

# Geeks Bearing Gifts

Ron Koertge

*When Renee sets out to interview the nonconformists and outcasts at Roosevelt High for a newspaper article, she has no idea what to expect. "I just want to talk to people who are different, that's all," she tells one group. William asks, "Different from you?" "I mean different from everybody," she says. Boy, does she have a lot to learn.*

**"HEY, RENEE. WASSUP?"**

**"Hi, Willard. Nothing special. How about you? Ready to play Central this Friday?"**

**"Yeah, I guess." He winced and reached across to massage his left shoulder. "Listen, Bobby tells me you writin' about people who're left out of things, is that right?"**

**"Sort of, yeah. There's this journalism scholarship I'm eligible for, and I need one more strong piece. So I thought of doing something in-depth about outsiders."**

**"And you weren't gonna talk to me?"**

**"Willard, are you kidding? You're on the football team; you're the Walter Payton of Roosevelt High."**

**"So?"**

"So you walk down the halls, everybody says hi."

"So?"

"So you can't be an outsider if everybody wants to be your friend."

"Sayin' hi don't mean they my friends."

"Well, they look up to you, then."

He shook his head so hard that the beads woven into his dreadlocks clicked together. "First semester, maybe. Football season over, and I'm like nobody."

"No way. You're still the man."

"Renee, when I'm playin' ball, they happy to know me. That be over, they just wary of me."

"No way."

"Don't you watch TV? I'm a big black guy. All we do is drink malt liquor and jack cars."

Renee frowned. "Don't talk that way."

"Listen here, girl. I'm a black man in a white world. Only difference between me and some brother lyin' dead in the street is I can catch a football."

"So you're inside when you're playing ball but outside when you're not."

"Playin' ball I don't think about it. So it's like a little reprieve."

Renee put her books down with a thud. "I'm not so sure this is going to work."

Her boyfriend, Bobby, lowered the burrito he was gnawing on. "Why not, baby?"

"I was talking to Willard and—"

"Did he come on to you?"

"What? No. He was just, I don't know, different."

"Different how?"

"Different from what I imagined, I guess. Did he ever say anything to you about how playing football is like a reprieve?"

"A what?"

"Do you ever talk to Willard?"

"Only every day."

"No, no. That's just, 'Did you catch ESPN last night?' I mean really talk to him."

When Bobby frowned, his eyebrows almost met. "About what?"

"He just got me thinking, that's all." She looked right at her boyfriend, right at the blue eyes beneath the cropped bleached hair. "Do you think black people are left out of a lot of things?"

"Baby, Tiger Woods is only like a gazillionaire."

"I mean regular black people."

"Honey, regular *white* people are left out of things."

Renee stood up. "I don't know anything about being an outsider. I'm gonna find something else to write about."

Bobby shrugged. "If this was football, Coach would call you a quitter."

"Well, it's not football, it's journalism."

"Show some guts anyway. No pain, no gain."

Renee stopped beside the crowded table in the north-west corner of the cafeteria.

"Can I talk to you guys a minute?" she asked.

Marco pulled his tray closer, then leaned protectively over a giant Pepsi, two Twinkies, and some Little Debbie snacks. "What about?"

"I'm doing this piece for the school newspaper. It's about outsiders, rebels, that kind of thing."

"Oh," said Lawrence. "That's us all right. Except instead of motorcycles we take the bus. Our tattoos say BORN TO TRANSFER."

"Just get out of here," ordered Marco.

"Look, I just want to get you guys' side of—"

Marco stood up. "Didn't you hear me? Are you death?"

Renee frowned.

"He means deaf. He's got auditory dyslexia." William didn't even look up from the book he was reading.

Renee tugged at the cover until William lowered it slowly, like a drawbridge that would let everyone into the walled city. "I just want to talk to people who are different, that's all."

"Different from you?" asked William as everyone at the table nodded.

"No. I mean yes. I mean different from everybody."

William glanced at his friends. "That narrows it right down."

Renee pushed her blond hair back. "Okay, wait. Make it people out of the mainstream, then."

"Nonconformists."

"Sort of."

"Outcasts."

"Kind of."

"The generally quaint."

"No."

"Bohemian?"

"Not exactly. Where did you learn all those words, anyway? I thought you guys were—"

"Retarded."

"No."

"Yeah, right."

Renee dropped her books, exasperated. "All right. Yes. Satisfied?"

William grinned. "Ah, the truth—it rings like a bell, doesn't it?"

"So tell the truth, then." She turned to Marco. "What's it like to have auditory dyslexia?"

"It sucks, big time."

Renee took a notebook out of her backpack. "Okay, that's good. Tell me more."

Marco took a bite of Twinkie and sputtered. "I don't want to tell you more. Just get out of here, you nosy beach!"

Renee frowned and looked at William.

