


Savaging the Dark

Christopher Conlon

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Mona Straw has it all-beautiful daughter, caring husband, lovely home, fulfilling job as a middle-school teacher. But one day a new man enters Mona's life and turns it upside down, their passionate affair tilting her mind to the edge of madness-and murder.

Her lover's name is Connor. He's got blonde hair, green eyes...and he's eleven years old.

Savaging the Dark Details

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From Reader Review *Savaging the Dark* for online ebook

Bob Langdon says

There's a thin veil separating fantasy from insanity. Or so this author would have us believe.

This book was, in a word... "disturbing." And I'm not easily disturbed. It's like driving by a fatal motorcycle accident; you don't want to see it, but you can't look away.

Some other modifiers that come to mind, include "creepy," "insightful," "sad," "tragic," and "fast-paced" (OK, that's two). I couldn't put this book down once I picked it up. Fortunately, at 204 pages, it's a quick read.

And let's not forget, "real." Very, very REAL. This could easily be a true story, written from the perspective of the monster.

Stephen King says that good fiction should be "honest." This was perhaps one of the most honest stories I've ever read. Conlon reached deep to write this. It took guts.

"*Savaging the Dark*" is one of those rare works that goes way beyond being "entertaining" (although it certainly is that), to also being "profound." It forces you ponder life long after you're finished reading it. I'll never watch the evening news through the same eyes again.

Cody | [codysbookshelf](#) says

It's been a while since I finished a book feeling this drained, broken. Maybe the last time was Jack Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door*. At the center of both is the relentless mental and physical abuse of a child at the hands of an adult. In Ketchum's infamous novel, the abuse is born of hate. In Conlon's work it is of love . . . twisted love, anyway. A junior high English teacher has fallen for one of her students — and it quickly spirals out of control.

Consensual sex in my reading does not bother me. Rape, however, does. Especially child rape. This book has child rape in spades. I'm petty tough to horrify, and this one had me almost seething with anger. But that's a sign of a successful horror novel: the reader is left uncomfortable.

Christopher Conlon is now on my radar and I will check out his other books. While this book's subject matter is very sensitive, a horror story that gets under my skin in this way is a rare find. I feel like I need a bath.

Nancy says

This is a disturbing, twisted page-turner of a book which I almost read in one sitting (started it just a little too late last night and had to finish the last 20 or so pages this morning). Mona Straw seems to have an idyllic life: husband, child, teaching job. But then she develops an attraction to one of her 11-year-old students, and,

well, you'll just have to read it to find out how well that works out for everyone involved. :) Christopher Conlon shows a lot of talent here, and I am going to look for more from him. Recommended!

Richard says

Review copy kindly provided by author and GR friend, Christopher Conlon.

This is the very strange, intense and tragic story of Mona Straw, a seemingly ordinary school-teacher who becomes obsessed with a young male student. Christopher Conlon tracks the progress of Mona's disorder from the warped seed of trauma, through the stunted sapling of disturbance to the sickly flower of obsession and the poisoned fruit of violence. As in some of his previous work, Conlon shows us a disquieting disconnect from reality which accompanies her aberration and becomes ever more severe as the story goes on. He does this admirably, giving us real insight into the cause and workings of Mona's malady.

My only qualm with *Savaging the Dark* is that I wonder whether the fictitious narrator to whom Conlon attributes the story could really have written it with such feeling and objectivity. Be that as it may, it is no mean feat to portray a character who causes revulsion and sympathy at the same time.

Mona is somewhat similar to Stephen King's obsessed nurse Annie Wilkes in *Misery*. They are both bad women but not totally evil. We realize that even here, there are factors that are not in their control. Conlon does not excuse his protagonist's deeds but explains them enough that we can still feel some sort of understanding and even pity, mixed with the fear and horror caused by her deeds, thus producing a kind of Aristotelian *catharsis*.

So in Mona's case, how much of it is her own responsibility? How much has been triggered by her upbringing and by events in her past? And how much is caused by inescapable fate? These are the questions we are asked to ponder.

Stephanie says

This is such a disturbing book! It's like a train wreck you just can't look away from as you turn page after page. I read it in two days. Not for the faint of heart, this "affair" with an 11 yr. old student seems so unbelievable but Conlon makes it make sense for the characters.

