

# **Good Kings Bad Kings Study Guide**

**Good Kings Bad Kings by Susan Nussbaum**

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# Plot Summary

This study guide is based on the hardcover edition of *Good Kings, Bad Kings*, by Susan Nussbaum. New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, a division of Workman Publishing, 2013.

*Good Kings, Bad Kings*, a novel by Susan Nussbaum, shares a collection of narratives told from the viewpoint of each character. The first narrative is told by Yessenia Lopez. Yessenia had been confined to a wheelchair, but that did not stop her from brutally beating a fellow student who mouthed off to her. The fight resulted in her being sent to Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center, known as ILLC, a facility for children with disabilities. While there, Yessenia spends time in the time-out room after she cuts up her roommate's mattress. The narratives that follow Yessenia's continue to tell the personal stories of others at ILLC.

Joanne Madsen recently took a job at ILLC. She had been hit by a bus, and she is now dependent on a wheelchair. Though she is in the school, she feels as though she is not a part of it. She lives by herself and has a lot of money from the bus company settlement. So, while she sympathizes with the other kids, she has more than they will ever have.

Ricky Fernandez is a driver and aide for ILLC. Being a large man, he is often called upon to wrestle a kid into submission and take them to the time-out room if they are acting up. Being a survivor of a rough childhood, he understands why these kids are acting up and goes easy on them. In his internal monologue, he sides with the kids against the other staff. Externally, he does his job, but finds ways to show the kids some kindness. This way, he gets them to calm down on their own instead of escalating the situation. He thinks Joanne is pretty and offers her a ride home one day, so she would not have to wait at the bus stop in the rain. They hit it off, and begin flirting.

Michelle Volkmann is a recruiter for Whitney-Palm, the corporation that runs ILLC. She gets \$300 for every bed she fills. She goes to homeless shelters and other spots to find people who would benefit from one of Whitney-Palm's many facilities. They also have facilities for adult care and psychiatric care. She spots Cheri Smith, who is schizophrenic, and has some physical disabilities. She lies, telling her she will have her own room at ILLC, but gets her to live there. Michelle's rationalization is that it is better than a homeless shelter.

Teddy Dobbs had surgery to remove a tumor in his back when he was very young. That made him wheelchair-bound. He is also developmentally disabled. At 21, he will age out of ILLC next year. He wants to run away because he does not want to live in an old age home. He is engaged to Mia, who is two years younger.

Jimmie Kendrick tried to make it as a singer, but wound up homeless. She describes herself as a tall, strong lesbian. She returns home and meets up with an old friend,



Joanne, who arranges for her to work at ILLC. Jimmie has a certification as a nursing assistant.

Mia is wheelchair bound and comes from an abused home. The abuse continues at ILLC when a staff member, Jerry, rapes her one night. She is ashamed of what happened to her. Between her shame and the threats from the aide, she never reveals what happened. She breaks it off with Teddy, without explaining why. He does not understand what has happened. He acts out, ramming his wheelchair into the wall. Louie, one of the aides, throws him roughly into the time-out room.

Some of the other characters start to bond as well. Ricky and Joanne start a romantic relationship based on mutual respect. Jimmie and Yessenia forge a kind of big sister-little sister connection. Jimmie looks out for her, and even takes her on an unauthorized trip to a club where she is singing. However, she does not let Yessenia off the hook when the girl is caught trying to steal.

Joanne and Michelle also meet, but their connection is not pleasant. They both work for Whitney-Palm, but have very different opinions about the company. Michelle likes the company and her boss, and wants to work her way up the corporate ladder. Joanne sees the company as warehousing children until they die. Joanne plants some doubt in Michelle that her company might not have the patients' best interests in mind. Joanne points her to some data showing how often the children get sick and die. She makes Michelle want to question why these children never reach any level of independence.

Mia eventually starts suffering from a sexually transmitted disease that Jerry had given her. She has to go to the nurse. When the nurse realizes what happened, she pressures Mia to say who she is having sex with. Mia names Jerry and he is arrested soon after.

Things are still awkward between she and Teddy, though. It takes a while, but he eventually comes around to talking with her. They get back together. Joanne tries to help him at the Center for Disability Justice, where a lawyer is planning for ways to have him transfer to a semi-independent residence instead of another institution.

Cheri, who was recruited by Michelle in the beginning of the book, is transferred to an insane asylum, and many of the kids are upset with this. Michelle sees her at the asylum, where she is doped into a near-vegetative state. She is horrified that someone she recruited off the streets now has this fate.

A fight breaks out in the cafeteria between a staff member and a student. Pierre, a student who is often getting in trouble, is confronted by Louie, an aide. It turns out that Pierre did not do what Louie is accusing him of doing. Louie, an ex-prison guard, is too rough with Pierre, and knocks him down. Pierre responds by stabbing Louie with a pencil in the chest. Louie breaks Pierre's jaw in retaliation. Then Jimmie practically picks Louie up and smashes him into a wall. Louie is put on leave pending an investigation after that. Pierre winds up transferred to the asylum.

Teddy is put in the shower by one of the aides. She leaves him alone for a few minutes to talk on the phone. The water comes out too hot, and he falls out of his chair trying to get out of the shower. He dies in a hospital a few days later.

After the funeral, Yessenia stages a protest against ILLC. She straps herself to a tree out front with a sign that says "This place abuse and kill children." A few other students join her. Joanne joins, and also makes a few calls to disabled groups in the area. They come out as well, and get the media to come. The protest lasts until nightfall.

In response, ILLC hires two additional aides, a good therapist, and a few other changes are made. It is too little, too late for people like Yessenia, though. She is ready to leave as soon as possible. She even skips school to meet up with a man she met on a dating site.

The end of the book has all of the characters either joining or splitting off. Joanne is fired. Michelle quits. Ricky is looking for a better job. Joanne and Ricky are in a serious relationship. Jimmie wants to be Yessenia's foster mother.



# Section 1: Pages 1-59

## Summary

Section 1: Pages 1-59

The "Sections" of this guide have been demarcated by the writer of the guide, rather than the novel's author. "Section 1" refers to the following: "Yessenia Lopez" (1), "Joanne Madsen" (14), "Ricky Hernandez" (16), "Michelle Volkman" (24), "Yessinia Lopez" (31), "Teddy Dobbs" (37), "Ricky Hernandez" (45), "Jimmie Kendrick" (52).

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 21. Yessenia is telling her story of how she got to this school, although she does not get the name right. When she was born, her mother gave her over to her grandmother, her Tia Nene, who raised her. Yessenia called Tia her mother and Tia called Yessenia her daughter. One bit of advice she took from Nene is that people only get three bad things that happen in their lives. Yessenia is trying to figure out what number she is currently on in her life.

Yessenia uses a wheelchair, although it is not described why she needs one. She relates that in the past she and another wheelchair-bound student at school had an argument. The argument led to a fight. Yessenia knocked the girl out of her wheelchair, then she sat on girl. Yessenia used her removable footrest to bludgeon the girl. Yessenia was taken to a facility for children who have disabilities and cannot live at home. This is where Yessenia is now. While here, she has cut up her roommate's mattress with a pair of scissors in retaliation for stealing a teddy bear. Yessenia is telling her story from solitary confinement.

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 7. A week ago, Joanne started working at the same place where Yessenia was sent. Unlike Yessenia, she has a name for it: the Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center (or ILLC). She tells the reader that it contains 80 kids, up to age 21. After being hit by a bus, she now relies on a wheelchair. She was well compensated by the bus company. Her disability had left her with no financial worries, but her social life had shrunk. So, even though she did not need the money, she took this job in order to have something to do and somewhere to be.

Joanne sums up her philosophy as follows: "It's all in the luck of the toss between living in a cozy apartment with a view and living in an institution where someone's asking you about your bowel movements and you have to go to bed at seven o'clock every night no matter what," (14).

Joanne is aware that she has it better than a lot of the other children. She can leave. She only has physical limitations, not cognitive or psychological problems like some. She talks about other kids, like Mia and Teddy, who are both in wheelchairs and are a couple. Teddy will tie their two chairs together so that he can pull Mia around.



The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 16. Ricky relates that he is a driver for ILLC. Since he is also a big guy, he helps with discipline in the facility. His story opens as he is called to take a kid into solitary confinement for eating crayons and being disruptive. Ricky tells the reader that he had an abusive childhood growing up and that is why he has a soft spot for some of these kids. Things are not fair for them, and he does not like the way they are treated by the staff. Given the challenges that they face, Ricky understands why they are acting out. Still, he does his job. He takes a boy named Pierre to solitary confinement, where he vomits the crayons. It will be Ricky's job to clean that up, too.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 24. Michelle is a recruiter for Whitney-Palm, the company that runs ILLC. It is her job to go to homeless shelters and other places to find kids who would benefit from ILLC. In exchange, she gets \$300 for every bed she fills with an occupant. She speaks very highly of her company and how they are grooming her for advancement.

Michelle spots a black 15-year-old girl with a noticeable limp and hopes that the girl will be her next client. The girl's name is Cheri Smith. She is a sweet girl with cognitive difficulties. She has a problem with her hand. Also, she does not filter her speech. Cheri tells Michelle that she is schizophrenic. She got kicked out of her house two days ago. She had brought a man home that she met at a cell phone store, and he exposed himself. She panicked and told him to leave. As a result, her parents kicked her out. Michelle feels like she does not have the entire story here. She is not sure she should believe everything Cheri says. Whatever the case might be, Cheri is better off at ILLC than a homeless shelter. Michelle stretches the truth about promising Cheri her own room there. She justifies it by knowing that ILLC is a much better place than the church's homeless shelter where Cheri would be sleeping on a pew. Michelle also justifies it by thinking of spending that \$300 on tires for her mom's car. "Homeless shelters can be really profitable" (30), she jokes.

The narrative titled "Yessenia" begins on page 31. Yessenia is complaining that she is fifteen-years-old and stuck in ILLC with kids who cannot use the bathroom by themselves. She continues to blame Benedicta, her roommate, for stealing her teddy bear. She goes to Herbert Hoover high school during the day, but lives in ILLC. She also gives her version of the other characters in the book. She thinks Ricky the driver, a fellow Puerto Rican, is hot. She has befriended Cheri. They both attend Herbert Hoover. Cheri cries at night. She feels that Michelle tricked her into coming here. Her parents have given up on her and hope that ILLC can do something for her that they can not.

The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 37. Teddy Dobbs begins his story. He was last seen briefly in the narrative by Joanne. Joanne had talked about Teddy and Mia being a couple. Teddy talks about running away, but he keeps getting distracted in the middle of what he is talking about. He is 21, and has a cognitive impairment in addition to being in the wheelchair. His plan is that he is going to save his allowance so he can afford to live alone, hire an aide, and go to bed whenever he wants. When he turns 22, he will no longer be able to live at ILLC. He will be sent to an adult facility. To him, this



means an old age home. He also mentions that one of the staff stole some of his allowance but there is nothing he can do.

His girlfriend, Mia, is two years younger. He calls her his “hot Mexican mama.” He has two suits that he wears on alternating days because he wants to look good for her, but they only get washed every couple of weeks. He tells Mia’s story. She has cerebral palsy and came to the facility when she was 11. She had been abused and was taken away from her family, but she still thinks they are coming to get her.

Teddy says he was born with a tumor in his back, and as a result of the operation, he is in a wheelchair. He has been here for seven years and has only seen his mother once. His father comes to visit, and seems to be a caring person. His father brings gifts for Mia because she does not get any visitors. His mental condition is pretty well summed up when Teddy tells the reader this:

“They told my dad I’m retarded. They told him first at regular school and then when I moved in here. My dad said that’s just a word they use that means I got a different way of learning stuff. That’s the way I think of it because I sure don’t feel retarded. My friend Ryan’s retarded and I asked him if he feels retarded and he said no. So I guess I am but I don’t notice it. And I look normal except for not walking and my arms not working perfect. From the tumor,” (43).

