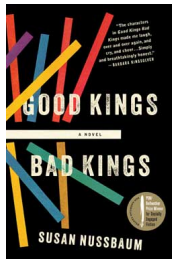


GOOD KINGS BAD KINGS: Brutally honest, funny look at ‘different’ kids

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Monday, 22 July 2013 10:49



In the state of Illinois, if you are a teenager with disabilities and perceived (or real) behavioral issues, there’s a good chance you will end up at the Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center, a human warehouse.

ILLC is home to a wonderfully luminous cast of characters in playwright Susan Nussbaum’s first novel, “Good Kings - Bad Kings,” with the chapters devoted to each one’s point of view.

Yessina Lopez says, “. . . before they stuck my butt in this place, I went to Herbert Hoover High School . . . on account of I am physically challenged and they send the people which have challenges to Hoover. . . . I do not know why they send us all to the same place, but that’s the way it’s always been . . . and I been in cripple this or cripple that my whole, sweet, succulent Puerto Rican life.”

Joanne Madsen works as a data-entry clerk at ILLC. She was forced into a wheelchair after the “No. 8 Halstead” bus ran into her, leaving her a quadriplegic. The city paid her “generously to apologize” for hitting her, so she really doesn’t need the job, but she longs for contact with the outside world and wants to feel productive.

Teddy Dobbs, who dresses each day in a polyester suit and tie, rolls through the halls and has a girlfriend, Mia, has plans to run away from ILLC.

“I’m going go right before they’re set to ship me out of here. . . . I know how I’m gonna sneak out, that’s easy, but I’m not sure where I’m gonna stay at. The plan has to be perfect so I don’t end up in a place even worse than this place.”

In other hands, this story could have been a real downer. With Nussbaum, however, the characters pop off each page, feisty and full of life.

The author, who is also confined to a wheelchair as the result of an accident, says, “The characters in my book are dealing with a place that’s not one of the worst, but abuse and neglect are rampant nonetheless. Some of them are sucked under by the riptide of repression, some of the bob to the surface against all odd, and maybe one or two find a way to fly away.”

The characters in “Good Kings - Bad Kings” might not be mainstream, but their hopes and dreams are certainly familiar – they want to love and be loved – and they want to live in a safe, protected place.