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best young novelist we've read since
J. D. Salinger's THE CATCHER IN THE RYE."
—Cleveland Amory

Good / Bad Times / Times

A Novel by James Kirkwood



Good Times/Bad Times

James Kirkwood Jr.

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Good Times/Bad Times Details

Date : Published May 12th 1983 by Fawcett (first published 1968)

ISBN : 9780449204696

Author : James Kirkwood Jr.

Format : Mass Market Paperback 288 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Young Adult, Coming Of Age, Lgbt, Gay, Gay Fiction

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From Reader Review Good Times/Bad Times for online ebook

Karl Marx S.T. says

Before I start my review, I have the highest hopes that after you've read this tattletale of mine, that you look for a copy of this novel anywhere possible.

I read Good Times / Bad Times just because of the fact that it is branded as the best young novel by the best young novelist and is a reminiscent of The Catcher in the Rye. The said classic is a hard act to follow so any title that resembles something existing is either loved or hated. But really, the moment I held myself on this one, I couldn't stop myself from reading. I know it's cliché to praise like that but it's really hard to resist the author's storytelling. It is narrated with honesty and confusion, with warmth that every incident you're reading makes you shudder with fear, watched your back and steadily feels the heightening tension.

The novel is about a young student, Peter Kilburn who is involved with a crime concerning his boarding school headmaster. The novel is narrated, diary-like by the main character before waiting for his sentence. Peter enters Gilford Academy which starts his hilarious and exciting journey through his academic life when the headmaster starts to keep his eye on him. With this, Peter is involved in every campus activities and a series of events which concerns the headmaster for the latter wants recognition for the school's popularity. The novel illustrates that there is no human inquiry without acquiring something in return and how being (too) good is bad. I don't know if I had ever read a novel before which nearly put tears in my eyes but this one. For the story is filled with strong, convincing and memorable characters, touching incidents and sensitive and heartbreaking narration. Good Times / Bad Times should become a classic of the prep-school genre and Mr. Hoyt stands as the terrifying and deranged headmaster of his class (or any). I have never read something readable for its being terrifying and funny at the same time about the pains and troubles of truly growing up. You'll hate to reach the end for it means letting go of the story but you'll also be glad to read its conclusion. That is why I would like any interested reader to find their own copy to experience what I have read, selfish or not, I wouldn't lend my dog-eared copy. I'm sorry.

Opening Sentence: It was such a short time ago that Jordan and I read in the papers you were going to defend the Wilk girl.

Ending Sentence: Hopefully yours, Peter Kilburn.

Vena says

I had nearly forgotten this book that I read in high school about forty years ago. While browsing others' libraries here at GoodReads I ran across it, and now I would like to revisit the story and see if it is still as affecting as what I remember.

Nancy says

This was required reading in high school. I'll have to revisit it to see if it lives up to my fond memories.

Kathy says

I read this book when I was in high school. It made me laugh out loud and also sit and sob at other times. I made my daughter read it years later but I don't think she liked it quite as much as I did.

LillyS says

I've read this book so many times! The first time - translated into my native language and as it seemed a bit too old-fashioned in its translation, I managed to get an original version sent to me by a family from the USA.

This is a book that's made the biggest impression on me and I've read loads of them. I also got to know "P.S. Your..." and "Some Kind of..." by this author but "Good Times/Bad Times" is the best in my opinion.

I remember when I first read this book, I was a teenager and was laughing and almost crying at the same time. Then I had to reread it the next day. I've read it many times, now I'm an adult close to 40s and my perception is slightly different.

The main characters, Peter and Jordan show these features of character I like in teenager age: honesty, being rebellious, ability to create a strong friendship/love, passion, sense of humour. I find the main character, Peter, a faithful guy, a loner, who'd give all for a person he liked a lot. I feel lack of love and need for more interest in this character (his father had his own problems with drinking, Peter had no mother) and a lack of family love and acceptance in Jordan. Peter often lies but here I believe he doesn't, confessing the whole story of the murder he did. They both, Jordan and Peter, felt they were soulmates and gave each other lots of acceptance and attention.