The narration titled “Ricky” begins on page 45. Ricky Hernandez returns to continue his story. He is leaving for the day, but he sees Joanne struggling. He does not want her waiting for the bus in her wheelchair in the rain. So, he offers to drive her home. He is a bit hesitant to ask, because he is afraid that she will take it the wrong way. He wants the reader to know he is doing it because he likes her, not because he pities her. He thinks she is pretty. They make conversation about work, and past jobs. Ricky’s narration details his past history with women. Without giving too many details, he shares with the reader that he has had a few serious relationships. They seem genuinely interested in each other, and they both talk a little too much out of nervousness.

The narration titled “Jimmie” begins on page 52. Jimmie Kendrick (a new character) describes herself as a very tall, physically strong woman. She feels unstoppable, because she has won a lot of fights. She tells a story of how she got to New York trying to make it as a singer. Before long, she was homeless and her family had to fly her back home to Chicago. She is friends with Joanne, who gets her a job at ILLC. She has trained as a certified nurse’s assistant.

## Analysis

The author opens *Good Kings, Bad Kings* with Yessenia’s story. Yessenia is seen as a somewhat typical child in the school. She is physically handicapped. However, the reader does not know the extent of her physical issues or if she has any educational or psychological ones. She is tough, and she does not put up with people telling her what to do. In many ways, she is a typical 15-year-old in an untypical circumstance.





As Joanne says: "It's all in the luck of the toss between living in a cozy apartment with a view and living in an institution where someone's asking you about your bowel movements and you have to go to bed at seven o'clock every night no matter what," (14). Yessenia has several strikes against her. She is disabled. Her parents are not in her life. Her grandmother, who raised her, is dead. It can be assumed that Yessenia would be a normal girl living at home if not for those three strikes. Her Nene told her that people get three bad things to happen in their life.

Nussbaum opens the door to this world very slowly. She only lets the reader see small segments, one at a time. Instead of throwing the reader into the mix of everyone's stories, the details are told little by little. Since Yessenia calls the school "Illinois Learning something something,," the correct name is not learned until Joanne Madsen shares the name, Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center. The reader sees Teddy and Mia as a couple before they see inside Teddy's thoughts. This helps to build the story slowly from each character's point of view.

Through first person narration, major characters are minor characters in other people's lives. Yessenia does not meet Michelle, but she knows who Michelle is from her new friend, Cheri. Joanne sees a lot of the children, but she does not become too involved at this point in the book. The characters are all following their own personal narrative and do not realize the impact that others have on them.

The author uses some of the narration as if the reader were in the room with the characters. A few hundred years ago, authors writing in first person usually had a reason. The main character might be speaking to someone else. The entire book of *Dracula*, for example, was told in the form of letters written between other characters. It is unclear why the reader seems to be in the room with the characters, only some of the time in *Good Kings, Bad Kings*.

Joanne has a nice apartment, with the collectibles and comforts of home. However, Nussbaum explains how this has become a trap for her even more than the wheelchair. Her social life has shrunk, and her need to work is gone since she has money. She is trapped by comfort. This is in stark contrast to what the author shows in the facility, where children are trapped because of other reasons. They are not strong enough to move their wheelchair, or they have no freedoms.

Normally, an author would show a character's abusive family history to make the reader feel sympathy for them. Instead, the author shows Ricky's abusive family history to make the reader understand why Ricky feels sympathy for the children in the facility.

As Yessenia continues with her thoughts on page 31, the reader sees discrepancies between Michelle's narration and Yessenia's narration. When Michelle recruits Cheri to live at ILLC, Michelle had promised Cheri a private room. That is the only stretch of the truth to which Michelle will admit. Now, Cheri feels that she was tricked and that her parents want her back. The truth might fall somewhere in between. Yessenia states that Cheri's parents have given up on her.



Unreliable narrators are a staple in first person fiction. At this early point in the book, it is interesting to see how much this will play a part. Obviously, Michelle and Cheri feel very different about this situation. Cheri's schizophrenia does not work in her favor. For some reason, the author does not let Cheri narrate her personal story. Perhaps, it would have been too obvious a construction to place Cheri's narrative right after Michelle's. It would have been nothing but a she said/she said. Perhaps, it did not lend enough story to the book. Perhaps, since Cheri is a schizophrenic, the reader would doubt her narration.

Yessenia is one of the most frequent narrators throughout the book, and she is the first one to narrate twice. The author intends for her to be a more memorable character, so Nussbaum makes sure that more of the story is told from her point of view. Otherwise, the story would get watered down with too many points of view.

Teddy's quote about being retarded but not feeling retarded is used by the author to show that the children do not think of themselves as any different. There is an ongoing theme about equality throughout the book, that those without disabilities look down on those with them. This quote fits into this theme because it shows that Teddy does not think of himself as any different than any normal child.

The author is trying to show that there is a difference between sympathy and pity. Teddy does not want pity, nor does he think he deserves it. He does not think Mia does, either, and she comes from an abusive home on top of her disabilities. When Ricky decides to pick Joanne up in the rain, he is conflicted about it. He does not want to make it look like he is taking pity on Joanne. He wants to make sure she knows that he is doing so because he is trying to be nice. This is an important distinction. Ricky does not want to hurt Joanne's pride.

It is interesting that the author describes one character more when another character is looking at them. During Joanne's narrative, the reader does not get a good idea of what she looks like. Possibly, she does not think much of herself. Ricky, who is interested in her romantically, takes in a lot more detail. It is through him that we learn she has her blonde hair in bangs that she has to brush away from her face occasionally, that she has perfect skin, and that her baggy clothes do not show as much of her body as he would like to see. Perhaps, people in general do not think about describing their own appearance. Jimmie describes herself as a large, tall woman. She does this to explain some of her physical fights.

While discussing things with Joanne, Ricky compares her to past women in his life. This is the author's way of giving us Ricky's background without stopping the current action and going through a miniature history lesson on the character.

While imperfect, ILLC has become a safety net for several of the characters. For some, the author makes it very clear. If not for ILLC, Cheri would be sleeping on a church pew. Yessenia would be in jail. For others, the author does not come right out and say it. Joanne uses ILLC to escape from the monotony of her home. Jimmie would be homeless without this job. It is as much a necessary evil for the kids as for the adults.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Why did the author tell the story from multiple points of view?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why did the author choose this order for the narrators to be introduced?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What details do the characters not mention while they are narrating?

## **Vocabulary**

rickets, post-traumatic stress disorder,, trifling, crackhead, stranglehold, profanity, icebreaker, autonomy, peon, acumen, nooks and crannies



## Section 2: Pages 60 -114

### Summary

Section 2: Pages 60 - 114

The "Sections" of this guide have been demarcated by the writer of the guide, rather than the novel's author. "Section 2" refers to the following: "Ricky Hernandez" (60), "Mia Oviedo" (64), "Joanne Madsen" (68), "Yessenia Lopez" (79), "Ricky Hernandez" (84), "Michelle Volkmann" (91), "Jimmie Kendrick" (96), "Joanne Madsen" (100), "Teddy Dobbs" (108).

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 60. Ricky is stuck in two uncomfortable conversations. One conversation is with Jerry, a houseparent, who apparently has the job of overseeing some of the students. The reader later learns that "houseparent" is an ILLC title for aide. Jerry uses sexually charged talk that makes it clear that Jerry objectifies women. Ricky makes a mental note to tell Joanne to watch out for that guy. Instead, he messes up and tells Joanne how he woke up on his 19th birthday to a prostitute giving him oral sex. It was his birthday present from a friend. Joanne gives him a hard time about it, but they end up laughing.

The narration titled "Mia" begins on page 64. Mia Oviedo is Teddy's girlfriend. Her short narration tells about Jerry sneaking into Mia's room at night and raping her. He threatens her to keep quiet and never tell anyone, or else he will have revenge on her.

Jerry actually assaults Mia twice. During the first time, he hears something in the hall. He leaves before raping her. The morning after the second time, Jimmie is helping her get ready for the day, and the reader can assume she is now working at the facility.

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 16. It has become Joanne's job to enter kids' records into a new system. All the paperwork is random, and there is no consistency. The new system will have all the houseparents (aides) using the same forms. She notices how sick the children get, and it raises a red flag for her. Thirty-two out of eighty children were admitted to the hospital in a seven month period. One died while there.

Joanne brings this up to Ricky during a date. Apparently, time has skipped ahead. Not only are they now dating, but they are dating enough for Ricky to want to introduce Joanne to his family. She declines. Ricky explains that these kids have more involved needs, like shunts and bedsores. "It sounds like a big number but for these kids it might be normal" (73).

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 79. The author returns to Yessenia, who is in a physical fight with her roommate, Benedicta, the girl Yessenia accuses of stealing. After Yessenia is pulled off of Benedicta, the aides are trying to figure out how to keep this from happening again. Jimmie is one of the aides, and she tells Yessenia to



pack her things and get ready to move. Jimmie does not have the authority to transfer a resident, but she decides to try it anyway. This makes Jimmie a hero in Yessenia's eyes. Yessenia refers to her as a Person to Know. Jimmie places her in Cheri's room. They are friends, so both of them are happy. However, Cheri sometimes wakes up screaming. A man says mean things to her in her sleep. It is unclear if this is a nightmare, a memory, or part of her schizophrenia.

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 84. Ricky takes Pierre into the time-out room again for acting up. Ricky thinks the kid is sick, but the teacher just thinks he wants attention. Pierre's tendency to do the opposite of whatever anyone tells him reminds Ricky of his nephew Pucho. Pucho had potential, but he joined a gang and is now in juvenile detention.

Even though the teacher, Mrs. Schmidt, wants Ricky to leave Pierre in the time-out room alone, Ricky will not. It is illegal, and anything could happen to him in there. So, he lets Pierre fall asleep, then wakes him up for lunch. He walks him back to the cafeteria, holding his hands. He remarks that this is the first time he has ever touched Pierre that it was not a hold of some kind.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 91. Michelle continues to speak highly of her boss, Tim McGraw, and her company, Whitney-Palm. Tim shows everyone at the office pictures from his cruise. He is extremely wealthy, and he is generous to his staff. Sometimes, he will share tickets to galas thrown by pharmaceutical companies. However, she is starting to feel run down. She has been given several more locations to do her recruiting. Her car is not going to make it much longer. She stays on because the company has nice perks, and Tim is promising her advancement, bonuses, or even a Smart car if she can fill 10 beds in three weeks.

The narration titled "Jimmie" begins on page 96. Jimmie is once again the narrator. She is walking by Yessenia's room when Yessenia calls to her. They talk a little about tia Nene, and how much Yessenia misses her. Yessenia, usually very tough, breaks down and cries. Jimmie shares that she lost her mother, too. Both of the characters lost their mother figures to breast cancer. Yessenia and Jimmie bond after Jimmie gives her this advice:

"I know it might not feel like it," I say, "but you're going to be okay. It's crazy but the pain you feel kind of changes into something else. I'm not saying you'll stop missing her. You'll always, always miss her. But you'll miss her in a way that doesn't hurt. If that makes any sense" (98).

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 100. Things are going well with Ricky and Joanne. Joanne segues into her most recent relationship, someone who was emotionally abusive. Most of Joanne's narration here expresses concern about the students. This concern increases when she sits in on a board meeting among leadership. Mrs. Phoebe is there with several board members who are never introduced. Tim McGraw, the head of Whitney-Palm, is there with Michelle Volkmann.



The discussions about being freeing from staph infections and three lawsuits are very business-like.

The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 108. Teddy is bored. He and his friend Bernard are just wandering around the halls. They happen to find Yessenia and Cheri, who are also bored. They all set out to cause some mischief. They steal some cleaning supplies off the janitor's table and then head to one of the bathrooms. Cheri is the lookout, while the other three make a mess inside and clog all the toilets with toilet paper. At the end of the night, Teddy is sad. At some prior point in time, Mia had broken up with him, and she had never told him why she did it.