"Do I really have to translate that for you?" he asked.

Lawrence stood up. "Wait, you guys. Don't be so rude." He dug into his scratched briefcase, flipping the duct-taped handle out of the way. "Take this," he said, handing her a matchbox.

"What is it?"

"Just a little something," Lawrence said, "to make up for Marco's attitude."

She looked at it warily. "This is a trick, isn't it?"

"Open it."

"Tell me what it is first."

"Toenails."

Renee screamed and the matchbox went flying.

"Beware," Lawrence crowed, "of geeks bearing gifts!"

Still laughing, Marco and Lawrence picked up their things and staggered away.

Renee sat down next to William. "My God."

"That was pretty clever, actually," said William. "A nice pun, and well executed."

Renee shook her head. "How come they won't talk to me?"

"To start with, this is probably the first time in, like, three and a half years you even looked this way. Are they gonna believe all of a sudden you're totally interested in them?"

"But I'm a journalist."

"Renee, you're a cheerleader." He stood up. "Anybody want anything? I'm going to get some dessert."

Renee turned to Monique. "Will you talk to me?"

"Sure. I'll tell you my life story: My parents took one look at me, then left me on a mountainside to die. A pack of dogs found me and brought me up, which is fine until a cat walks by. Then I kind of lose it."

"Can you just tell me what it's like to be, uh, you know, visually challenged?"

"You mean blind as a bat?"

"Okay, fine—what's it like to be blind as a bat?"

"Well, it really sucks." She looked down. "Like, right now I can't hardly see my stupid pudding, okay? And if I want to read something, I have to hold it about two inches away from my face like some total freak. *And* it's just gonna get worse and worse until I go like totally blind. Then I get a white cane, which is every girl's ideal fashion accessory."

"When will you not be able to see at all?"

Monique shook her head. "I don't know."

"And there's nothing anybody can do?"

"Probably not. Pretty soon I'll be applying to Guide

Dogs for the Blind, get screened, take the training, and score this cool pooch I get along with. Then we'll kick back and listen to dirty books on tape."

"You're kidding."

"Hey, Miss Perfect Pants. Just because we're disabled doesn't mean we're dead."

"Wow." Renee patted her notebook. "Can I use that?" She started writing.

"Listen." Monique scooted her chair closer to Renee. "William calls us 'The Unwelcome.' But he says we perform this service to mankind."

Renee looked up. "Like what?"

"Well, you're at one end of the scale, okay? People think, 'If only I was as cute as Renee or as popular as Renee' or whatever. But we're at the other end: 'At least I can see better than Monique.' Or 'At least I don't drool like Marco.'"

"People really think stuff like that?"

"You don't?"

William put a paper plate in front of the girls. "I got everybody something anyway."

Monique held out her hand. "Renee, spell out brownie on my palm and we'll do a scene from *The Miracle Worker*." Then she stood up. "I'll catch you guys later."

"Is she always that way?" Renee asked.

"What way?"

"You know, kind of bitter and thorny."

"She doesn't want to be pathetic." When Renee reached for her pen, he added, "Don't write that down." William turned his brownie one way, then another. "I thought of something," he said finally, "as I was standing

in line. A guy named Colin Wilson wrote a book called *The Outsider*. You should read it for your article."

"For sure." Renee twisted her gold Cross pen. "What's it about?"

He rolled his eyes up. "Let me see if I can get this straight. An outsider is somebody engaged in an intense self-exploration, somebody who's willing to challenge cultural values. Something like that."

"That's cool."

"Exactly. But that's not us. Colin Wilson meant Kafka and Camus and van Gogh. Monique and Lawrence and Marco and I, we're just barely holding on most of the time."

"But I could write about that. Everybody knows you guys are in the Resource Room, but half the kids in school think it's a good deal 'cause you get all that extra help."

William took two prescription bottles out of his pocket. "I'm like this guitar that has to constantly be tuning itself. Otherwise, my strings snap!"

"Really? Every day?"

"Pretty much."

Renee's beeper started to chirp but she turned it off. "Tell me about that, okay?"

Renee scowled at her keyboard when the phone rang. But it didn't stop, so finally she hit Save and picked up the receiver.

"Man, are you hard to get hold of," said Bobby. "Where've you been?"

"Interviewing people. I decided not to give up on this piece."

"I saw you talking to that stoner William."

"Except that he's not. Those pills are totally necessary, from a doctor and everything. And he has to sort of pay attention to himself all day so he doesn't get too, you know, too much Wellbutrin or not enough Ritalin. He was pretty interesting."

"Did he come on to you?"

"God, Bobby. Not everybody comes on to me, okay?"

"Well, they should. You're really pretty. Especially with your clothes off."

"Will you shut up! My mom's home."

"This is your private line, dummy. Nobody's gonna—"

"And don't call me names. I told you before not to call me names."