Dana says

Wow so many times while reading I ask myself, why am I reading this crap? But like someone else said it is like a train wreck and I could not look away. I needed to find out how this ended, kept hoping Mona would get caught. Mona was no average middle school teacher, she was bat shit crazy. Absolutely disturbing.

Jessica says

This is like Mary Kay Letourneau gone wrong. It's a quick read and super twisted!

Leslee says

Great book but one I'm not sure I would widely recommend due to the choice of topic, which covers the same material as Tampa and to a lesser extent, What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal .

The direct comparison to Tampa would be more likely as they are both tales told from the perspective of a female child molester - however where Nutting presented her narrator as a straight up unfeeling monster, Conlon's narrator slowly descends into madness and mania throughout the story. Where I think this book shines and where it disturbed me a lot more than Tampa was in its representation of the young male victim - a lot of the things that the boy says felt spot on to what people say are the biggest psychological effects to victims and it was pretty intense to read.

I can't say that I enjoyed it because I was always low level uneasy throughout the whole book but I recognize that it was bravely and well written especially considering the topic.

Athena says

I won this book through Goodreads First-Reads.

This story was intense, twisted, and upsetting.

Mona Straw was an average woman with a husband and daughter, a beautiful home, and a teaching career. Everything is as it should be until Mona invites you into the real version of her life; her disappointment in her once energetic, fit and handsome husband, and an unrewarding job. She describes how her husband no longer satisfies her, or appeals to her and how she feels as though her job as a teacher is unhelpful.

This is the brink on which Mona Straw's life precariously balances.

How or why her target was a young child is the real question.

Maybe she no longer felt needed, she found someone who needed her and appreciated the things she did, but she spiraled out of control trying to understand herself, and how this happened to her. The really bizarre part is that she rationalized her behavior and didn't really put much effort into stopping it. Yes, she did come up with a half-hearted plan to stay away from him, but the harder she tried she more she craved him, and the farther she detached from reality.

In the beginning, when I was trying to ignore the fact that Mona was so much older. It was beautiful the way the author detailed how a woman starts to act awkward around someone she cares about, and realizes that she likes more than she thought. It was reminiscent of high school. As the situation got worse I felt like she was the monster she herself thought she was and I lost all sympathy for her. I would cringe and silently plead with Mona to get her shit together but to no avail. At the end of the story she had completely unraveled and I

was a little relieved that it ended the way it did under the circumstances.

Erica says

This is my new Lunchtime Reading book. I haven't read a book at lunch for a really long time. However, I'm feeling uncomfortable in my body lately and since I don't really do diets or exercise, I'm going to kill my appetite by reading horrifying books during my main eating times.

Because, dude, this thing is going to give me nightmares. It starts out with a dirty foot being tongue washed. I hate feet. Here's a total aside that sort of relates: I remember riding the bus home from middle school one afternoon. We'd just stopped at the high school to pick up those kids and a discussion on the grossest part of the body started. Some fellow (but younger) middle-schooler piped up that the butt was the ugliest part of the body, which got a huge laugh and some mockery from the big kids. When it was my turn to give input, I said, "Feet." Everyone looked at me like I had said something so unrelated to the topic at hand that maybe I should go sit up in the front. Obviously, feet have grossed me out for a really long time. I handle it much better now than I did in my youth, but still. No. Feet. Ugh. Not my friends.

That's why the first chapter caught me, like a train catches a cow on the tracks. It ran me over instead of throwing me aside, though.

I had to skim a lot of this book when I cataloged it because, at the time, there wasn't much info to be found regarding the contents. When I was done, I had a general idea of the plot and it's one that intrigues me - a female teacher having sex and probably even being in (some form of) love with her really young student - because I can't wrap my mind around it. But it was the first chapter in which this scrawny eleven-year-old is tied to a bed in a motel and the adult in there with him washes his feet in order to earn the kid's trust (yeah, crazy. That's kind of the point) and realizes the way to show the kid full-on trustworthiness to to LICK THE DIRTY FOOT CLEAN?? Dude, have you ever seen/smelled a boychild's foot? Unsanitary! Horrific! The rank smell is even mentioned and yet...ugh. Ok. To quote the tribe of vapid white girls, "I can't even."

And that is why I am reading this book during my lunch breaks. I don't know if I'm going to make it through in tact but kudos to me for jumping way outside my psychological comfort zone. And probably losing about ten pounds as I starve to death every day.

