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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ LGBT FICTION

Says Who

D Vincent Russell
CreateSpace (Dec 27, 2012)
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What happens when a young man attempts to ignore the fact that he is gay? What are the ramifications once he leaves home and tries to continue to ignore his feelings? D Vincent Russell's *Says Who* explores those questions with two novella-length stories. Each takes place in a university setting but in vastly different time periods. While both tales tackle the issue of acknowledging one's sexuality, each accomplishes this with very different results.

In the first story, "Says Who," readers meet John Francis (Jay) Fitzgerald. Jay tries to be a good Catholic son and goes off to seminary. After he is sent back home after confessing to excessive masturbation, he moves into a dorm at the local college. His first roommate does not work out due to a misunderstanding that leaves the entire campus with the knowledge that Jay is gay. Because of this, he struggles with an ill-conceived suicide plan. Jay eventually meets his new roommate, Benson, who leads Jay into many new adventures, including one that ends up with Jay experimenting sexually with a bisexual female friend.

In "David," the second story, an upper-crust boy named Brad is paired with Angelo, a young man who has just returned from service in World War II. Angelo is struggling with PTSD, to the extent that he keeps a live grenade in an intricate box under his bed and calls it his pet. During a Thanksgiving trip to meet Angelo's family, Brad is confronted with his sexuality in an intimate moment with Angelo. Unfortunately, Angelo was even more ill-prepared than Brad to deal with the revelation of his own sexuality, and, sadly, this leads to Angelo's suicide by grenade.

Both stories in Russell's volume deal compassionately with the challenge of recognizing one's feelings about being homosexual and of coming out to one's family. By setting the stories in different time periods with different conclusions, Russell does a nice job creating two distinct experiences. There are references to sexual situations, but there is no over-the-top explicit sex in either story. The addition of the bisexual female friend in "Says Who" adds one more dimension to the coming-out story. That said, the character development tends toward the stereotypical, including lesbians as basketball players and gay men wearing pink dress shirts.

There are a few grammatical and stylistic errors in the text. The main issues are with sentence fragments and incorrect use of verb tenses, but these errors do not impede the reader dramatically. There are also a few slow spots in each story where philosophical pontificating causes some of the dialogue to drag. For example, Benson is very guilty of pedantic speeches to Jay in an effort to get him to relax a little. In the second story, there are lengthy passages of Angelo's time at war that slow the narrative.

On the back cover, coupling "suicide" and "hilarious" in the description is a concern. While the tone of "Says Who" is indeed light, the choice to label a story that explores suicide "hilarious" should really be addressed.

Overall, Russell's book would be a good addition to a high school library looking to add some shorter pieces to its gay/lesbian collection, as well as an engaging read for those interested in coming-out stories.
LYNN EVARTS (February 12, 2013)

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