The Serpent King

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Unfortunately, Dill Early has the same name as his father. Dill lives in a small town, and his father is well-known as the head of a religious congregation that dabbles in snakes and poisons, as well as prayer. But Dillard Early, Sr. was sent to jail for possessing child pornography. With that reputation following him, Dill can’t help but feel trapped. While his best friend Lydia is planning on heading to college, Dill lives in poverty and is saddled with his family’s debts, so even that escape does not seem possible. It is his senior year of high school, and Dill has so much to think about. He has to grapple with his changing feelings for his best friend, the shame of comparing his own impoverished circumstances to those of his friends, and the unexpected grieving that comes up for him when tragedy strikes in the middle of the school year.

The Serpent King is not necessarily a light and uplifting read, but it is filled with complex characters and universal themes. The reader should be aware that there is severe language in this book, including racial slurs. Also, the themes are dark, and the book includes suicidal ideation, twisted religious themes, and domestic abuse. However, the violence and darkness does not seem gratuitous or to be included just for shock or entertainment value. Rather, the characters are confronted with very adult problems and must find pockets of hope amidst darkness. The issues are addressed productively and respectfully. Author Jeff Zentner’s writing style is comparable to that of award-winning young adult author Benjamin Alire Saenz in the way that it is sometimes lyrical but also employs character voices that are accessible to a teen reader. Ultimately, The Serpent King is serious and, in some places, dark. But, for an older reader with the right mindset, it could be a thought-provoking read.

*Contains severe language and moderate violence.