As Renee negotiated the crowded hall, Charlotte stormed up to her. "You were going to leave us out, weren't you!"

"What?"

"You were going to leave us out of your article on the ostracized."

"It's not about that exactly. It's more on—"

"I saw you talking to those LD geeks."

"Oh, that's nice, Charlotte."

"There's more gays and lesbians than there are retards, but you were going to blow us off, weren't you?"

"I guess I didn't think about it. But, you're right. You guys should be in the piece. So we'll find a time and—"

"We're like totally outside everything, okay? There's even quotas for blacks in medical school and stuff. Ever seen a quota for faggots and dykes?"

"They don't do quotas anymore."

"They *never* did it for us!"

"Look, take it easy. What do you want me to say exactly?"

"I don't know. Just don't leave us out of your stupid article."

Renee waved. "Arnie, can I talk to you a minute?"

"Oh, God: the gay perspective. What gave me away—my impeccable taste in clothes or those show tunes I can't help but hum?"

"I'm writing this piece on—"

"Losers. I heard."

"Rebels, outsiders, not losers. Just do me a favor, okay? And talk to me. If I don't get you guys in the paper, I'm afraid Charlotte's going to beat me up and make me wear a flannel shirt."

Arnie grinned. "Charlotte's a little hard to take. She's just come out, so she's carrying the banner."

"You're not?"

"I've known who I was since I was eleven. Banner-wise, I've been there, carried that."

"Do you think you're engaged in an intense self-exploration? Do you think you're challenging cultural values?"

"God, you're a hoot."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Renee, do you think being gay is all that different from being straight?"

"I don't know. I guess I do."

Arnie shifted his biology book from one hand to the other. "Do you get depressed sometimes?"

‘Sure.’

“Me too. Do you get anxious?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. Ever wonder what we’re all here for or if there’s a god or why nice people get cancer and total bastards don’t?”

“Sure.”

“Everybody does. Who’s your favorite movie star?”

Renee shrugged. “Brad Pitt, I guess.”

Arnie looked up as the bell rang. “Me too. So why aren’t we friends? We’re really a lot alike.”

Renee walked beside Bobby, talking a mile a minute. “Did you know that more than half the people in prison have attention deficit? They can’t concentrate in school, so teachers call them troublemakers. Pretty soon they’re self-medicating with caffeine or grass or speed and then—”

Bobby took hold of her arm. “Where’d you learn all this crap?”

“From William.”

“Willard saw you two talking again. He said that geek was all over you.”

“That’s crazy. All I did was check some stuff for my—”

“I want you to stop writing that thing, Renee. I mean it. I never see you anymore, and when I do, all you care about is some dork you just interviewed.”

“I’m almost done. Just one or two more.”

Bobby turned, loomed over her, and shook his head. “I want you to stop now. We talked about this, remember? I’m not supposed to get upset before a game, and this crap is upsetting me.”

Renee pulled away from him. "I don't like you telling me what I can and can't do."

"If I get upset and we lose the game, it'll be your fault."

"God, I know everything you're gonna say before you say it."

Bobby turned and slammed the nearest locker with his forearm.

Renee just shook her head. "I knew you were gonna do that too."

"Hi." Renee looked down at the three girls who were leaning together like conspirators. "Can I talk to you guys? I'm doing a piece about kids who don't usually get in the paper. Okay if I sit down?"

Chana cocked her head. "No, stand there so you can like totally condescend to us."

Debra waved to Renee. "Don't pay any attention to her. She just got her belly button pierced and it's all infected."

Molly nudged Chana. "Show her, girl."

"Get away. I'm all flabby. Look at Miss Perfect here. How many sit-ups do you do?"

"The piece isn't about me."

"Tell us, or we ain't none of us talkin'."

Renee sighed. "A couple hundred."

"Lord, makes me tired to think about it."

Renee slipped into an empty chair and opened her notebook. "What's it like having a baby and still being in high school?"

"Well, cut right to the chase."

"One thing I learned talking to people this week is no BS, okay?"

"That's cool."

"So?"

The three girls looked at one another. "Well, it's hard," Chana said finally. "When my grandma can't baby-sit, I can't come to school. Without school, I'm in more trouble than I am now."

"Do you guys ever go out on dates and stuff?"

All three shook their heads. "No time," said Chana.

"Not interested," Debra said.

Molly blushed. "I'm interested, but all guys want is to do the nasty. They think 'cause I did it at least once I'm just gonna fall on the nearest bed."

"What do you want to do after you graduate?"

Chana grinned. "I want to sit on the beach and have people give me money. But that position has apparently already been filled 'cause I never see it up on the Job Board."

"My sister started at Macy's part-time. Now she's an assistant buyer. I could do that."

Molly said, "My people make soap and go to craft fairs. Lot of single mothers in that business."

