



## Little Ravens

**Frank Bardessono**

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*Bardessono populates a facility for the developmentally disabled with well-drawn characters in this heartfelt novel.*

*Little Ravens* is the follow-up to Frank Bardessono's debut novel, *The Kindness of Ravens*. Set in the nineties, *Little Ravens* continues to follow the life of Daren Capriati in his rough yet rewarding role as assistant director at the Santa Crisca Residential Institute for the Developmentally Disabled (SCRIDD).

The novel may be read as a stand-alone tale, though reading *The Kindness of Ravens* first provides some clarity and context. An omniscient narrator provides infrequent updates on the characters, an unnecessary device as the author has done a fine job of developing them and moving the story forward. This presence reasserts itself at the end of the novel, arguing against the ambiguous ending. However, the ending is perfect as is, wrapping up all the unresolved plot lines. If the epilogue were excluded, there would be room for a third book in the series.

Bardessono has worked in vocational and residential facilities with developmentally disabled people for more than twenty years, and his knowledge serves him well. He draws a clear and concise portrait of life in these facilities for both the worker and the “client” and does so without overwhelming the reader with industry jargon.

Reading about life in a facility of any kind is not for the faint of heart. The residents of SCRIDD are young women who elicit sympathy along with wonder at their survival and anger at a world that allows such physical and psychological horrors to be inflicted on anyone. The author shows a clear cause and effect between the damaged women and how they live in—or hide from—the current world.

The caregivers have their own share of difficult issues, including loss of love and loved ones; sex, drug, and alcohol addictions; and sexual abuse. They find a way through their pain and use their experiences to counsel their young charges. Bardessono boils it down to a succinct paragraph: “Focus on the girls, not yourselves, ladies and gents. You’re being paid to be present for these wayward kids. Buck up or shut up.”

The writing is dense at times, overwritten when fewer words would have sufficed, such as, “expedite her escape in the quickest fashion” and “small student-size desk.” Additionally, the sparse use of Spanish is ideal, but misspellings take the oomph out of the words, as when *cajones* is used instead of *cojones*, and *carone* in place of *cabrón*.

The sensitivity of the well-paced plot and the depth of the characters is belied by the neon yellow cover with a smattering of black birds along the bottom. A warmer, perhaps darker cover would convey the intensity of the words within.

*Little Ravens* explores the seamy side of those who care for the developmentally disabled, how they are treated and mistreated. It is clear that understaffing, overmedicating, and overcrowding are issues that the author would like examined and rectified, and this novel makes a solid case.

DINDY YOKEL (May 5, 2014)

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