## Analysis

The author shows that Ricky always thinks about where someone is coming from when they speak. Even Jerry's gratuitous talk is given a pass by Ricky for a bit. He talks to Jerry as long as he does because he feels bad that Jerry is stuck working alone. Even though Jerry's talk is so upsetting to Ricky, Ricky does not expect the abuse to happen. He does not think Jerry will attack a kid. He is more concerned about the woman he likes who works there.

Jerry's talk is obviously foreshadowing an event. In fact, the only thing surprising about Mia's rape is that it happens shortly after Jerry's conversation with Ricky. The reader is prepared to expect Jerry's abusive behavior, but, perhaps, not so quickly..

Mia's first time to narrate tells about her rape. Mia's narration is brief and partially translated. There are parts where Mia breaks into Spanish. Therefore, some readers might not understand what she is saying. She also can not bring herself to really say what he has done to her. She is as vague as she can be, and this gives the reader two impressions. Perhaps, she does not want to think about it, or she might not totally understand what is happening. Perhaps, both impressions are true.

It is a brutal introduction to the character. The reader has not been given enough time to really get attached to her. She has been in the background during other narrations, such as when Teddy spends some time discussing her. However, this is the first time the reader sees anything about what she thinks.

There is another situation in this section when the narrator is speaking as if whatever is happening is happening right now. Mia yells, "Help! I can't breathe!" (64). The last time the reader saw this was in Yessenia's first narration. Yessenia said she had to go. Then, she stopped narrating.

In this section, Mrs. Phoebe pats Joanne on the head endearingly, but Joanne sees it as being treated like a child or one of the patients. It is another example the author uses of people seeing the patients as beneath them. It is condescension. It does not help that Mrs. Phoebe treats all of the children as beneath her.



The contradiction is that the author seems to look down on her own subjects. When Yessenia is thinking about her tia Nene, she is hoping she is up in heaven and not having to worry about paying off her credit cards. Teddy likes to wear suits. The author, through the other narrators, will mention how his suits are always wrinkled and dirty. Teddy thinks he can live on his own by saving up his allowance. It is intended to be funny, but it is sad, too. The author is also condescending to her own characters.

Yessenia describes Cheri as she “feels the same way I feel about everything,” (83). This is interesting. The first time Cheri was seen, it was through the eyes of a recruiter. The recruiter saw her as very friendly and amenable. It was not until the next time the reader sees Cheri that she says the recruiter tricked her. It is possible that Cheri presents one thing to someone, but she is really thinking something else.

The reader only gets a description of Ricky for the first time when Joanne decides to describe him on page 77. She says that he has a crooked face, droopy eyelids, thick black lashes, and a white scar that runs through an eyebrow. This happens in the earlier chapters as well. For example, Ricky is the first one to describe Joanne.

The reader sees a different side of ILLC through its corporate leadership. The subtext of Tim's wealth is that Tim makes a lot of money off these kids. Dr. Caviolini, who oversees their health, also does as well. While the kids live in squalor, they live very comfortable lives. Here, the reader sees the business end of the care of individuals. It is a business, and they are there to turn a profit off of people in need.

The author speaks through the characters, even if she has to stretch their being believable to do so. Joanne and Michelle are low-level employees. There is no reason for either of them to be at a meeting where wrongful death lawsuits are discussed. However, the author needs eyes inside the corporate goings-on at Whitney-Palm, so she drafts these two. She could have narrated from the point of view of Tim McGraw or Mrs. Phoebe, but she does not. Perhaps, she did not want to have too many narrators. Joanne has some negative things to say throughout that meeting, but only the reader hears them. Joanne says that all prisons should be abolished. She is not a fan of the warehousing of children at facilities like ILLC.

During one of Joanne's chapters, the author writes (through Joanne) “The board members trickle in. None of them have disabilities or are parents of kids with disabilities...” (105). There is no way that Joanne would know if these board members have children with disabilities unless she knows all of them, or has met them already. This is the author editorializing.

The author also uses dry language during the meeting. This is intentional. She wants to show how the management of the care facility is business-like the, instead of caring. They could be discussing cereal shipments or the size of lug nuts, instead of the death of children in their care.

Some of the flavor text that surrounds the action is little more than set dressing. The chapter that has the meeting opens up with Joanne and Ricky making out. There is



literally one sentence about it, before she delves into her romantic history. Joanne's ex-boyfriend, Dennis, was emotionally abusive and kept her from interacting with others. He kept her trapped, much like her handicap. Her interaction with Ricky is decoration to keep this book fiction instead of nonfiction.

Joanne does not take part in the meeting. She is a fly on the wall, almost like the author is watching the meeting instead of the character. Instead, she has a running commentary throughout. Two gems, in particular, stand out:

“Kids like this are trained to stay helpless. So they have to stay institutionalized,” (102).

This is a profound statement about how the system works to strengthen the system, not the children. The author brings up many examples of this throughout the book, and the reader sees the results here: Tim's expensive lifestyle, and how the people at the top do not think much about the human impact of the people in their care.

“Not that invisibility is hard to achieve when you're a crip. We're minor characters in someone else's story,” (104).

This quote has two meanings. First, Joanne means that people tend to ignore people who are disabled. People with disabilities make “normal” people feel uncomfortable. Having become disabled because of an accident in her adulthood, she has seen the change happen. Additionally, there is a meta meaning to this quote, because of the narrators are minor characters when another person is narrating.

Other characters also serve as voice boxes for the author. Jimmie tells Yessenia what the author wishes she could tell everyone who is dealing with grief. Additionally, if one abbreviates the quote, then it can be applied more broadly. The quote has different meaning if it is cut down to just this: “I know it might not feel like it, but you're going to be okay.” This seems to be the advice that the author wants all troubled children, or perhaps troubled people, to take to heart.

Several of the teenagers also use the word “pop” for soda in this book. This is a bit jarring, because no one in modern day uses that term. It makes the reader think that the author is not really understanding how teenagers think.

The reader never gets inside Tim or Mrs. Phoebe's head. They are never described. This prevents them from being well-rounded characters, and instead quickly rendered cartoons. They are seen only as manipulators and money-hungry business people.

## Discussion Question 1

Mia is the last character to be introduced as a narrator. Why? What does she have to say?





## Discussion Question 2

Why does Mia stay quiet about the rape?

## Discussion Question 3

Could Jerry's rape of Mia have been prevented? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

free-associate, audited, minutiae, dilated, spit-take, preadolescence tong, ominous, pejorative, imprimatur, deferential, staph, compartmentalize



## Section 3: Pages 115-160

### Summary

Section 3: Pages 115-160

The "Sections" of this guide have been demarcated by the writer of the guide, rather than the novel's author. "Section 3" refers to the following: "Jimmie Kendrick" (115), "Michelle Volkmann" (125), "Mia Oviedo" (132), "Teddy Dobbs" (134), "Yessenia Lopez" (138), "Joanne Madsen" (143), "Ricky Hernandez" (150), "Jimmie Kendrick" (156).

The narration titled "Jimmie" begins on page 115. Jimmie is up to mischief. She takes Yessenia on a field trip to a Valentine's Day party. She lies to the staff. It is actually at a hall for a lesbian group where her band is playing.

Jimmie could have got into a lot of trouble with her lie. She wants Yessenia to have some semblance of a normal life, where she would go out with friends and have fun. So, she takes her out to see her own life, what she does when she is not working. Yessenia loves it.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 125. Michelle is complaining about getting gonorrhea from a man and that her mom is upset that her dad is remarrying. Her real focus is going over ILLC's budgets for her boss, Tim. Tim is looking for ways to save money. Michelle is seeing that they are on a pretty tight budget as it is. This job also brings her into conflict with Joanne, whose job is to update all the computer work that Michelle is currently reviewing.

Michelle uses the Whitney-Palm corporate term "lifestyle alternatives" when she describes nursing homes. Her job is to find people in shelters and tell them about the "lifestyle alternatives" that Whitney-Palm can offer at a variety of places, like ILLC. Joanne says she does not think of a nursing home as a "lifestyle alternative." Michelle's opinion is that when someone is homeless, than a place like ILLC is a good alternative.

Joanne urges her to look past just the financial data. She wants the corporation to look into patient health, death rates, and how many transition on to semi-independent housing. Michelle concedes that those are good questions, and will bring them up to her supervisor. This seems to appease Joanne.

The narration titled "Mia" begins on page 132. She laments breaking up with Teddy. However, she is afraid that if he found out she was raped, he would think she was a whore. Joanne says she should talk to a therapist, but Mia is afraid to talk for fear of revenge from her rapist. In her narration, Jerry takes the form of a large, black bird that swoops down on her at night and tells her horrible things. It is unclear whether she is hallucinating or dreaming. It is also unclear if the attacks are still ongoing.



The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 134. He is acting up, ramming a hole in a wall with his wheelchair. One of the aides, Louie, grabs him and brings him to the time-out room. He takes any belongings off of him. Presumably, the pencil and pen are taken so that they could not be used to hurt himself or others. But Louie steals a dollar off of him, too. As he closes the door, Louie tells Teddy "I can be a good king or I can be a bad king," (135).

He is upset that Mrs. Phoebe told his dad that when Teddy turns 22, he will be sent to an adult home that is far away from where his dad lives. His dad will not be able to come visit as frequently. That, plus not knowing why Mia is not talking to him, is sending him over the edge.

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 138. She is required to speak to Mr. Bonelli, a counselor, as part of her parole. She tells him, and some friends, about Jimmie's field trip to her life. She also describes Jimmie, how she has facial piercings, long black hair, and how her pants ride low so she can see her boxers. This might cause trouble for Jimmie later.

Yessenia also shares a few instances of things that happen to her friends. She is with Cheri when Cheri sees Michelle Volkmann in the school. Cheri yells at Michelle, threatening her, and sends Michelle running. She is still angry at being betrayed by her and ending up at ILLC. They tell the story to Ricky, and Ricky says he sympathizes. Cheri, who is schizophrenic, has other problems, though. She sees patterns on the wall that are not there. She has bad thoughts, but does not explain what they are. She wanders off in the middle of the night, and is tracked down to the TV room. She cannot remember if she took her medication.

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 143. There is a quick mention of how Ricky has to drive her everywhere, and she does not want to be a burden. Then, it is back to case files about kids. Ricky has asked Joanne to look into Pierre's file. This is the boy that Ricky keeps taking into the time-out room. Pierre had been found when he was 5 in a grocery store Dumpster. He was living in an abandoned apartment with a little brother. The file did not mention what happened to the brother. He went through some foster families and ended up in a residential treatment facility. He was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, which was later changed to rickets. A staff member had hit him with a wrench and then he was transferred to ILLC. The narrative ends with her meeting up with Ricky for a dinner date, after which she suggests that they sleep together for the first time.

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 150. Ricky is flagged down by Jimmie. She gets him somewhere privately where they can talk. She heard through one of the other staff members that Pierre got roughed up by Louie, the aide who said the "Good Kings, Bad Kings" line to him earlier. Pierre had been hoarding food, most of which rotted. Louie punished him for it. Ricky catches up with him in the time-out room. They sit there for an hour looking at Pierre's collectible cards. Once Pierre is able to leave, Ricky takes him to the cafeteria. Ricky is not able to figure out exactly what happened, since a lot of it is hearsay. But, one thing is obvious. Louie lost his temper and took it out on Pierre.



The narration titled "Jimmie" begins on page 150. Jimmie catches Yessenia in a lie. The girl is walking out of another child's room, and she lies about why she is there. Yessenia is trying to steal money from one of the much younger kids. Jimmie does not yet take her to task, but she lets Yessenia know that she is on to her. She can see through lies. She wants Yessenia to know that even though they are on the same side, she will not stand for lying and stealing.

## Analysis

Louie says the line that gives the book its title: "I can be a good king or I can be a bad king," (135). It is strange since Louie is not a narrator. This is one of his only lines in the book. So much of the book is summed up in this line. The aides can be good or bad. They can be good people who make mistakes. They can be bad people who do whatever they want. They can be good people who do the right thing. Surely, Louie did not mean all of this when he said it. He is just threatening Teddy, trying to get him to behave. If Teddy behaves, presumably Louie will be good to him. The reader never sees Louie's good side, though. Perhaps, he does not have one.