"Do you have pictures of your babies?"

"Not for no school newspaper, we don't."

Renee closed her notebook. "No, no. Just for me to look at."

Chana got hers out first.

"Oh, my God. She's precious."

"Yeah, well, let me find the one with the poopy diaper in it. You won't think she's so precious then." Chana

had just finished laughing when she looked down at her T-shirt. "Oh, man. I'm leakin' again." She turned to Renee. "What's wrong with this picture? You're not supposed to leak milk on your Gap T-shirt. You wear a Gap T-shirt, you're supposed to be dancin' at a cookout and bein' all happy."

Renee, Debra, and Molly watched her head for the girls' rest room.

"She's all right," said Molly. "She just doesn't want to give up bein' seventeen. Now me. . . ." She tugged on the waistband of her stretch pants. "I settle for bein' comfortable."

"Are you guys sorry for the way things turned out?"

"I'm not sorry I've got my baby. No way am I sorry for that."

"I'm sorry I was stupid," Molly said. "Seems like boys'll say anything to . . . you know."

Renee reached for her beeper and turned it off.

Molly frowned. "Bobby's beepin' you from across the room?"

"Don't look at him."

"I'm already lookin' at him. He's got his cell phone to his ear."

Debra shook her head. "He's got you on a short leash, girlfriend. Is he worth it?"

Molly leaned in. "Yeah, what's he like in bed?"

Renee leaned back. "Are you kidding?"

Debra grinned. "No, she's not kidding. Give it up."

Renee looked around, then leaned in until her forehead almost touched theirs. "It takes about a minute and then he watches ESPN."

The three girls were still laughing when Chana sat down wearing a clean shirt. "So we're all friends now? We're comin' over your house, right? Hang with you and Bobby?"

Renee stood up and wiped at her eyes with the back of one hand, she'd laughed so hard. "One more question, okay? What did you all want to do or be before you were moms?"

Chana volunteered. "I didn't have no plans to speak of. So life sort of imposed itself on me, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Debra said, "I used to look at the maps in geography, okay? I liked the names—Somaliland, Thailand—and I thought maybe I'd like to go there, look at all those major exports piled on the dock."

"Well, this," said Molly, "is gonna sound funny comin' from somebody who got all those D's in English, but I always felt like I had something to say. Something kind of urgent, you know? Now it's just gonna have to wait."

The next day at lunch Renee walked into the cafeteria and sat down beside Bobby. "I'm taking a little vacation," she said.

"From what?"

"From everything. I want to think about some stuff."

"Like what?" He reached for her hand; she pulled away.

"I always thought I was like at the center of everything, you know? You and I and maybe ten other people: sports, school paper, yearbook staff, prom committee, all that stuff."

"Well, yeah. We are."

Renee shook her head. "No. It's not like that. They're not revolving around us. The truth is we're totally outside everybody else in this room."

Bobby looked baffled. "So?"

"You know those people you keep calling geeks and freaks and losers? Well, I like some of them."

"What are you talkin' about?"

She laid the beeper right in front of him. "Don't call me for a while, okay?"

"If you go out with that retard William, I swear to God I'll kill him."

"I'm not going out with anybody, okay? I'm going to read this book about outsiders. I'm going to sit in my room to think."

"You're nuts, you know that? Pretty soon you're gonna *be* one of those outsiders."

Renee stood up. She looked around the crowded, noisy room. Chana waved at her, William turned the page of his book, Arnie carried a tray with four yogurts.

I could sit anyplace in this cafeteria, she thought. I could even sit by myself.

# Ron Koertge

Readers are sure to find colorful characters, a good amount of humor, and unusual situations in the novels of Ron Koertge. Although it's been some years since Ron was a teenager, he has a keen ear for realistic teenage dialogue and a sharp memory of how teenagers struggle with peer pressure, identity, sexual feelings, and insecurity. After enjoying this story, you might want to check out one or more of Koertge's award-winning novels: *Where the Kissing Never Stops*; *The Arizona Kid*; *The Boy in the Moon*; *Mairposa Blues*; *The Harmony Arms*; *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*; *Confess-O-Rama*; and *The Heart of the City*.

The American Library Association has identified *The Arizona Kid* as one of the 100 Best of the Best Books for Young Adults published between 1967 and 1992. And the New York Public Library includes *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright* on its list of the 100 Best Children's Books; it was also named a Blue Ribbon Book by the *Bulletin for the Center of Children's Books*, a Bank Street Child Study Children's Book Committee Children's Book of the Year, a YALSA Best Book for Young Adults, and a Judy Lopez Memorial Award Honor Book.

In addition to writing novels and short stories for teenagers, Ron Koertge is a poet, a writing teacher at the city college in Pasadena, California, and a member of the faculty at Vermont College, where he teaches in the MFA in Writing for Children residency program.