



# Inside the Outsiders

BY NED VIZZINI

**W**HAT would the world look like without stereotypes? It seems that everyone has asked us: Martin Luther King Jr., "Sesame Street," MTV — which figured out how to monetize the question in "Real World."

It's nice to imagine. But the world of young adult literature? It would look like a blank page. Books for young adults thrive on stereotype because adolescents try on types so often and in such bizarre combinations that they have to form groups on the Internet to figure it all out. And there are entirely new menageries of labels to

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## KING OF THE SCREWUPS

By K.L. Going.

310 pp. Harcourt/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$17. (Ages 12 and up)

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## THE VAST FIELDS OF ORDINARY

By Nick Burd.

309 pp. Dial Books. \$16.99. (Ages 14 and up)

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identify and dislike, like white rappers, superpopular gay guys, emo kids (tough to define but easy to spot — black glasses, hair combed down into the face).

This puts young adult novels in a powerful position. It is one thing to hear from "Sesame Street" that you should love people for who they are; it is another thing to get beaten up by a rich popular guy but around the same time read a book that convinces you that not all rich popular guys are like that.

Of course, to do that, you would have to read a book starring a rich popular guy: enter "King of the Screwups." In K.L. Going's latest novel, Liam Geller is the son of a model and a C.E.O. He is good at basketball and fashion and bad at everything else. His problem? His dad. Mr. Geller could come from the Roald Dahl pantheon of evil parents. He kicks Liam out of the house at the start of senior year and sends him to live with his cross-dressing "Aunt" — er, Uncle — Pete in upstate New York.

As Liam goes through the expected culture shock, the novel shapes up to be the story of two misfits coming together, and one wishes it featured more of that. But Liam's relationship with his father takes precedence. Missing his dad and desperate to impress him, Liam resolves to do better in school, which means becoming less cool and reinventing himself as a loser.

This is a daring reversal of the nerd-

to-cool journey, even if it is not always completely believable. For example, when Liam's good looks get him advances from cheerleaders, he refuses them. Would he really do that? There are rules about high school and then there are *rules*.

But Going does us a favor by using Liam's love interest to comment on another teenage cliché: the put-upon, sweet, outcast girl. Darleen Martinek dresses in overalls, makes art and is shunned by football players. What is her secret? She is an unpleasant person to boot. This exposes a piece of classified information in the misfit high school community: some misfits are actually not nice people. They have a reverse snobbery at least as powerful as that directed toward them. Perhaps if more young adult authors wrote characters like Darleen, more people like Liam would read the novels.

Going's writing is smooth and simple; her torn-family scenes make you long for Mr. Geller's comeuppance. What lasts when the story concludes, however, is Liam. By subverting expectations, Going not only reaches readers who might otherwise pass up a book like hers, she also shows them she understands: their view from the top of the social power structure is not easy, nor is it even all that powerful.