When Yessenia describes Jimmie to her counselor, it is another case of the reader only knowing how a character looks when they are described by another. The strange thing is that this happens on page 139, and Jimmie is introduced on page 52.

Jimmie's illegal field trip with Yessenia is one of the first times the author shows a "good" staff member doing something wrong. Throughout the book, there will be a few times when the "good" staff, like Jimmie and Ricky, make mistakes. However, these mistakes are either simple accidents or they mean well. The friendship between these two is not appropriate, but it comes from a different place. It is not inappropriate like Jerry and Mia. It instead comes from caring, not from abuse.

The main purpose of the narration by Jimmie when she discovers Yessenia lying is to show how sisterhood dynamics work between these two. Jimmie is very much the adult. She sets the rules and loves Yessenia, even if Yessenia breaks those rules. Earlier in the book, Yessenia tells the reader that she only had one mother, and it was her tia Nene. She resents anyone trying to set her up with a foster parent. That is not what Jimmie wants out of this relationship. Jimmie sees kinship and a younger version of herself.

When Michelle mentions having gonorrhea and the issue with her parents, the author again uses personal life details as decoration. They are summed up and washed through so quickly that they are really unnecessary. They are just ways to lead in, to differentiate a new narrator, before continuing the ongoing story of bad things happening at a youth facility.

The author uses Michelle as a voice box for the other side of the equation: the corporate side. The state was doing a bad job, so the corporation took over, making it more efficient, streamlined. Michelle's point of view is to show how the system works. Her



voice provides balance to Joanne's, who wants the place shut down and the kids put in semi-independent residential communities.

The author continues to speak through the characters in ways that they probably would not in order to further the plot. Michelle and Joanne are given a lot of access to all the inner workings of the corporation in order to show how the care of disabled youth is really carried out. Additionally, Teddy, who has been established as having an IQ of 74, has a strong enough vocabulary to use words like “aping” when Louie is making fun of him.

Joanne's narration is one of the best examples of what could be described as “plot sandwiches.” Nussbaum opens the narration with a little fluff that gives the narrator a hint of personality. Then the character dives right into a dissertation on why managed care facilities are bad. The narration wraps up with a bit more fluff. The fluff in the beginning and the end are just to let the reader handle the meat of the story. Without these little character snippets, this book could be a nonfiction essay.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why did Jimmie take Yessenia to her club?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Louie mean by “good kings” and “bad kings”?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is Michelle learning about Whitney-Palm? How do you think it will affect her relationship with her employer?

## **Vocabulary**

hood life, gonorrhea, hemorrhaging, aping, white man's burden, bare-bones, matrix, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, opposition, defiant disorder, nature-versus-nurture,



## Section 4: Pages 161-243

### Summary

Section 4: Pages 161-243

The "Sections" of this guide have been demarcated by the writer of the guide, rather than the novel's author. "Section 4" refers to the following: "Yessenia Lopez" (161), "Mia Oviedo" (165), "Joanne Madsen" (170), "Teddy Dobbs" (177), "Ricky Hernandez" (180), "Michelle Volkman" (187), "Yessenia Lopez" (194), "Jimmie Kendrick" (198), "Ricky Hernandez" (202), "Yessenia Lopez" (206), "Michelle Volkman" (212), "Teddy Dobbs" (220), "Ricky Hernandez" (226), "Mia Oviedo" (232), "Yessenia Lopez" (235), "Teddy Dobbs" (239).

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 161. Yessenia tells a story about how she and Cheri talk to Joanne. They tell Joanne about Michelle tricking Cheri and Cheri's parents into placing her at ILLC. Yessie tells Cheri that she has to stop telling everyone she is schizophrenic or people will think she is crazy. They plead with Joanne to try to get Cheri moved back to her home or something better. Joanne says that Michelle's job is in recruitment, not transitioning people to independent living. "Even if I talked to her it's extremely unlikely that she would be willing to turn this around. To help you get home, I mean. Her job is the opposite of that," (162).

They notice a picture of a handsome man in a wheelchair chained to a door that is hung up in Joanne's office. Joanne starts to tell the story that he is protesting a home for disabled people.

The narration titled "Mia" begins on page 165. Mia's private parts hurt so much that she goes to the nurse. She is reluctant to tell her anything, except that she hurts "down there." Nurse Donna puts her on an examining table and runs a few basic tests. Then, she examines her pelvic area. She has a discharge from her vagina. Nurse Donna takes a sample and looks at it under a microscope immediately. She deduces she has venereal disease. The nurse asks her who she has been having sex with. Mia refuses to tell. When the nurse says that she is going to have to test everyone in the building to find out, Mia whispers "Jerry." The nurse asks her if she is sure, because if she is lying, then it can be very bad. Mia confirms that it is Jerry.

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 168. The narrative shows Joanne traveling now with her own driver. His name is Leo. She hired him because she did not want to rely on anyone in her personal life to take care of her. Ricky would have gladly driven her around, she concedes. However, she does not want Ricky to feel obligated to do so. "I'm a believer in keeping your relationship person clearly separated from your employee person. I don't want to be Ricky's job" (171).



She goes to see Elaine Brown at the Center for Disability Justice. While in the waiting room, she catches the reader up on the kids at ILLC. The police arrested Jerry on his way into work. Kids who witnessed this were cheering. Fantasia, who is Mia's roommate, was interviewed by police. Mia had thought she was sleeping through the attacks. She was only pretending to be asleep, because she was afraid. Mia was told to "think happy thoughts" by ILLC's therapist before the therapist went on vacation.

Joanne is not visiting the Center for Disability Justice for herself. She calls out of work to accompany Teddy and his father there. Mrs. Phoebe wants to transfer Teddy to an adult home when he turns 22. The other home is owned by Whitney-Palm as well. He will still be making them money. Joanne wants him out of the system. Teddy wants to live in an apartment. Elaine, the lawyer there, sets up a best case scenario: "It means you have a right to live in the community, with caregivers you hire and fire yourself. Or there are living situations that are not nursing homes or institutions but have more round-the-clock help if you decide you need that. Meanwhile, we can get an injunction to stop ILLC from transferring you," (174). However, all of this will take a lot of work on his part. He needs to start taking courses to learn more skills to demonstrate that he can be independent.

After, Joanne asks Teddy if he has talked to Mia yet. Teddy says he has not, and he is still angry. Rumors have spread about what has happened to Mia, but nothing is certain. Joanne urges Teddy to talk to Mia because she needs a friend right now.

The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 177. Teddy and his friend Bernard are sitting around the empty swimming pool smoking cigarettes. Teddy is upset that everyone has been critical of him for being cold to Mia. In Teddy's eyes, Mia broke it off with him, first. He thinks Mia and Jerry became boyfriend and girlfriend. Bernard has to inform him that bad boys force sex on good girls sometimes and it was not her fault. Bernard convinces Teddy to talk to her. Bernard has his own problems. His mother needs his disability check, so she is going to take him home. Their home is not wheelchair accessible, though, so Bernard probably will not be leaving often. He will probably stop going to school. Teddy tells him when he has a place of his own, they can be roommates.

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 180. He tells the reader a story of having to pick up an 11-year-old girl named Cleo and escort her to the time-out room because she will not take part in gym. He makes the mistake of falling asleep while she is inside. Luckily, nothing really bad happens to her. She managed to have a purple Magic Marker in with her and has colored every part of her body she can reach, including her eyelids and teeth.

Later, as he is talking to Joanne, he confides in her that he does not like the person he has become at this school. He has become the disciplinarian, who has to take kids into time-out or tackle them to the ground. She suggests he leave. However, he is worried that when he does leave, they will hire another person who does not care about the kids and will not be as gentle. Or worse, they will hire another Jerry.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 187. She is at a meeting discussing issues at Whitney-Palm with the rest of the staff. A girl in one facility, not ILLC, died



under suspicious circumstances. She was strapped into a wheelchair and suffocated. She was not a child who required a wheelchair, so an investigation is underway. Whitney-Palm is probably going to get a fine for this death. There is another case pending, also not at ILLC, where an aide watched as one boy raped another. The rapist had been told not to have a roommate because he was a sexual predator, but that advice was not heeded. Michelle thinks "I would never say this to Tim probably but we deserve to pay a big fine," (192). She is starting to feel bad about the people at the facility. The cracks are starting to show.

Michelle brings up Joanne's point about trying to look into the patients' health. Tim promises to look into it, but Michelle knows he will not. She also knows, somehow, that Whitney-Palm contributed \$765,000 to state legislators' election campaigns in the most recent year.

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 194.. Yessenia is feeling lonely because Cheri got sent away without her being able to say goodbye. Cheri tried to run away and go home a few times. Finally, she was sent to another facility. Yessenia figures it was the "nuthouse." There is an instance she describes about how Cheri cut up her leg with a branch, but the staff covered up for her. Yessie thinks that if someone can just talk to Cheri, then she usually snaps out of whatever her problems are. There also seems to be inconsistencies about how often she gets her medication.

The narration titled "Jimmie" begins on page 198. She is asking the big questions. She is blaming herself for missing signs about Mia's sexual abuse, and not wanting to take the time to do more to help her when she saw some red flags. Instead, there were so many kids to take care of, she just went into automatic mode and just got things done to get through the night. She is talking at Joanne's home, and they are going back and forth. Is it the system's fault, or a series of individual decisions that leads to children getting hurt in their care? They never fully decide.

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 202. The significant part of this narrative is that Ricky overhears a few other aides talking. Louie and Candy are talking about how the kids try to manipulate the aides into making the aides feel bad for them. This way, the kids get away with anything they want. Louie and Candy think they are the only ones who see things clearly, and the others are deluded. Especially Ricky, who they do not realize is listening outside the door.

Two other minor characters, Louie and Candy, are talking shop. These two have been described as bad kings by the author for their behavior so far. The author puts this comment right after Louie's and Candy's conversation to show both sides. They think the compassion that Ricky and the others have is a weakness. Since neither of these people are narrators, the only way for the reader to know what they think is for Ricky to eavesdrop on them.

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 206. Yessenia has a new roommate, Ree Ree, whom she does not like. The girl is two years older, physically, and possibly even younger mentally or emotionally. She also has some kind of eye condition. Yessie





watches as Louie, the aide, confronts Pierre about eating lunch. Louie says Pierre is supposed to be on a delayed lunch for something he did, but snuck in. The two wind up cursing at each other. Louie grabs Pierre by the arm, presumably to drag him to the time-out room. The teacher on staff, who Yessie likes, grabs Louie and tells him to stop. He is wrong, and Pierre does not have a delayed lunch that day. Instead of letting go of Pierre's arm, Louie shoves Pierre's arm away. This causes him to topple. But, Louie helps him clean up his spilled tray of food. Not wanting to let that go, Pierre gets a pencil and drives it into Louie's chest. In retaliation, Louie, who is described as an ex-prison guard, breaks Pierre's jaw with one punch. At that, Jimmie clutches Louie's neck and sweeps him across the cafeteria, face-first into the wall. The children, of course, all love watching Louie get hurt.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 212. Michelle is liking her job less and less. She has been taken off the recruitment portion, which she laments because she used to get bonuses. Now, she is doing a lot of paperwork that is not in her job description. After the incidents at the facilities, she is being sent to all of Whitney-Palm's facilities to check on their condition. Tim just bought a house in Florida, his wife is going to decorate it, and he gave her a car so she can drive around down there. So, obviously, the company is still making money.

Michelle goes to Riverwood, a mental institution. She has a checklist to go over. Some things, such as hairnets being worn by the people preparing the food, fail. Everything is clean, so they pass that. There are only two nurses on, so that raises a concern, but she is not sure how many nurses there are supposed to be. She sees Cheri. Apparently she has been transferred here. She is on such strong medication that she does not even talk and has to be coaxed to eat. Her eyes are half open. Cheri does not see Michelle.