Ok! This took me half a year to read, which is ridiculous as it's a super short book. I brought it home in November because lunchtime reading was taking too long and it was too hard to concentrate on the story. I started over from the beginning and got through it all in a week (that's nighttime reading, though I actually really am a slow reader. Just not quite that slow)

REVIEW:

So you know how I love bitching about lack of editing in indie published works? This book did not have that problem, not at all. It's super clean, grammatically and technically correct, and everything flows in a logical progression without the weird hiccups that so often occur when an editor hasn't hacked-n-slashed a piece. I was impressed, SUPER impressed. Seriously, I caught two typos and a few missing commas and I am probably the only person who will ever notice them.

However, you know how I also like to go on and on about how if only the structure had been crafted better, the story would have been awesome? Yeah, that didn't happen this time.

Based on how this book starts with a female teacher, Mona, - super unreliable narrator who is full of justifications for her actions, trying to explain everything to make it look like she knows something is wrong but that she's not DOING anything wrong, per se - who doesn't have a dark past, finding herself overly-interested in an eleven-year-old student.

I thought the trajectory would be as follows:

The woman falls into her abusive ways and I, the reader, wonder how this could happen if she didn't have a tragic event to blame (according to her). The reader must then consider the broader scope: are people just bad? There doesn't have to be a trigger, some people just do bad things because they want to and they care more about their wants and desires than they do the well-being of others? And back that up a step: Is this - child molestation - truly a bad thing or have we just programmed ourselves to believe it is the mostworst horrible thing that can happen to a kid? (Don't get on me for this. I'm doing philosophizing, here. I already have very strong feelings about sexual abuse, particularly of children) If it's really that bad, why is it that bad, especially if the child seems to consent? Is it impossible for someone so young to know themselves well enough to feel they're part of a decision that is beneficial for them? Knee-jerk reaction rails against this but, if you go all Spock on the situation, what do you see, logically?

So I really thought I'd be tormented by being in this woman's head as she started sexually abusing an eleven-year-old. I was afraid of being made to understand something I find so horrific and wrong and I read it because I wanted to feel that fear, the cognitive dissonance. No one wants to understand why monsters are monsters; it doesn't feel good to make that connection.

But that's not how this played out.

Instead, there actually was a triggering event in her life that made her want to abuse little boys, as we find out sooner rather than later. Also, because her voice was so dispassionate and because she was so unreliable, I couldn't connect with her at all. She became a cardboard character with no depth. She was nothing but "Oh, this is bad but I am a good teacher, a good wife, a good mother, and I have a nice house and a great job and I know this is wrong but I can't stop because I love this boy so much so I will furtively continue on until I get busted" and that mantra gets old, quick.

Also, I got stuck on Connor Blue, the kid in question. He's eleven. He's a mediocre child who comes from an abusive single-parent family. He's that typical nice, under-the-radar, white-trash-kid. We've all known him. In fact, I still know him. There are several eleven-year-olds, soon-to-be eleven-year-olds, or just recently eleven-year-olds who fit some part of that description in my circles. None of them speak, act, or sound like Connor Blue. Little Boy Blue, here, sometimes sounds like a slow-witted five-year-old and sometimes sounds like an overly-dramatic seventeen-year-old out of a YA romance novel. And how did he get to be so sexually active? Again, with the eleven-year-olds I know, I'm not sure any of them think of girls as anything other than cootie-ridden enemies at this point. I know that when they have girlfriends, it means that they ride the bus together or they actually talk to each other at recess. That's about it. They all think kissing is gross. Soooo...why is this eleven-year-old so biologically advanced?

I didn't believe in Connor Blue. He was a generic stand-in for any child who is being molested. Without believable reaction and interplay from him, Mona and her disassociation become even more unbelievable which made me not care at all.

I made it through the story because I was determined to finish. I found out why Mona sounded the way she did. It didn't help me feel any more sympathy toward her, though.

I think the idea behind the story is strong and had it become an actual psychological thriller that was horrific in that it made me see a side to child abuse that I never want to see, it would have been crazy amazing (and I'd have needed therapy because the thought of identifying with the abuser is not something I want...and yet I read this book expecting just that. I have some issues to work out, ok?). As it is, this story is well-written, technically, but low on depth.

