



EPIC

GAME

WILLIAM  
KOWALSKI

**EPIC  
GAME**

# EPIC GAME

WILLIAM  
KOWALSKI



RAVEN BOOKS

*an imprint of*

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Copyright © 2016 William Kowalski

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Kowalski, William, 1970–, author  
Epic game / William Kowalski.  
(Rapid reads)

Issued also in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4598-1049-5 (pbk.).—ISBN 978-1-4598-1050-1 (pdf).—

ISBN 978-1-4598-1051-8 (epub)

I. Title. II. Series: Rapid reads

PS8571.O985E65 2016      C813'.54      C2015-904496-0  
C2015-904497-9

First published in the United States, 2016

**Library of Congress Control Number:** 2015946324

**Summary:** Kat is a tough, independent woman who makes her living as a professional poker player in this work of fiction. (RL 2.2)

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover design by Jenn Playford  
Cover photography by iStock.com

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS  
www.orcabook.com

19 18 17 16 • 4 3 2 1

*In memory of my grandfather, Harold Siepel*

ALSO BY WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Novels

*Eddie's Bastard*

*Somewhere South of Here*

*The Adventures of Flash Jackson*

*The Good Neighbor*

*The Hundred Hearts*

Rapid Reads

*The Barrio Kings*

*The Way It Works*

*Something Noble*

*Just Gone*

*The Innocence Device*

# ONE

**W**hen I was a kid, one of the first things I noticed was that the people who make the rules tend to make them in their favor. So I don't feel too bad about breaking them. I don't always do whatever I want, but I do whatever I need.

And I don't apologize to anybody. If you're going to stack the deck against me, then I don't have to listen to you. The only rules I really like are the ones I make for myself. And I have very few of those.

One of them is, if you're holding a pair of bullets and you're under the gun on the

## WILLIAM KOWALSKI

first round, you go all in. Don't be a wuss. Just do it. The turn and the river are too late.

Of course, the river is *always* too late. If you don't already know who's won the game by the time the river gets turned over, then you're a fish.

Oh, and that's the other rule. If you can't spot the fish at the table...then you're it.

Those are two rules that never change.

I have lots of other rules, but I break those whenever I want.

That's what it means to be free.



My dad was a poker player too. He's the one who taught me. He was old school, the kind they don't make anymore. He always carried cards with him, and he would play anywhere. He played in the back rooms of bars, in office buildings after hours,



## EPIC GAME

in motels, in run-down apartments, in luxury condos. Once, he told me, he played in a three-day game in a county sheriff's office down south. They couldn't let the public see them, and they didn't have any prisoners, so they just played in the cell block, sitting at the guard's post. Another time he played at a zoo. He came home looking depressed and smelling terrible. *Monkeys*, he told me, and that was all he would say.

Dad would play anytime too. No hour was sacred. He would play through weddings, funerals, birthdays, parent-teacher conferences, marriage-counseling appointments, anything. He was the most reliable guy I knew. If he was supposed to be somewhere, you could count on him being at a poker game instead.

Now they have poker on TV, just like football or basketball. If my dad were alive to see that, he would laugh his ass off.

## WILLIAM KOWALSKI

*Who would want to watch a bunch of guys sitting around a table? he would say. That would be the most boring thing ever.*

He'd be right, of course. They have to sex it up for TV. But regular poker is boring to watch. I should know. I saw enough of it as a kid to qualify as an expert by the time I was sixteen.

I grew up with my dad, mostly. Sometimes my mom tried to take me back, and I would go along with her for a while. But life at my mom's was even more boring. It was so mind-numbing I could hardly stand it. It was all princess telephones and frilly duvets. Hairdos and lipstick. After-school activities, church youth groups, volunteer committees, horseback riding lessons. Maybe other girls would like that kind of life. There are plenty of kids who would love to have a nice house and normal parents. But it made me want to puke.

## EPIC GAME

I much preferred life with my dad. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. Half the time, he would forget to send me to school. Not that I missed much. I know quite a bit, but I learned all of it from reading books and watching science programs. He would slip me twenty bucks and tell me to go get whatever I wanted to eat. I could watch anything I wanted on TV. I didn't have to do homework or listen to stupid teachers. There was no such thing as bedtime. It was a miracle I graduated high school. I grew up making forts with the empty pizza boxes that the guys would toss aside as they headed into the second day of an epic game. They were all old men to me, my dad's age—forty, maybe, sometimes much older. I knew most of them by their nicknames. Also by their deep voices that muttered curses. The air full of dirty shirts and dirtier jokes. I would go through the pockets of the coats piled on the couch to

## WILLIAM KOWALSKI

see what I could steal. Of course, the guys knew, but they pretended they didn't. I got away with murder because I was a kid, and probably because I was a girl. I was in heaven.

Oh, and I did graduate high school. With honors.

Those old guys liked having me around. A little girl in the joint kept them honest, they said. I don't know how true that was. Some of those guys couldn't play it straight if their lives depended on it. They felt naked without an ace up their sleeve.

I loved listening as the chips shot back and forth across the table and the cards rippled and rattled in their hands. The bullshit flowing around the room in a never-ending river. Music from the sixties and seventies pounding out of the stereo. And that sound the chips made as they were stacked on the table. The sound of money.