Why do I believe he isn't lying that there was nothing between him and Jordan in bed? Because he admits to some gay incidents in the past and admits he and Jordan kissed once (during a party that had no boundaries, f. ex. the old lady admitting she had murdered her husband). I think something more was to happen between them both, though (in the future, during their travels, if Jordan had still been living), because it's clear their relationship after the Christmas trip was even deeper. I think both were in doubt and having no woman to fall in love, they'd choose themselves because of the soulmate thing and previous experiences with men. That actually repeats in "Some Kind of..." in the prison.

I find this book touching - these poor Vacarro and Jimmy Greer - Jordan had a lot of compassion, also a nerve. He wasn't all saints, but I like this character a lot.

The headmaster that was killed - well, he was scary... with his wife, who maybe was so nervous because he was surprising and aggressive?

All in all, there's a lot of truth about life in this book. Many true remarks. It reads fast. And I feel regret they both had no real family who'd give them mental support.

LJ says

Jordan on homosexuality: "Any man who says he wouldn't whack off with Cary Grant is either a liar or can't get it up."

Tesa says

One of the best books ever written and a favorite of mine. One of my favorite accomplishments in life was acquiring a signed, first-edition hardback copy of this book.

Sherrie Collinson says

One of my favourite books, read several times!

James says

A nostalgic read. I last read *Good Times, Bad Times* 40 years ago when I was a teen, and somehow though I have remembered little of the story, the title stuck. Probably because it was the title to the first track of the first side of the first LP by Led Zeppelin. Go figure. Anyway, I found it a good read. It doesn't quite have the angst or flippancy of Salinger's *Catcher* or the literary heft of John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, still it holds up well, capturing the time and place of a New England boarding school for boys in the 1960s. A tragic triangle between two students and the headmaster dominates the novel.

Tim says

I read this when I was in high school, and was so fond of it, but take my advice, let sleeping dogs lie - it did not live up to my memories. The main character comes off as whiny and annoying, and his "best friend" is such a queen, yet we're supposed to believe they have the purest of platonic relationships. Sometimes you can't go back again.

Lauralee says

Catcher in the Rye meets *A Separate Peace* meets *Brokeback Mountain*.

Melanie Griffin says

Oh how wonderful to return to an old favorite and find that it withstands the test of time and then some! I found a ragged paperback copy of this in the hall when I was in high school forty-five years ago, and it was so magical for me that I began a several-year compulsive reading stint which continued until I went to college and didn't have time for fiction anymore. I read everything I could find by James Kirkwood (Vonnegut was another favorite at the time) and intend to go back and re-read them all.

The characters in this novel are so vivid I find myself thinking about them throughout the day, as if they are inhabiting my head. Peter is accused of killing his headmaster -- well, he did kill him, and that's not a spoiler

because he tells us that on the first page. The book is in the form of a letter to his lawyer who has asked him to lay out the whole story. And what a harrowing story it is! Even through the horror, Peter's growing friendship with Jordan remains the most compelling and commanding part of the story. It is an exquisite relationship. I think I've had a little crush on Jordan all these years.

The book is a bit dated in that it deals with issues of homosexuality in a 1968 kind of way, but for me that took nothing from it. I laughed out loud multiple times when I was 17 and did so again this time through. I cried then, I cried this time. After all, it is called Good Times, Bad Times.

Michael Lauro says

Funny, but I don't remember this one as fondly as P.S. Your Cat is Dead

Greg says

This story of a homoerotic love triangle is set at a New England boarding school in the 1960s. Peter, the narrator, the son of a failed, alcoholic actor, is not yet fully aware that he is gay. While spending his senior year at the Gilford school, he falls in love with Jordan, another student. They develop a close relationship, but the headmaster of the school tries to interfere with it because he is sexually fixated on Peter. Eventually the headmaster's obsession and need to possess Peter leads to a terrible crime.

The main characters, especially Peter, are well developed, but the others, primarily other students, are simple stereotypes: the Brain, the Jock, and so on. Aside from this, it is a well-told story.

