



## Jacked Up

**Erica Sage**

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Set over five days in the life of a death-obsessed teenager, *Jacked Up* is snappy and clever, wrapping Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and spiritual beliefs around a coming-of-age story with themes of friendship, acceptance, and mourning.

Jack Kerouac's ghost has followed grammar-snob Nick ever since his Kerouac-loving sister, Diana, committed suicide. His parents decide to ship Nick off to a week-long retreat at Camp Eden Springs, a desert "Bible Disneyland" in which "happiness happens," so that he can deal with his grief. Nick quickly becomes the ostracized loner blamed for the theft of the camp's prayers and confessions box. The confessions begin to go public, spurring Nick to find the missing box and retrieve his own confession about his role in Diana's death before the secret gets out. But can Nick find the box in time to save himself and Natalie, the girl he loves?

Frank observations are made about the melodramas that consume the social lives of teens. Kerouac functions as a compassionate jerk, truth-seeker, and madman, haunted by his personal demons. Nick and Natalie are also positioned as mad for their insecurities and their reluctance to embrace life.

Nick and Natalie mock the hypocrisies of born-again evangelism. Through them, Sage plays religious venalities for laughs while reaching for something deeper with her teenage audience, especially concerning homophobia.

Issues of youth activism, guns, methamphetamine abuse, and gender identity also appear. This kitchen-sink approach succeeds thanks to well-constructed dialogue. The book does not offer prescriptive fixes, but rather a therapeutic safe space in which to discuss the various hopes, fears, and doubts that teens have.

*Jacked Up* celebrates living life on an individual's terms—accepting flaws, facing fears, moving beyond stereotypes, and reaching out to others.

NANCY POWELL (Religion 2018)

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