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Dunger by Joy Cowley

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Many schoolkids dream of being the envy of their classmates and spending their holidays at a swanky seaside resort, or snowboarding on the mountain slopes. Fourteen-year-old Melissa and her eleven-year-old brother, William, are looking forward to a summer holiday in Queenstown when Melissa punctures a kids' bouncy castle with her high heels. The repair costs and other financial pressures put the family's expensive holiday on hold.

When their parents announce they will be working over the summer and the siblings will spend the holidays with their grandparents at their old bach in the Marlborough Sounds the kids protest loudly, but in vain.

The unhappy brother and sister are collected by their grandparents for the long drive to the Sounds. The elderly couple are definitely not stereotypical kindly, old greyheads. They're an unconventional pair, a mixture of wise and witty, cantankerous and sharp-tongued. Plus William and Melissa are horrified that the two often argue with each other.

Storyteller Joy Cowley brings all four characters to life with realistic interactions and sparkling dialogue. She has drawn from her own home in the Sounds to describe the beautiful coastal setting and lifestyle of the remote area.

A highlight of the story is the misunderstandings between Melissa and William, their growing acceptance of each other, and the affection that develops with their grandparents. They learn how to work hard, enjoy the outdoors, and appreciate their family background. The storyline unfolds naturally, with surprises, disappointments, and drama along the way.

Dunger is an honest, believable, funny, perceptive, superbly-written Kiwi tale for all the family to enjoy.

Reviewed by children's author Jean Bennett

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