The novel takes the form of a letter written by Peter in the aftermath of the crime. Thus this is a typical example of the unreliable narrator--we learn about the events of the story only from the point of view of one character, who has an interest in controlling and shaping our understanding of those events, and cannot necessarily be trusted. We have to look past Peter's dissembling and misrepresentations to discern what really happened and what motivated these characters.

Peter is a glib narrator. His voice is smooth, and highly readable, but it is characterized by a superficial charm. He's the kind of guy who thinks he can talk his way out of anything. I finished the book unsure whether it was meant to be interpreted as a soul-baring confessional or as the manipulations of a psychopath.

George Dudley says

loved it

Nicole says

I only read this because there's a review on the cover that claims this book is similar to the Catcher in the Rye.

My Analysis: It's not.

I mean, I liked the writing style, but I discovered that I'm not a big fan of boarding school settings.

Lenny Husen says

Still one of my favorite books ever. Have read it at least 20 times. Super well-written, somewhat autobiographical, timeless and unforgettable main character and best friend. But it is my favorite book because there is so much humour in it.

Stephen says

Peter Kilburn is a young man in trouble. He's accused of killing the headmaster of his boarding school.

The Clarence Darrow style lawyer that has agreed to take his case is currently tied up with another matter and has asked his young client to write down the circumstances leading up to the event. What emerges is the story of a sad, smart, engaging young man who lost his mother at birth and who's been abandoned by an alcoholic actor of a father. Initially friendless at his new school, Peter soon meets and befriends Jordan, a rich, chronically ill young man with a quirky sense of self and he and Peter become soul-mates.

Mr. Hoyt the headmaster of the school is a deeply troubled man and while the two mockingly refer to him as Reverend Davidson from Rain, they unwisely dismiss the danger that his closeted homosexuality poses to two irrespressible children of the late sixties. Perhaps the two should have paid more attention when they studied the Greek tragedies.

This book written in the late sixties is still fresh and relevant and doesn't show the age that many of its contemporary works of fiction do.

The writing is great and we hear echoes of a more self aware Holden Caulfield in the prose. The young protagonist and his friend are eminently likeable and their adolescent bravado makes you feel that nothing too serious can occur, despite the heavy foreshadowing given by its narrator being in a jail cell at the outset.

This book is well worth the read. The author went on to write much of the dialogue for the Broadway smash *A Chorus Line* and his talent clearly shows in this earlier work.

James says

I remember being tremendously moved by this novel, so much that I looked for more works by James Kirkwood and acquired and read them. The story is told in the form of a letter from Peter Kilburn who is in jail for a crime involving his school headmaster. This, however, is not a typical tale of crime and recrimination. I found it unique in its deep melancholy and sadness of the memory shared in its pages, unlike Kirkwood's lighter, more humorous work. *Good Times / Bad Times* presents two young men at a New England prep school who are threatened when the disturbed headmaster develops a homoerotic fixation on Peter. His friend Jordan is the novel's voice of wisdom; he tells Peter that what makes the headmaster's

attraction so dangerous is the fact that he cannot acknowledge it.

The story is one of friendship that only can be experienced by youth of a certain age, but even that aspect is unique in this telling and that with all the unsureness of young men coming of age, still acting and thinking like boys, makes it more compelling. The novel is suffused with homoeroticism, but homosexuality is nervously (and unconvincingly) disavowed by the narrator, who says at one point, "We threw our arms around one another and we kissed. It was a real kiss, and no matter what anybody might think, a perfectly right and fitting expression of our friendship for that time and place and for us."

The questions of perception and distance between the boys and the headmaster also weigh heavily in the story which is not without lighter moments. However, the tension that pervades the work and the seriousness of the feelings that are not always capable of being expressed overcome these lighter moments. Ultimately it is the adept handling of themes of friendship in a school setting and coming-of-age that stay with your memory and made this book special for me.

Austen to Zafón says

My review in 1988 when I read it: Reminiscent of Salinger. An emotional roller coaster, read it in one sitting. "Does for schools roughly what Rosemary's Baby did for the Dakota." (Not sure where that one line review originated.)