The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 220. This is an update told from Teddy's point of view. Yessenia and Teddy share some information in the middle of the night. Teddy can not sleep, and Yessenia gets up to call someone she met on Facebook. Pierre was moved to Riverwood after the fight with Louie. Louie is suspended, pending review. Louie has been replaced by George, who comes in and finds Yessenia in the boys' dormitories at night. He makes sure they get to bed and says he will report them.

The narration titled "Ricky" begins on page 226. When Joanne tells Ricky that they are sending Pierre to the mental hospital. He gets very upset. She tells him to compartmentalize it. She just wants him to put the thought away until there is a time that he can act on it. They are lying in bed at the time, so it is not the most practical time to worry about a child's placement. In the meantime, Pierre is in the hospital until he gets better. His jaw is wired shut, so Ricky brings him a smoothie with an extra shot of protein in it because he knows the boy has nutrition issues.

The narration titled "Mia" begins on page 232. Mia is still having the nightmares – or perhaps visions – of the bird stalking her. She is going to a class taught by Mrs. Schmidt. It appears to be some kind of life skills class, because they talk about using a bank book, and how to eat healthy. Teddy is in the class, and he is a class clown. He



makes the kids laugh a few times. Mrs. Schmidt promises that if the class does well on their test, she'll order pizza for them. They love that. After class, Teddy comes up and talks to Mia. They just say "Hi" to each other. Then, he asks if she is going to the cafeteria. She is, so he offers to bring her there. He hooks up his chair to hers, using some kind of strap, and he pulls her along. They seem to be getting back together again.

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 235. Yessenia is checking Facebook to see if Cheri says anything, but Cheri has not been on since she left. Joanne has given her the phone number of the attorney at the Center for Disability Justice to see if she can get to Cheri. They are short on lawyers so chances are they will not be able to help her. She has also given her a copy of the *Plumed Serpent*, the magazine about disability rights. Yessie has trouble reading it because it is too boring.

The narration titled "Teddy" begins on page 239. Apparently, Teddy is dying. An aide, Beverly, leaves him in a shower while she makes a quick phone call. The facility is understaffed because ILLC is cutting back on aides. The water is too hot, so Teddy tries to get out of the shower on his own and falls out of his chair. He hits the ground and starts to bleed, presumably from his head. He wakes up in the hospital, with machines keeping him alive. Then, he slips away.

## Analysis

Nussbaum speaks through Joanne again, with her quote about Michelle: "Even if I talked to her it's extremely unlikely that she would be willing to turn this around. To help you get home, I mean. Her job is the opposite of that," (162). Joanne (and Nussbaum) feel more strongly than any other characters that the institutionalization of youth is a cycle. Once youth get into the system, they can not get out. Whitney-Palm does not appear to have a staff member dedicated to transitioning individuals into semi-independent living.

The author nonchalantly sneaks the photo into this narrative. Yessenia makes a bit of a deal about the photo. She says that she is sixteen and the man in the photo is "succulent," so the reader thinks nothing of the fact that she put the picture up on the wall in her room. The photo has a profound effect on her that will only be revealed later in the book. It stirs more than physical yearnings. It stirs her emotional need to want to break free of the institutionalized life.

In the interest of making the story move, the author has Nurse Donna able to put Mia's discharge under the microscope immediately. One would think there would be a backlog of cases, or that the nurse's office would not be equipped for something like that. Regardless, this is one time when a minor staff member, the nurse, does the right thing: she tests Mia and also gets her to name a staff member who had sex with her. When there are a myriad of things going wrong, Nussbaum points out the few things that go right.



When Joanne takes off from work to accompany Teddy and his father to the Center for Disability Justice, it is another instance of a staff member doing something inappropriate, but for a good reason. Nussbaum shows staff members being bad for the sake of being bad, like Jerry. But she also shows them being bad for the sake of doing good, like Joanne inserting herself in the life of a student. This would be seen as inappropriate and grounds for termination. Perhaps, the author just needed eyes and ears inside this interaction and did not think Teddy would be the best narrator, because some of what was said would have gone over his head.

Another example of a good king doing bad is when Ricky falls asleep by the time-out room. He brought an 11-year-old girl there and fell asleep. When he woke, she had painted herself in purple magic marker. The scene is more funny than anything else. However, if she had had something that she could have choked on, then the outcome would not be as positive.

The author reveals why good people continue to work at places like ILLC. Ricky reveals that he is getting burned out, but he is afraid that if he leaves, they will replace him with an abusive aide. Ricky knows that he still has compassion to give, and that he can act as a protector between the coldness of ILLC and the children. It is unclear why Joanne started to work there. She never liked the idea of institutions. She even says at one time that all jails should be closed. It could be, although the author never reveals this, that she has the same motivation as Ricky. She wants to help kids trapped in the system. Her choice of helping Teddy outside of work seems to indicate this might be true.

In another case of pushing the story through characters that are not really appropriate, Michelle knows that Whitney-Palm contributed \$765,000 to state legislators' election campaigns in the most recent year. Obviously, the author wants this information in the book, but has no realistic way of getting it out there. So, she has Michelle mention it, even though Michelle is not in a position to know such things. It could be that Tim might have been a narrating character in an earlier draft. Once the book was pared down, he was taken out, but Nussbaum still wanted certain information in the book. So, she had Michelle stand in, being the only corporate employee left.

The author makes it a point to show that the two legislators that are taking contributions are from different political parties. She is being careful not to paint one party as more corrupt than the other.

Immediately after Michelle confides in the reader that she thinks Whitney-Palm should pay a fine for a boy's death, the reader gets Tim's version of things: "Tim said the media is biased against businesses and the really sad thing about doing this kind of work is that people die. He said if it weren't for places like Whitney-Palm taking care of all the people no one else wanted to take care of, a lot more people would die, but they never put that in their newspaper articles...he said death is a natural part of life and unfortunately in our business we have to accept that people are frail and what happened to the little boy was a tragedy and his heart went out to the family," (192). This shows the other side of the equation. With this quote, Nussbaum shows the philosophy behind Whitney-Palm. However, Tim does not get a voice. He does not even



get a direct quote. He gets Michelle summing up his dialogue for the reader. It is plain to see that Michelle (and Nussbaum) do not accept this philosophy.

Throughout the book, characters say that compassion is the best way to reach these children. Ricky demonstrates it by being patient with the kids when they are acting up, for instance. Here, Yessenia thinks that if people simply talk to Cheri, she snaps out of whatever destructive behavior she is engaging in. It is difficult to know how much truth there is to this, because the effects of her schizophrenia are not revealed.

Jimmie narrates a scene that feels less like a few people talking and more like a dissertation. She is hanging out at Joanne's apartment, and talking shop about work. They go back and forth over what can be done to help the kids. A couple of quotes from Jimmie's narration are important. "Joanne's thing is, we're none of us responsible. Or we're all responsible." This means everyone is either complicit in the situation or helpless. Then, she quotes Joanne as saying "There are Jerrys everywhere but the System lets it happen," (200).

This conversation is an attempt by the author to get to the root of the problem. Throughout the book, these issues have been playing out between the characters. Here, she steps back and lets the reader see it from the outside looking in. The issues with these facilities are that they are part of a system. Individuals with good hearts can only fight the system so much. Closer to it, there are people in the system who are dangerous. The author does not quite say that the system made up of a bunch of individual decisions.

The eighth narration in the novel is Jimmie's first narration. Jimmie's few paragraphs tell about her being big, strong, and overpowering in a fight. Her words foreshadow when she takes on an ex-prison guard, Louie, in defense of Pierre.

Michelle's journey in the book began with her loving her employment, and really looking up to her boss. At this point when she sees Cheri in a semi-vegetative state, Michelle hits a low. The author crafted her journey alongside Cheri's. When they met, they were both happy about the situation. Then, they both started disliking their surroundings. At this point, Michelle is sick of her job, and Cheri does not feel anything any more.

While the staff is firmly divided into good kings and bad kings, Nussbaum does not make much of a determination about George, who replaces Louie. Maybe George is the middle of the line. Louie is bad, too bad. Joanne is good, too good. And George is middle of the line. He is following most of the rules, but has his issues. Teddy tells the reader that he woke up one night and George was in his room, talking on his cell phone. So, he is not perfect. But it remains to be seen whether he will be a Louie or a Jimmie.

The author thinks it is a good idea to compartmentalize emotions when working with people. It is clear the author thinks this way because Joanne thinks this way, and Joanne is her voice. Ricky is feeling this in his own way when he brings Pierre a smoothie in the hospital: "I don't know if it's such a great idea that I came. I don't know if I wanna get involved like this. I don't want him to start thinking I'm gonna be around for



him, because he's not my kid, you know?" (228). Ricky is aware of boundaries. He wants to keep a professional boundary between himself and Pierre, but his compassion is making it difficult.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Tim's reaction to the Michelle's inquiry about health conditions at ILLC?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did Michelle get upset after touring Riverwood?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jimmie feel guilty about Mia's rape?

## Vocabulary

succulent, venereal disease, auspicious, muralist, emphatically, flustered, accentuate, deadpanning, pathologists, self-deluded, truncheon, generic, nuked, haywire



## Section 5: Pages 244-294

### Summary

Section 5: Pages 244-294

The "Sections" of this guide have been demarcated by the writer of the guide, rather than the novel's author. "Section 5" refers to the following: "Yessenia Lopez" (244), "Michelle Volkmann" (248), "Joanne Madsen" (264), "Jimmie Kendrick" (271), "Michelle Volkmann" (275), "Mia Oviedo" (278), "Yessenia Lopez" (283).

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 244. Yessenia tells Teddy's father how Teddy talked about how much he loved him. It is a lie, but it makes him feel better. Mia cannot stop crying. She also notices how Beverly and her husband are there, sitting in the back, trying to stay out of the way. She feels bad for them.

When Yessenia gets back from the funeral, she follows through on something she had been planning for a while. She straps herself to a tree on the road, like one of the people protesting nursing homes. She has a sign that says "This place abuse and kill children." Not very many people drive by. At one point Ricky drives by, honks hello, then his mouth drops open when he reads the sign. He parks the bus with some of the kids from the funeral. Soon, Bernard, Mia, and Fantasia (Mia's roommate) are in a line with her, protesting.

Ricky brings Joanne over, and Joanne makes some phone calls. Mrs. Phoebe sees it, and tells them that it is not appropriate to use a friend's funeral to turn it into a circus. Joanne sides with the kids, and gives up her job. Ricky can not afford to, so he goes back inside the building. He acts as a spy, reporting to Joanne what is going on inside: they are not letting kids out to join them. A few disabled adults come from nearby organizations, brought there by Joanne's phone calls. They bring food, and take the kids on bathroom breaks.

Soon, a television news crew arrives. They talk to a few kids, but really want to talk to Yessie. She tells the reporter, Marjorie: "Marjorie, what I'm saying is us youth come to these places on account of we got no place else to go and the least they could do is to take care of us and make sure nobody gets beat up or gets raped or left in the shower by mistake and killed. And don't send people off to the booby hatch just because they homesick and didn't take their meds. We are teenage youth, and I mean, what do they expect?" (255).

The news people also interview Elaine, the lawyer, and lawyers from ILLC who have come out. Elaine says to the camera that they will be watching for any repercussions against the children or Joanne for protesting. The protest lasts into the night. Eventually, it is time to go back in. Joanne and Yessenia are the last ones back inside. Joanne asks where she got the idea to do that. Yessie says it was from the picture of the disabled



man chained to the front of a nursing home that she had given her back in a previous narrative.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 248. Michelle is taking notes at a Whitney-Palm meeting. All the administrators of the operation are there. Mrs. Phoebe, Tim, and Dr. Caviolini are present. These are characters the reader has seen already. Also present is the president of Whitney-Palm, Howard Anderson. The purpose of the meeting is to do damage control after the student protest. It is revealed that Teddy received heavy burns from the hot water in the shower. His legs had to be amputated and he died of pneumonia in the hospital. By this point, many of Michelle's illusions about her employer are gone. She is glad that there is media coverage of the protest. She understands the boy was neglected, but she does not think the reporters realize how difficult it is to run an operation like this. She still feels bad for Tim.

