. Gripping, disturbing, and starkly illuminating, his hypnotic narration captures the voices of two damaged souls — a third speaks only through drawings — to tell a story of alienation, deprivation, and ultimately, the saving power of compassion. - [From Publisher](#), Candlewick.

**Reviews**

- [Kirkus](#) (1 March 2003): “The bleak scenery of winter forms the backdrop to this tale of three runaways, bonded together to grasp feebly for emotional warmth. The reader meets Custis, Curl, and Boobie as they speed down the back roads of Illinois in a stolen car, with a stolen baby. Alternating narratives move back and forth through time, obliquely telling the characters’ individual stories even as their current drama unfolds. Custis is homeless, a fugitive from a child-porn producer; Curl is a drug-addicted prostitute; Boobie is a virtual cipher—his contributions to the narrative consist of increasingly violent and nihilistic sketches—who, the reader learns, has just killed his well-to-do parents and made off with his baby brother. They have no destination other than to get away from where they’ve been; they have a vague plan of selling the baby and using the money to set themselves up comfortably. Their “plan” is doomed from the start: the three, plus the baby, end up in an abandoned van in the middle of the woods, where first Curl dies and then Boobie vanishes into the snow. It is at this moment that Custis and the baby are taken in by Seldom, an ancient and eccentric black man who lives in a cabin and who begins to show Custis that maybe there is another way to live. With his customary ear for the language of the marginalized teen, Rapp (*Little Chicago*, 2002, etc.) allows his characters to present themselves with total un-self-consciousness, frankly and powerfully laying out the squalor of their existence without any seeming sense that life can be anything else but squalid. Seldom may himself seem rather like *deus ex machina* from a plotting perspective, but he serves to save both Custis and the narrative from utter annihilation. The snug warmth of Seldom’s home and the little family he and Custis and the baby have formed contrasts powerfully with the frigid internal winter that Custis has survived, allowing both Custis and the reader to hope for redemption. (*Fiction. YA*).”
- [Library Media Collection](#) (1 April 2007): “Let’s start with Adam Rapp, as one of his books has caused me to rethink my mantra of “Don’t booktalk a book you don’t like.” I have to change that to “Don’t booktalk a book that you didn’t react to!” I certainly reacted to Rapp’s 33 Snowfish. My first response was that I detested the book and wanted to throw it against the wall when I finished reading it. A strong reaction, even a negative one, suggests a need to look closely at

what caused it. Was it because the book is now well written, or was it because the content is so disturbing? Once I got past my initial intense reaction to the novel, I realized that it was the strong language, voiced mainly by a young boy, and the horrific events in the story that caused my initial negative response. Can I say this book is poorly written? No. It is very well written, as are Adam Rapp's other YA novels. But child sexual abuse, drug abuse, and murder all in one book with intense language are bound to cause reader reaction. Will this be a book I offer to any tenn requesting a "good read"? No. Rapp's book requires some thought as to who you recommend it to and where you booktalk it. If you are thinking that this is one you don't even want to consider for your collection wait a minute. Not every book needs to have broad appeal. Some books have limited audience but should still be in your collection."

- [Publishers Weekly](#) (13 January 2003): "'On top of everything else, Boobie's got the clap," begins Rapp's (Little Chicago) dark tale about three runaways who understand hatred and violence better than love. Custis, an orphan, is fleeing from his "owner," a producer of pornography and snuff films. Custis is accompanied by Curl, a child prostitute, and her boyfriend, Boobie, who has just murdered his parents and kidnapped his baby brother to sell on the streets. Drawn together more by desperation than friendship, they roam from one town to the next, stealing and scavenging. Alternating first-person narratives graphically express Custis's and Curl's histories of abuse and exploitation. Boobie remains more of a mystery, revealing troubled thoughts through pictures rather than words (Ering's line illustrations are meant to recreate Boobie's sketches). Signs of hope do not appear until two of the three children have lost their lives and the lone survivor, touched by a stranger's kindness, faces options that could change his fate. Readers may have trouble stomaching the language (e.g., "He was a dirty-ass little half-nigger, too—a lot dirtier than me"), as well as the horrors so flatly depicted and, in the end, so handily overcome. Final artwork not seen by PW. Ages 15-up. (Mar.)"
- [School Library Journal](#): "Gr 9 Up-The opening sentence sets the hook: "On top of everything else, Boobie's got the clap." He is the eldest of a quartet of kids on the run. The "everything else" consists of the fact that he has killed his parents, stolen their car, and hooked up with Curl, 15, a prostitute. They take in the younger Custis, who has recently escaped from sexual bondage with an abusive pedophile. Lastly, the youngest traveler, Boobie's infant brother, is regarded as a likely source of income-if they can find a buyer. Depraved and depressing? Oh yeah, and the shocks just keep on coming. The fearsome elements escape the pages like nightmares loosed into daylight. Custis carries a loaded gun and is a racist who frequently uses offensive epithets. Curl, a drug addict, is pragmatic about using her body to make money. Boobie is not much of a talker, and is a pyromaniac whose occasional, naive, and brutal drawings speak for him. Things get worse before they get better. Seldom, an elderly black man, helps Custis bury the dead, celebrate Christmas, and take his first tentative steps toward a "normal" child/adult relationship. Spare descriptions and stellar characterization reel readers into the dark and violent world of these dispossessed and abused young people. This book will be controversial, but for those readers who are ready to be challenged by a serious work of shockingly realistic fiction, it invites both an emotional and intellectual response, and begs to be discussed."

## Awards

- [Best Books for Young Adults](#), 2004. American Library Association.

## Lists

- [Teens and Poverty](#) Book List, School Library Journal
- [Best Books for Young Adults](#), 2004, American Library Association

## Response to challenges

- [Spotsylvania County School Board](#) (8 November 2021): The Spotsylvania County School Board directed staff to begin removing books that contain “sexually explicit” material from library shelves after a parent raised concerns at a board meeting about books available through the Riverbend High School’s digital library app. The board voted 6-0 to order the removal. A week later, the Spotsylvania County School Board voted to reverse its decision to remove “sexually explicit” books from school libraries after hours of public comment. Board members Abuismail and Twigg continued to oppose keeping the books in school libraries.

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