Nick Cato says

Mona Straw is living the perfect American life. She has a faithful husband, a cute young daughter, and is a beloved school teacher. But when one of her students--an eleven year old boy named Connor Blue--catches her eye, she begins to drift into territory even she can't explain. Young Connor, like herself, is a huge fan of old films and books about film, and before long they become involved sexually. Connor even claims to be in love with her, and she with him.

I usually avoid stories dealing with child abuse or adults preying on children, and I almost stopped reading this one a few times (it does get a bit graphic). But Conlon handles his characters and situations in a way that we just can't stop reading. It's interesting to see the tidal wave of emotions Mona goes through on this unusual journey. Her paranoia that Connor will tell someone about them grows at a relentless pace, bringing to mind some classic Hitchcock (which is fitting as our couple are fans of the late director).

SAVAGING THE DARK isn't a pleasant read nor is it for everyone. There's a lot of horror fiction that claims to be dark and disturbing, but this actually is. Conlon crafts a human monster in Mona Straw, yet even I hate to admit that we also see her human side and at times I actually felt for her. The book is told from her point of view, but in the clever epilogue that's told from Connor's, the tale comes together in a most surprising way.

This is a challenging, horrifying portrait of a seemingly ordinary woman that won't be leaving my mind any time soon.

William M. says

5+ STARS

Ever since Christopher Conlon's debut, *Midnight On Mourn Street*, he was an author that I knew I needed to read more of. Then came his stunningly emotional *A Matrix of Angels*, which put him in my top 10 current authors and pushed that book into my top 50 of all time reads. Now Conlon has produced such a can't-take-you-eyes-off-it story with a taboo premise and handles it so effectively, I find myself trying to decide where this book fits into my all-time favorite top 10 list, and arguably my top 5. Yes, folks, this is that damn good.

The subject matter might turn off a lot of readers. And the fact that author Conlon never shies away from extremely, almost unbearably uncomfortable situations, makes this book an acquired taste, I suppose. But for me, it was a story I was horrified and addicted to, nonetheless. It is a dark journey through the deteriorating mind of an unstable woman, who at every juncture has the opportunity to make the right decision. Yet, as she justifies her actions by her deranged thoughts, continues down a path of heartbreaking destruction for everyone involved.

So far, this is my favorite Christopher Conlon book, and in some ways I'm sad about that. It will be nearly impossible to top what he has done with this book. The characters feel perfectly authentic, the dialogue completely organic, and the tension had me literally holding my breath at times. This is easily my favorite book of 2014 and gets my very highest recommendation possible. But again, be warned. This material is not

for everyone.

James says

not sure how i found this, probably a reader i follow added it to their queue, but i am glad, um, yeah, glad i read it... mostly... kinda... sort of... this was quite the experience... Mona is an absolute horrorshow... hard to pinpoint when she went from a seemingly OK life to whatever the fuck she ended up with... it was a bit gradual, then just full on crazy town disaster awfulness... the characters were all done wonderfully full and complete and real... poor Kylie... poor Gracie... poor Connor... ugh... i read this after Alissa Nutting's 'Tampa', which felt quite different to me... Mona, Ms. Straw conjured up an image of this strange femme fatale from a 50's movie, probably due to the use of that element in the book, but how messed up is that idea? still, it persisted... the entire tale, from start to its sombre ending, was fabulously written... it got so horrible quickly and mercilessly... Mona went from wacko to John Wayne Gacy-ish in an expected but eerie turn... plenty to wonder about, though more of a terror-ish story than a thought piece for me...

Eileen says

Don't read this book if you're looking for traditional horror. This doesn't read like a King novel or even a Clive Barker or Jack Ketchum.

Savaging the Dark is essentially a (very graphic) profile of a female child molester.

It's not a fun read. You won't get the thrills of working out a mystery like in a crime novel, or even the satisfaction you get from a horror novel when the story ends and you get to see if the character made it out alive.

What you will get is fantastic writing from Conlon that deals with the very dark subject matter in as sensitive a manner as he can, considering the book is written from Mona's perspective—but even that is explored towards the end of the book.

Savaging the Dark is no Lolita.

I implore you to read to the end. You won't feel good after reading the book, but I hope you feel, like I did, that you read something necessary.

David Antrobus says

I'm a bit wounded by this novel, to be honest, so in terms of a review, let me take some time to digest it and get back to it. I will say these two things for now: it's brave and it's appalling. And it's why I read horror. Okay, that's three things.