Tim is worried that ILLC will be shut down. Howard Anderson calms his fears by saying: "We're one of the few businesses for which there will always be a need. We're like funeral directors," (261). He later explains that the death rate for children with fragile medical conditions living at home is much higher. "It's exhausting to confront this question over and over again every time there's a natural or accidental death," (262).

The following conversation, taken verbatim from the book, explains a lot about the beliefs of the overseers at Whitney-Palm. It involves a public relations person and Anderson. It begins with Tim speaking:

"Yes, the death was tragic, but under the circumstances, a reasonable number of deaths is justified."

The PR guy says, "How many deaths are reasonable? Is there a number?"

Mr. Anderson says, "However many of them have died. That's the number."

They decide to recruit the parents and children who love ILLC to speak on their behalf. That way, they can show the public the good they do. They think that someone put the sign in Yessenia's hands, and that she was put up to the protest. Mrs. Phoebe notes that there was a staff member protesting, meaning Joanne. The rest of the Whitney-Palm inner circle suggest to fire her. When Phoebe says it is the facility's only disabled employee, and it would be a public relations nightmare, they agree to hold off on any retribution.

The narration titled "Joanne" begins on page 264. Joanne has been fired from ILLC for her role in the protest. Ricky is helping her around the apartment. She is still uncomfortable accepting help. He is bringing her to a huge family function the next day, and she will meet all of them for the first time. She is terrified that she will not be considered good enough for him. Ricky, meanwhile, is considering going to school or getting a job at a juvenile detention center instead. He is looking for someplace to do some good.



The narration titled "Jimmie" begins on page 271. Jimmie is still working at ILLC, and updates the reader on the changes that have come since the protest. There's a new psychologist on staff, and they increased the number of aides by two. Lawyers came in and told Mrs. Phoebe to make changes. For example, Mia is going to get a motorized wheelchair. Jimmie is going to pick Yessenia up from school and take her to a Cuban restaurant, because she misses food that her grandmother used to make. Then, she says she is going to ask if Yessie wants to be her foster daughter.

The narration titled "Michelle" begins on page 275. Michelle has quit her job at Whitney-Palm, and she is currently unemployed. She just could not recruit more kids into the system with a clear conscience. She does not want to have to have any job where the duties are ethically questionable. She fills the reader in on an article she read. Dr. Caviolini was arrested for receiving half a million dollars in kickbacks for ordering unnecessary tests on the people in his care. The money was then spread out to other people who were in on the scam, including, theoretically, Whitney-Palm.

The narration titled "Mia" begins on page 278. Mia is now going to see Connie, ILLC's psychologist, once a week. She is still not ready to talk about what Jerry did to her, the rape as well as the intimidation. Mostly, she talks about Teddy. She thinks she is unlovable. Connie has to reassure her that Teddy definitely loved her, and that feeling of being loved does not go away just because the person is gone.

The narration titled "Yessenia" begins on page 283. Yessenia is feeling very lonely now. Teddy is dead. Mia spends time at Access, where she is getting life skills training. Joanne got fired. Jimmie is busy training the new staff. Cheri is still at the home for the mentally ill. So, she finds a guy named Pedro on a website. After Ricky drops her off at school, she sneaks away and goes to the bus station. She takes a bus to Milwaukee to meet up with Pedro. He takes her to McDonald's, and they talk. Everything is going well until he forces a kiss and nearly climbs on top of her in his car in the McDonald's parking lot. She yells at him and dumps a soda on his head. That cools him down. He takes her back to his home, which is not wheelchair accessible. He helps her out. He gets her drunk, and they have sex. She is more willing this time. Perhaps, it is the alcohol. She wants to lose her virginity, and he is available. He brings her back to the bus stop, and they part ways.

Yessenia started the narrative calling Pedro her boyfriend, but now she feels like she will probably never see him again. When she finally returns to ILLC, it is late. She is afraid of what punishment she will get, but she sees that it is Jimmie who is working the front office. They had never had their talk about fostering. Now, the end of the book implies that this will happen.

## Analysis

It is interesting that the author used Beverly as the aide who let Teddy die. Beverly is described as being one of the good aides, by Teddy. Teddy even invites her to the pending wedding between him and Mia. The author is saying that even good people





make mistakes. Yessenia is the one who sums it up: "In a way it must be worse to kill somebody and it be a accident than for that person to just die from being sick. You might be just as sad as anyone that the person is passed? But everybody hates you 'cause it's your fault he's dead. And no matter how hard you pray to go back to those two minutes or whatever and do them again? You can't. And nobody knows how sorry you feel," (245).

Nussbaum has Yessenia narrate the funeral instead of Mia because of the action that Yessenia later takes. Mia would have been a good choice for narrating Teddy's funeral, since she was arguably closer to him than anyone else. Perhaps, the author did not choose her because she wept the entire time. Of course Mia is going to be distraught. It is a given. It is perhaps more interesting to see it from a slightly more distant angle, and Yessenia is drafted to tell the story. Also, the funeral story goes right into the protest story, so it makes sense for Yessenia to be the narrator. This is also one of the longest narratives in the book. Therefore, it makes sense to tie all the action together in one narrative.

Michelle, the recruiter, is like Nussbaum's spy in Whitney-Palm. She is used to learn everything that is going on in the upper echelon of management. Again, it feels like Tim might have been a narrating character in an early draft, but got cut. He, or maybe Mrs. Phoebe, are the only ones who would realistically know the inner workings of the corporation. Michelle is taking notes for the company, but really she is taking notes for the reader. Her narration shows what the corporate people are really thinking. Through her, the reader learns the concepts of acceptable losses for running a facility, and how situations like this are just part of the system.

Even in Michelle's last narrative, she is updating the reader on the inner workings of Whitney-Palm. This time, it is through a newspaper article that caught the doctor in an unethical situation.

Joanne's experiences with ILLC literally bookend this story. She starts working in the second narrative, and she leaves during the fourth to last narrative. This expresses just how much she is a voice for the author. Very little happens outside of her experiences.

It is up for debate whether Pedro takes advantage of Yessenia. She cries on the way home, but she says it is a mix of feelings going through her that overwhelms her. Yessenia's feelings is that they both used each other. She wants to lose her virginity and have something like a date, and he wants sex. He is 21 and she is 16, so their relationship is illegal in at least some states. He gets her drunk. She says she is in control of the situation, but as a drunk minor, she really is not. The author's tone does not condemn this "date." The tone implies that nothing bad really happened, and feels more like a thing a rebellious teenager would do.

The author uses these last few narratives to tie up some loose ends and to make happy endings for the characters that she likes. Yessenia and Jimmie are going to take their big sister-little sister bond to the next level. They will likely move in together and Yessenia will no longer be at ILLC. Jimmie rescues Yessenia. Mia gets a little more



mobility and independence. Joanne did not suffer anything during the course of the story. In fact, she winds up getting a serious boyfriend out of her employment at ILLC. Ricky wants to move on, but still help people in some way.

Not all of the characters have happy endings, obviously. Teddy dies, and Pierre and Cheri are sent to the asylum. It would not be a novel without at least a little tragedy.

Some of the bad kings are punished by the author. Jerry is arrested. Louie gets stabbed by Pierre, but winds up getting another job elsewhere, starting over with another group of people he will likely abuse. Dr. Caviolini is charged with taking bribes. Whitney-Palm is facing increased scrutiny.

Some of the bad kings are not punished. Candy, another aide who does not care about the kids, remains at her job. Mrs. Phoebe, Tim McGraw, and Howard Anderson are not changed by the situations in the book. In fact, the author shows that their lives go unchanged in spite of all the tragedy that the children are going through. Whether the children thrive or die, those three are unaffected.

## Discussion Question 1

Is there a main character in the book? Is there one character that unites the storyline and drives the action? If so, who is this character? If not, then why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think the author's purpose was for writing this book?

## Discussion Question 3

Are people better off at a place like ILLC or would they be better off at homeless shelters?

## Vocabulary

trifling, desgracia sinvergüenza, chica, Sturm und Drang, quadriplegia, awhir, marshal (as a verb), gimpy, stratospherically, crips, agoraphobic



# Characters

## Yessenia Lopez

Yessenia is a 16-year-old Puerto Rican girl who never knew her father, and her mother was addicted to crack. She went through juvenile detention and at least one other facility after tia Nene died. She has some bite to her. She always speaks her mind. She had attacked a fellow student prior to the events in the book.

## Joanne Madsen

Joanne Madsen was hit by a bus and has since been confined to a wheelchair. She is independently wealthy, from the bus company settlement. However, she uses a job as a way to get out of her apartment. She does not like any facilities like nursing homes or jails because of the abuses and neglect that are endemic to those places. According to Ricky, she is a pretty, young woman with blonde hair. She is in her late 30s.

## Ricky Hernandez

Ricky Hernandez is a driver and aide for ILLC. He is a tall, large Puerto Rican man who is a little rough around the edges. His heart has a soft spot. Ricky had seen abuse in his family growing up, so he is slow to anger now. Ricky always seems to take a moment and think about where another character is coming from. He does not see isolated incidents. Everything people do is caused by something that happened to them as recently as that morning or as long ago as their childhood. He seems to ask: "What circumstances created their lives?" Ricky also has a tendency to say the wrong thing.

## Mia Oviedo

Mia is a teenager in ILLC. She is engaged to Teddy. Mia is confined to a wheelchair and comes from a home where there was abuse. She is raped by a staff member at ILLC. In the novel, her character serves the purpose of being a victim.

## Teddy Dobbs

Teddy had a tumor removed from his spine when he was younger. This left him in a wheelchair and with a cognitive impairment. He longs to get out of ILLC. He is 21, and has had enough. When he turns 22, he will not be able to live there legally. So, he needs to make a plan to get out before being put in a home for adults. He sees this as an old age home. He is engaged to Mia, and would want to marry her in the future. He likes to talk big. He makes big plans. He struts. He boasts. He insists on wearing a suit



every day. He comes off as very charismatic. The other residents and some of the staff have taken a liking to him.

## **Mrs. Phoebe**

Mrs. Phoebe runs the ILLC. She flits about the building, putting positive spins on everything. She is either unable or unwilling to help people when they really need it. She is condescending to people with disabilities.

## **Tim McGraw**

Tim McGraw is the corporate face of Whitney-Palm, although there is at least one person above him. He is a charming businessman, and business is good. His wealth is used as an example of how much money the corporation makes off of these children.

## **Pierre**

Pierre is a kid who is constantly misunderstood by most of the staff. His diagnosis changed at some point, and some staff do not seem to realize he has rickets. He also seems to have a defiant disorder, so he just rebels for the sake of rebelling. It is not that he wants to cause any trouble, rather he is just not in control. His lack of control upsets him as well. He is often being punished for his behaviors, whether his behaviors were intentional or not.

## **Cheri**

Cheri is a teenager who has multiple handicaps. She has some physical disabilities that are not fully explained in the book. Those difficulties lead to her having trouble walking. Also, one of her hands has problems. She is schizophrenic. There might also be some cognitive delays. Cheri is picked up at a homeless shelter by Michelle after Cheri had been kicked out of her house. Michelle recruits her and brings her to ILLC. Cheri does not do well there, however. After taking her medication inconsistently and trying to run away, she is sent to an asylum, where they over-medicate her into being quiet.

## **Michelle**

Michelle works for Whitney-Palm as a recruiter. She gets a \$300 commission for every bed she fills at one of Whitney-Palm's facilities. In the beginning of the book, she is devoted to her employer. She is put on the promotion track, and has plenty of positive things to say. By the end of the book, she is burned out on the industry in general, and she is extremely critical of Whitney-Palm.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Picture of a Chained Man

The picture of a man chained to a door represents protest. It stirs something in Yessenia when she sees it, which is part sexual and part psychological. He is an attractive man, but what attracts her is his stance. He has a fierce expression in a moment of defiance. This feeling of protest grows within her through the course of the story, and eventually she becomes the person chained to an inanimate object in protest.