## EPIC GAME

Needless to say, my parents were divorced.

That happened early, when I was still a baby. It's a total mystery to me how they even got together in the first place. My mother used to have a thing for bad boys. A lot of girls do, I guess. I find them sort of attractive myself.

But then Mom got religion, dumped my dad, took up with this new guy named Ted and started living with her nose in the air. Whatever. To each their own. I wasn't going that way.

Don't get me wrong. I don't blame my mom. It couldn't have been easy living with a guy who never had a regular job. Money-wise, my dad was a disaster. Up one day, down the next. Well, mostly down, to be honest. Most women wouldn't consider that much of a husband.

Me, I don't care about a husband. I don't care about men at all. I have one when

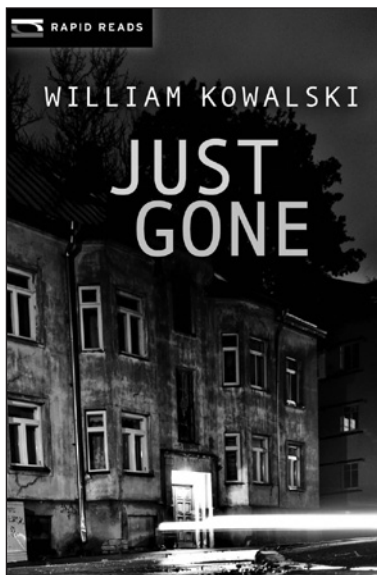
## WILLIAM KOWALSKI

I want, but I don't keep them around for long. I'm a card player. That's all I really care about. It's in my genes.

I rely on no one but myself.

That's the way my dad raised me.

**WILLIAM KOWALSKI** is the author of the international bestseller *Eddie's Bastard*, winner of South Africa's Ama-Boeke Award, and, more recently, *The Hundred Hearts* which won the 2014 Thomas H. Raddall Award. His work has been translated into fifteen languages. Two of the titles William wrote for the Rapids Reads series have been nominated for the Ontario Library Association's Golden Oak Award. He lives with his family in Nova Scotia. For more information, visit [williamkowalski.com](http://williamkowalski.com).

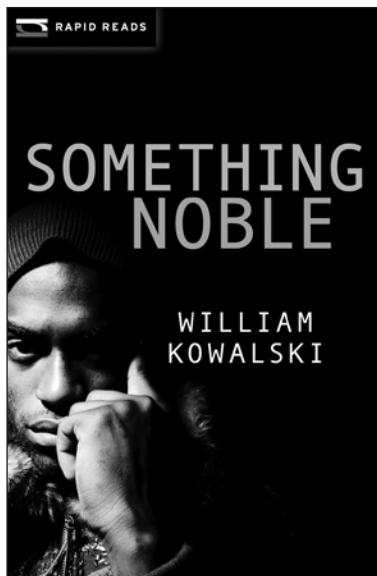


Mother Annelique runs a shelter for homeless mothers and their children in the inner city. When newly orphaned Jamal arrives at the shelter, he tells fantastic stories of a man named Jacky Wacky, who protects the poor children of the city and punishes the adults who harm them. Annelique doesn't believe his stories at first, but strange things begin to happen, and she is forced to admit there are some truths that her faith cannot explain.

"Worthy and positive...and its hopeful message for exploited and abused inner-city youths... Appropriate for adult literacy and ESL programs."

—*Publishers Weekly*

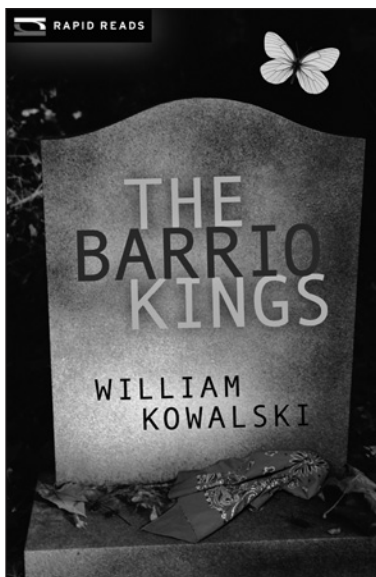




Linda is a young, hardworking single mom struggling to get by from paycheck to paycheck. Her son Dre needs a kidney transplant, and the only one who can help Dre is his half-brother LeVon, a drug-dealing gangbanger who thinks only of himself. Somehow Linda must get through to LeVon in order to save her son.

"Linda's voice snags readers' attention with the first sentence...[and] there are several nifty twists...Marked by an authentic plot and realistic characters, this slim volume delivers what it advertises and deserves a bright spotlight."

—*Library Journal*



2011 Golden Oak Award Nominee  
2011 SLJ's Top Book Choices for Youth in Detention List

Rosario Gomez gave up gang life after his brother was killed in a street fight. Now all he wants to do is finish night school and be a good father. But when an old friend shows up to ask him why he left the gang, Rosario realizes he was fooling himself if he thought his violent past would just go away.

"While the story can be seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of gang life, it's never preachy...Recommended." —*CM Magazine*