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Clarion Review ★★★★★ HUMOR FICTION

Bad Taste In Men

Lana Cooper
Delightfully Dysfunctional Books (Dec 18, 2013)
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A peppy protagonist offers bittersweet recollections of desperately seeking a boyfriend.

As if living in a small, backward town and having a name like Nova doesn't offer enough grief, the protagonist in Lana Cooper's *Bad Taste In Men* is only eight years old when she first wonders if she is a lesbian. Nova is in fifth grade when she is finally interested in boys and in sixth grade when she meets Frankie Gilroy, but she only drums up the courage to ask him out years later. His cruel and humiliating response reveals the strength in Nova's character when she unleashes insults at him, but it also affects her fragile self-esteem and sets the stage for the future failed boyfriend pursuits chronicled in this funny and bittersweet look at a young girl's struggle to fulfill herself by having a relationship.

The narrative flows as smoothly as Nova's glib comebacks and commentaries on life, as when kids mock her for being poor: "Hey, kids are cruel. Life is hard. Puppies die. It sucks, but it doesn't negate reality." The engaging and articulate protagonist draws on the candor and spunk of the likes of *Golden Girls*' Dorothy Zbornak and Blanche Devereaux as an outlet for her self-described "40-year-old trapped in the body of an overdeveloped, puberty-stricken 12-year-old." Nova's often-disastrous attempts to find a guy who likes her as more than a friend are tender, sensitive, and never self-pitying.

The theme of trying to move past the limitations set by environment is effectively portrayed through several characters, including Nova's friend Rick, who manages to get through high school and college in spite of his parents. Nova sums up the challenge of leaving the past behind when she catches sight of her reflection and notes, "I realized that I wasn't a half-bad looking chick…That's the thing about school—and school in a small town, in particular: You can change your appearance. You can change who you *are,* but no one ever lets you forget what you *were*."

The story weaves together Nova's journey with numerous references to the culture of the time when describing characters, such as the older guy she calls "Whorin' Hank" who refuses to take her virginity and be her "sexual Obi-Wan Kenobi." These descriptions offer fresh and vivid images of the characters while also keeping them light; the humor, rather than the bitterness of Nova's rejections, is emphasized and allows the story to remain upbeat.

While the narrative winds through Nova's emotional development and her endeavors to find a boyfriend, from elementary school to college, all the hurt is resolved in a heartfelt epilogue that contains equally compelling messages about life targeted at young adults and grown-ups: "Do we ever leave high school?…We all still carry that emotional baggage we picked up all those years ago. Every act of kindness and every hurtful blow we receive shapes who we are."

Bad Taste In Men offers an enlightening look at a young girl's life and her quest for love, with all its pain, absurdities, and lessons.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (January 23, 2014)

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