## Mia's Motorized Wheelchair

Mia's motorized wheelchair represents autonomy. The old chairs represented the staff's unwillingness to give them independence. She used to need Teddy to tow her around. Now, with the new chair, she feels like she can make more of her own decisions. The fact that it is pink and pretty lets her feel girly. It seems like it is an accessory in addition to being a necessity.

## The Big Bird

The big bird specifically represents Jerry and his attack of Mia in general. Mia sees the big, ugly bird as her attacker. When she cannot even say his name, she uses that moniker. Perhaps, she cannot say his name in her narrative because of how scared she is of retribution. It is unclear if she is hallucinating this, or if she understands that she is using it as a metaphor.

## The Illinois Learning and Life Skills Learning Center

The Illinois Learning and Life Skills Learning Center, referred to as ILLC, represents any facility that houses disabled youth. The author has invented this particular place as a generic stand-in for any other kind of nursing home for youth. There are few details about the building and operations in general, allowing it to be easily swapped out for another location in another state.

## Riverwood

Riverwood, the insane asylum, symbolizes a place to go when someone is forgotten. When Cheri goes there, the medications sap away all of her individuality and independence. She becomes a near-vegetable. It is also a kind of boogeyman story that the children tell. They are scared of acting out, because then they will be sent away to Riverwood. It is unclear if the staff at ILLC threatens the children with Riverwood or if the children just know what happens when one of their fellow youths is taken away.



## Yessie's and Jimmie's Field Trip

Yessie's and Jimmie's field trip represents a sliver of normal in an abnormal world. The youths in ILLC never have an opportunity to go out and be social. In this case, they are never able to do typical teenage mischief like sneaking into a bar. Jimmie's act of taking her charge, Yessenia, into this world represents crossing over into the real world. It also offers a glimpse of what their lives would be like if they decide to live together.

## Time-out Room

The time-out room symbolizes punishment that comes from anger. It is an important feature in the ILLC to rein in children when they are acting up. However, it is also seen as punishment. There seems to be no set duration of time for how long a child goes there. It seems that when adults are angry at the kids, the kids spend more time there. Yessenia starts off the book in the time-out room. She calls it the “punishing room” in the book's second paragraph. That sets the tone for the room's purpose.

## Aides or Kings

The aides in ILLC are like kings, in that they have total control over the lives of people in their care. ILLC is a kingdom, and the aides are at the top. Just like a king, their rule is unquestionable. The kids are just subjects.

## Teddy's Death

Teddy's death symbolizes the ultimate worst thing that could happen to a child. Earlier in the book, Whitney-Palm oversees discuss wrongful death suits. So, such deaths might happen relatively frequently. This fate hangs over all of the children. It could happen at any time to any one of them.

## The Protest

Yessenia's protest symbolizes rebellion. It starts with only her, and it grows to include several other children, and eventually adults. It is the first step of a growing movement. The protest is relatively small. Like all protests, it is not necessarily the size but the ability to reach an audience.



# Settings

## Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center (or ILLC)

The Illinois Learning and Life Skills Center (or ILLC) is where almost all of the action in the book takes place. It is a facility for children with disabilities. The physical building itself is not described in detail. The reader only knows that it is a big place and there are several floors. There are a lot of children there, but there is not enough staff to take care of all of them. It holds eighty children, up to age twenty-two. It is a generic stand-in for any other similar home for disabled youths.

## Joanne's Apartment

Joanne's apartment is a comfortable place, with all of her collections and books and entertainment to last for the rest of her life. She is living off of a settlement after the accident that crippled her. When she gets a job at ILLC, it is because she is bored. She can afford this apartment all on her own thanks to that settlement. It represents autonomy. It is wheelchair accessible. For the most part, she does not need a great deal of help.

Ricky changes the storm windows during the course of the book, and he does a few other things. For the most part, though, she is living the ideal life for someone with her challenges. Several of the children talk about getting an apartment when they grow up. They want to live on their own. That is why the author shows her in her self-sufficient world. It is the pinnacle for which others need to strive.

## Riverwood

Riverwood is an insane asylum that is also run by Whitney-Palm. The reader only sees it once, through Michelle's eyes. She is given an expansion of duties that requires her to visit there and audit the building and its operations. It is very quiet, which surprises Michelle, until she learns how overly medicated all the students are. They are medicated into being semi-vegetative so that they are easier to deal with and handle. As with ILLC, this facility is understaffed and not adequately prepared for caring for the children, but it does have the minimum requirements that regulators require.

## The Time-out Room

The time-out room is used whenever kids act up too much. The reader mostly sees it from Ricky's point of view. He feels that most of the staff use it for punishment, rather than to give the kids a literal "time-out" to collect themselves so they can function appropriately again. It is small, with carpeted walls. There is a small window that they



can see the staff member guarding the room. It smells of old vomit and cleaning chemicals that tried to remove the stench.

## **The Center for Disability Justice**

The Center for Disability Justice is much different than ILLC. Whereas ILLC is very depressing and colorless, the CDJ is clean, open, accessible and welcoming. There are pictures on the wall of disabled people doing things, and many of the employees are disabled. However, Joanne sees this as a bit too clean and perfect. For example, the people in the pictures are token stereotypes of disabled people.. So, whereas ILLC does not really care about representing various people, the CDJ works a little too hard to tell people that they are all-inclusive.



# Themes and Motifs

## The author wrote a nonfiction book with fictional characters.

Nussbaum educates the reader about the issues of the industry that deals with the disabled in America by making up characters who go through real-life problems in the facilities. It is a nonfiction book disguised as a fiction book. Although all fiction is based on reality on some level, this book seems more based on real life events.

According to her website, Nussbaum is a disability rights activists as well as an author. This is her first novel. Her previous publications are both plays that appeared in collections that were about, or written by, people with disabilities. So, she knows firsthand about the issues she put in her book. While truth is said to be stranger than fiction, the occurrences in this book feel like they probably happened in real life. Perhaps these things happened to people she knew, or read about, and she changed the names.

Joanne is a voice for the author. She tends to sum up what the author wants the reader to understand, such as notions that there is a system, and it is very hard to get out of that system. Joanne also makes it clear that bad things happen to people in that system. Joanne is in a wheelchair because of an accident. Since she is independently wealthy, she is on the outside, looking in.

Most authors are actually on the outside of an issue and looking into it. So, Joanne becomes author Nussbaum's surrogate. She even becomes a writer at the end of the book. Starting on page 198, Joanne and Jimmie are talking outside of work about the system. They are talking about what can be done and what parts of the system are too broken to be able to fix. This conversation feels like the author is trying to condense all the discussions that caregivers have had about these facilities into one conversation. She is trying to show all sides of the issue.

There are only minor characters telling a major story. Mrs. Phoebe or Tim do not narrate. These two are the people most in charge. They have the most say over what happens with the children. However, their voices are absent. Because of this, minor cogs in the machine are given more of a role than they realistically would. Michelle, who is just a recruiter, is granted unprecedented access to the entire Whitney-Palm operation. She even knows what politicians were bribed, and by how much. Joanne, who is hired as a data entry clerk, is suddenly going through every patient's files and seems involved in all aspects of daily routines. These choices were made so that the author could show the reader the entire situation that faces disabled youths while having a minimal number of narrators.

Often, the character drama going on is just set dressing for the characters to tell the reader what they think about the plight of the disabled. For example, it is completely



irrelevant to the plot for Michelle to have a sexually transmitted disease in the book. It makes sense for Mia, because that is how they catch the fact that Jerry raped her. However, Michelle mentioning off-handedly that she has gonorrhea serves no purpose but to make the reader think that they are reading about actual characters rather than a nonfiction book about the problems in how disabled people are treated in America.

Additionally, only characters who are sympathetic to the children are given voices. Tim, Mrs. Phoebe, Candy, Louie, and Jerry are never narrators. The reader never knows what they are really thinking. Granted, it would be difficult for the author to make a rapist like Jerry a likable character. However, by having only characters who are either victims or sympathetic to the victims, the author makes the reader feel strongly for the children and want to make a change in the system.

## **The care of other people is an industry.**

Almost every problem that Nussbaum introduces in *Good Kings, Bad Kings* stems from money being the reason certain decisions are made at ILLC. From the top down, corporate decisions trickle into daily life for the children.

For example, Mia does not have a wheelchair she is able to use on her own. It is less expensive to just let her sit in her chair and not be able to move. The author also has a few scenes in an abandoned room that used to have a swimming pool. Presumably, that was closed down because it was too expensive.

Throughout the book, bad things happen because there is not enough staff around. Jimmie regrets not picking up on red flags regarding Mia's rape because she is too busy taking care of all the kids. Kids who can not move on their own are forced to stay in the same place for hours because no one has the time to move them. It could also be implied that bad employees like Candy or Louie continue to work there because the facility can not afford to let someone go and have to train someone new.

The first time the author actually spells it out, somewhat, is by Michelle in her first narrative, the fourth in the book. "Homeless shelters can be really profitable," (30). The author lets Michelle telegraph one of the themes pretty early in the book. Although Michelle says this as a joke, the author is serious about it. Whitney-Palm employees can make real money from scouting homeless shelters and placing children in homes.

This is because once the children are in the system, they can not get out. The author shows that it is not in the corporation's best interest to let the children be independent. Joanne says this pretty clearly. "Even if I talked to her it's extremely unlikely that she would be willing to turn this around. To help you get home, I mean. Her job is the opposite of that," (162). The context of this quote is that Yessenia and Cheri were appealing to Joanne to work on their behalf to get Michelle to place Cheri in a more independent residential care facility, instead of an insane asylum. Joanne tells them that Michelle's job is recruitment, not teaching them life skills. In fact, there are no Whitney-Palm employees in the book whose job it is to transition youth into a more independent



lifestyle. Toward the end of the book, Mia is taking life skills classes at another building. It is unclear if these classes are run by Whitney-Palm, but it is assumed that they are not.

There are various facets of this industry, and the author touches on each one. They are presented here chronologically, although the author presented them in the context of each character. First, a recruiter like Michelle finds and brings a child into the system. While there, they are tested on and sent for unnecessary medical procedures with Dr. Caviolini. The author reveals in a later narrative that he is receiving kickbacks for the unnecessary care he is doing. Then, when they reach the age of twenty-two, they are shipped to another Whitney-Palm facility for adults. Although Teddy refers to this place routinely as a nursing home full of old people, it is unclear what the age group there is. It could be that they get sent to yet another facility when they are a senior citizen. The only other option is if they are deemed dangerous to themselves or others, like Cheri or Pierre. Then, they wind up in the insane asylum, also owned by Whitney-Palm. Meanwhile, the state must pay Whitney-Palm for their care for the rest of their lives. Whitney-Palm invests \$300 in Michelle for every recruitment, and the company earns money off of each person for that person's lifetime.

## **There is a difference between empathy and pity.**

The interactions between characters demonstrate the difference the author feels between empathy and pity. Empathy is something that you feel for an equal. Pity is something you feel for someone you consider below you.

The relationship between Ricky and Joanne is the strongest example of empathy in the book. In Ricky's narrations, the author shows how careful he is when he offers any kind of help to Joanne. He does not want his offers to seem condescending. He does not want Joanne to think that he is taking pity on her, so that the big strong man is going to swoop in and take care of the disabled woman. Instead, he makes offers with ways for Joanne to decline him. He wants to make sure that his assistance is wanted. On the other side, Nussbaum has Joanne's narration show that she welcomes his help to a point. She is grateful for his help around the apartment, taking care of things that she cannot. However, she hires a driver to drive her around. She knows Ricky would do it without complaints. However, she does not want to be Ricky's job. When his job is taking care of disabled people all day, she does not want to be another disabled person for him to take care of after he leaves work for the day.

