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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Campus Outcasts

Kyrstin Underbakke
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In Campus Outcasts, an urban fantasy, University of Minnesota senior Kyrstin Underbakke brings walkers, werewolves, vampires, and wizards to life in Minneapolis. The story centers around a college club called the Campus Outcasts, a group of otherworldly creatures that have come together for companionship and information sharing. Through the eyes of a walker named Todd Burke, readers are introduced to life on campus and in the organization. Things heat up for the Outcasts when Liam, a man with several otherworld races in his genetic makeup, joins the group and they must protect him from a villainous vampire. The ensuing battle leads to a much larger conflict that has been brewing between two opposing groups of wizards.

The idea of the campus outcasts—a group of mostly young adult “others” banding together to fight various forces of evil—is one that should appeal to the readers of the popular urban fantasy genre. The author’s writing style is easy to read, and the plot is clear from beginning to end. However, there are numerous problems with this novel.

The first issue is a lack of character development. Members of the large supporting cast of characters are difficult to tell apart, since little is known about them beyond their name and race. An immediate bond is formed between Liam and the other Outcasts with no explanation. Toward the end of the book there are two scenes, a Christmas celebration and a game of paintball, that give more insight, but they come too late to engage readers in the story. The book’s other major problem is that it contains two distinct plots. The first is the Outcasts’ fight to protect Liam. The second is the Outcasts and the Wizards of Light’s battle against the Darkness Devils. The two storylines are insufficiently connected. With better backstory and character development, Campus Outcasts could have been expanded into two separate and much better books.

There are other minor issues here. The author frequently makes cultural references without explanation. For example, Todd says, “I found it necessary to play J.S. Bach’s ‘Toccata in D Minor’ as played by E. Power Biggs with the bass cranked as high as it would go.” Without further details, these references only frustrate readers. Additionally, the fun of reading fantasy novels is in exploring the “otherness” of the characters. Underbakke spends little time on the details of what it means to be a member of another race. Almost all of this novel’s characters are normal people who just happen not to be human. More information on the vampires or werewolves of the author’s imagination would have added a great deal to the story.

Ultimately, Campus Outcasts does not live up to its potential. While the story shows promise, more effort is needed to make this work appealing to fans of urban fantasy.

CATHERINE THURESON (July 12, 2010)

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