Rooster
by T.D. Thompson
(Middle Teen Fiction)

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

Rooster is the third young adult novel by Edmonton writer T.D. Thompson and published by Pemmican. Like the previous books, this one has young Métis characters struggling to get through difficult situations in life, but this story is darker, harsher than the earlier ones were.

The main character is James Campbell, known as Rooster, a 17-year-old who lives in Edmonton with his mother and attends a special arts-oriented high school. The story begins with a weird, long dream – told in almost too much detail, I felt. The dream, in which James/Rooster felt that he was drowning in feathers, left him feeling creeped out and convinced that he should not follow through with a backcountry skiing/camping trip into the Rockies, south of Jasper. The trip was planned for the upcoming weekend with his best friend, Frank, and his girlfriend, Jen. Frank and Jen are annoyed when James backs out and they take the trip – with horrible consequences. The two die in an avalanche and James must deal with the terrible grief and guilt he feels afterwards.

The book follows James as he suffers through a deep depression. At first he tries to keep going as usual, attending school and helping out at home, but rejecting grief counselling and well-meaning teachers and students who want to help. He must also deal with an increasingly strange mother, who drives erratically, has strange periods of forgetfulness and spends her evenings with a bottle.

Then he begins to think that school is pointless: "when people’s lives can end so suddenly and so unfairly . . . how could anyone possibly still insist that maths concepts or science labs matter in the least!" (66) He starts skipping school, hanging out at a low-end seedy bar called Blues Inverted where the clientele is sketchy but the music is good. There he starts to make new friends and feel that he almost belongs.

Rooster paints a dark picture of teenage grief and depression, but one that some teens could relate to. “It seems when I think about it, that the sun never shone, the days never brightened. It was always night – a night without stars or moon." (64) Only gradually, over a two-year period, does he begin to see a light at the end of the tunnel, to feel some closure over the death of his friends, and to begin to accept help from others.

Several of the people in Rooster also appeared in Thompson's previous books. Students Ari and Deena, Deena’s Aunt Mel, and Lis, whom Rooster meets at the bar, were all characters in Flight of the Wild Geese and Retro Girl.

Rooster is not an easy read, but I think teen readers will relate to it. Teachers would find it useful. It’s a thought-provoking book that could lend itself to classroom discussion. As a writer I enjoyed the unique comparisons Thompson uses in several places, e.g., “The threads that held my life together were coming apart like a pair of jeans whose knees have given out.” (86)

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.