Another pair that demonstrate this is Jimmie and Yessenia. Jimmie does not look down on Yessenia despite her disability or her age. She does not treat her as an equal, because one is an adult employee and the other is an underaged ward. However, the author included the trip to Jimmie's nightclub performance to show that Jimmie does not look down on Yessie. She brought her to that place because she wants the girl in her life. Also, perhaps, because Jimmie feels that a 16-year-old girl should be sneaking out and going to clubs. It is done out of empathy, not pity.



Yessenia becomes friends with Cheri, who has a lot of challenges. In addition to having a physical disability, she is schizophrenic. There also appears to be a learning difficulty but that is not fully addressed. Yessenia sees her as an equal, in spite of the shouting in the middle of the night. Yessenia does not understand why people do not just talk to Cheri when she is having an episode. She always calms down after that, she says. Approaching the girl with empathy rather than pity is the way to get through to her.

The opposite of all of this is Mrs. Phoebe. She flits about the office, spinning anything she has to say through a filter of forced optimism. The author shows her as looking down on all of the children, and talking down to them, too. In one of Joanne's narratives, Mrs. Phoebe even pats her on the head, like she would a child. This, the author says through Joanne, is demeaning. Mrs. Phoebe does not have empathy for the disabled, she pities them.

## **It does not matter where you are now, but it does matter from where you have come.**

The author tries to teach the reader that to get along with someone in the present, one must learn that person's past. The characters in this book all come from different backgrounds. They are thrown together into a stressful place. Tempers are going to flare. People do not always get along. Yet, the way to work through all this is to learn where the other person is coming from.

All relationships are based on understanding. Nussbaum shows this in the kinship that Jimmie and Yessenia feel. They come from different walks of life, and yet there is a bond that forms very easily.

The ILLC employees who serve as narrators – Jimmie, Joanne, and Ricky – are united in their mutual understanding of what the job entails. By showing some of their talk outside of work, Nussbaum shows the reader that they all have a mutual understanding that the children come first. No matter what is going on in workers' lives and no matter what happened to them before they worked there, the children are the main priority.

Nussbaum uses the character of Ricky as a model for behavior. Ricky rarely acts on impulse. Rather, he thinks first about where another character is coming from, and how that background can change their perception. Upon being called to take a kid to the time-out room, for example, Ricky knows he is walking into a situation where tensions are already high. He does everything he can not to escalate it further. To that end, he tries not to be confrontational. He tries to talk to the kid and try to get him to open up and relax. He builds bridges instead of walls. Ricky even analyzes his own past, about growing up in a rough household where punishment was expected if he made mistakes.

This is also one of the reasons the author lets the story be told from multiple points of view. This way, the reader can see the character's past in their own words. By doing this, the characters become more sympathetic and are easier to understand.



## **Good people can make bad mistakes; bad people will do bad; and the system makes it worse.**

Nussbaum builds a world where there are good people who make bad mistakes, bad people who do bad things, and a system that does not protect vulnerable kids either way.

Generally speaking, the narrators who work as employees are good kings. They have the children's best interests at heart, and never intentionally cause harm to the kids. The author uses Ricky as an example of how to defuse a kid before the kid blows up. She uses Jimmie as an example of how to look at a disabled person as an equal. She uses Joanne as an example of how to educate oneself about the rights and needs of a disabled person.

The author also protects good people when they make bad decisions. Ricky falls asleep with a girl in the time-out room. When he wakes up, he has found that she has drawn all over herself. The girl could have died if she had something on her that she could have choked on. Instead, the situation is funny. When Jimmie takes Yessenia out to her club, any number of bad things could have happened. Instead, Yessenia gets home safe and sound. For some reason, the staff and management at ILLC do not even notice that the girl went to a night club. The exception is Beverly. She steps out to use the phone, and Teddy dies because of it. Perhaps, bad things happened on her watch because she is not a narrator.

Jimmie blames herself for not noticing the warning signs of Mia's abuse, but the author is quick to absolve her by explaining that she is overworked and cannot fix every problem. In this way, the author blames the system instead of Jimmie's choices. This is the closest the author gets to merging the two different ideas. One idea is that each person is personally responsible for their behavior. The other idea is that the system is broken and that the individual choices of the employees in the system do not matter as much. A third solution is more likely, that the system is actually formed by everyone's individual decisions.

This book has its fair share of villains. Some of them are relatively harmless, like Candy. She is only described as being mean to the kids, but not abusive. Some of them are not overtly dangerous, but further the system. In this category are Mrs. Phoebe and Tim. Then, of course, there are Jerry, who rapes Mia, and Louie, who breaks Pierre's jaw. Louie even delivers the line that gives the book its name. "I can be a good king or I can be a bad king," (135).

The author lets the reader in on a venting session at Joanne's apartment. Jimmie is the narrator, and she quotes Joanne as saying: "There are Jerrys everywhere but the System lets it happen," (200).

These words establish the author's main purpose for writing this book. A lack of oversight in the industry leads to bad people who work with the disabled. More advocacy is needed to protect the victims.



# Styles

## Point of View

The author changes point of view every chapter. Each character speaks a bit differently when contributing to the larger story. The following characters narrate chapters: Yessenia, Joanne, Michelle, Jimmie, Ricky, Mia, and Teddy. Joanne tends to use big words more than the others. The author tends to speak through her. Yessenia tends to mispronounce things. Mia slips in and out of Spanish and dances around things she does not want to talk about. Ricky habitually says the wrong thing. Teddy talks like he is the life of the party. He gets distracted very easily. Jimmie is very grounded because of some hardships she has had to endure. Michelle is probably the character who changes the most. In the beginning, she loves her job. By the end, she hates it and feels truly sorry for the kids in the system.

## Language and Meaning

The author chooses words that match the narrator when they are speaking. Several of them have quirks that make their narration sound like they are talking to the reader. For example, Jimmie ends sentences with “you know” a lot when she wants to drive home a point. The goal is to make the characters sound distinct. The desired effect is that the reader should be able to know who is narrating without even looking at the section heading that tells them this information. They would know, for instance, that Yessenia speaks very passionately about everything and will not take “no” for an answer. Mia speaks like a lost and frightened little girl, and Teddy is full of bravado, big plans, and exaggeration.

## Structure

There are forty-eight narratives, each one only a few pages long. Each narrative is named after the character that narrates it. For the most part, the narratives are in chronological order. Sometimes, there are hiccups as the point of view switches. For example, Michelle recruits Cheri to live at ILLC in one of Michelle's narratives. Then, Cheri and Yessenia are friends in Yessenia's next narrative.

The amount of time passing from the first to the last narrative and the amount of time in-between narratives are unclear. It seems unnecessary to know those time frames. Since the characters sometimes delve into their own pasts, sometimes situations that happened years ago are described in the same paragraph as something occurring that day. There is also an immediate quality to some of the narration, as if the narrator is speaking to the author while they are in the room. The bulk of the action takes place over an indeterminate amount of time between when Joanne takes the job as a data entry clerk and when she is fired.



## Quotes

You do what you gots to do and have a good day, chica.”  
-- Nene, quoted by Yessenia Lopez (Yessenia)

**Importance:** This quote sums up how Yessenia lives day to day. She might be tough and come off as harsh, but it is because she is trying to have a good life and does not want anyone to ruin things for her.

Homeless shelters can be really profitable.”  
-- Michelle (Michelle)

**Importance:** Michelle says this as she is recruiting children to live at ILLC. It is meant as a joke. However, it keys into a major theme in the book. Disabled people are a source of income. In Michelle's case, she earns a \$300 commission for every child she brings to ILLC. So, going to homeless shelters can be very profitable for her. It can also be very profitable for her company, Whitney-Palm, since they make money off of each person in a bed for the rest of that person's life.

They told my dad I'm retarded. They told him first at regular school and then when I moved in here. My dad said that's just a word they use that means I got a different way of learning stuff. That's the way I think of it because I sure don't feel retarded. My friend Ryan's retarded and I asked him if he feels retarded and he said no. So I guess I am but I don't notice it. And I look normal except for not walking and my arms not working perfect. From the tumor.”  
-- Teddy Dobbs (Teddy)

**Importance:** Teddy does not think he is any different from anyone else. Or, rather, he sees that every person in ILLC is different, so his differences are not really that much of a big deal.

It sounds like a big number but for these kids it might be normal.”  
-- Ricky (Joanne)

**Importance:** Ricky and Joanne are talking about how sick the children get. There is a disproportionately high number of sicknesses at this facility. Ricky, always the optimist, considers that the normal number of children being hospitalized from ILLC might be realistically higher than the number of children being hospitalized who do not have handicaps. In other words, it is more likely for kids who are already sick to end up in a hospital.

I know it might not feel like it,” I say, “but you're going to be okay. It's crazy but the pain you feel kind of changes into something else. I'm not saying you'll stop missing her. You'll always, always miss her. But you'll miss her in a way that doesn't hurt. If that makes any sense.”  
-- Jimmie (Jimmie)





**Importance:** Jimmie is consoling Yessenia, who is still feeling the loss from the death of her tia Nene. The two bond throughout the course of this book, and this is one of the more important conversations they have.

Kids like this are trained to stay helpless. So they have to stay institutionalized.”  
-- Joanne (Joanne)

**Importance:** This statement is almost a theme in and of itself. The reader is speaking through Joanne to talk about how once a child is in the system, it is very difficult to get out. The facilities like ILLC make a lot of money off of these individuals. As they grow up, they age from one facility to another. They are never independent. They will always require a business to take care of their needs.

Not that invisibility is hard to achieve when you're a crip. We're minor characters in someone else's story.”  
-- Joanne (Joanne)

**Importance:** Joanne is speaking about how people either do not see or do not want to see others when they are disabled. They are on the fringes of other people's consciousness. They are never let in. They are never made a significant part of their lives. Additionally, all of the characters are minor characters if someone else is narrating.

I can be a good king or I can be a bad king.”  
-- Louie (Teddy)

**Importance:** The line that gives the book its title comes from Louie, an aide that tends to be rougher than necessary with the kids. His quote seems to indicate that he is giving the kids a choice as to how they are treated. However, throughout the book, he is seen as little more than a monster.

Even if I talked to her it's extremely unlikely that she would be willing to turn this around. To help you get home, I mean. Her job is the opposite of that.”  
-- Joanne (Yessenia)

**Importance:** The context of this quote is that Cheri and Yessenia are appealing to Joanne to help them get Cheri a better housing situation. They are friendly with Joanne, so they hope that Joanne can persuade Michelle to change Cheri's placement. Joanne's quote falls into the theme that taking care of people is an industry. The business makes money off of the children. There is no incentive to take them out of the system.

It means you have a right to live in the community, with caregivers you hire and fire yourself. Or there are living situations that are not nursing homes or institutions but have more round-the-clock help if you decide you need that. Meanwhile, we can get an injunction to stop ILLC from transferring you.”  
-- Elaine Brown (Joanne)



**Importance:** Elaine is basically laying out the best case scenario for the kids. She is speaking specifically to Teddy, who never makes it to this goal.

There are Jerrys everywhere but the System lets it happen.”  
-- Joanne (Jimmie)

**Importance:** While spending time outside of work one night. Joanne and Jimmie are talking about the problems that ILLC. There is a mix of fatalism and realism in this quote. There are people like Jerry everywhere. The idea that the system is designed to let these things happen is fatalistic.

I don't know if it's such a great idea that I came. I don't know if I wanna get involved like this. I don't want him to start thinking I'm gonna be around for him, because he's not my kid, you know?”  
-- Ricky (Ricky)

**Importance:** Earlier in the book, Joanne warns Ricky that he needs to compartmentalize his job. He cannot take his work home with him. It is possible to feel for someone, yet not let the feelings or situation into your personal life. When he says this quote, he is visiting Pierre in the hospital after Louie broke his jaw. Ricky cannot compartmentalize.