Clarion Review

Science Fiction

A Column Named The World We Live In
Ali M.
AuthorHouse
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Two Stars (out of Five)

Set in the not-so-distant future, A Column Named The World We Live In follows a cast of downtrodden characters as they struggle through the trials of love and loss in a world transformed by World War III. Leaping back and forth in time from the year 2000 through 2014, this futuristic novel grapples with the sensitive modern-day issues that matter most. From bristling political controversies to tender matters of the heart, Ali M's first novel is a study of modern human habits and the ways in which diverse individuals find meaning in their lives.

The structure of the novel invites the opportunity for rich character development, with each chapter focusing on the perspective of a single character at a particularly significant moment in his or her life. The characters however, lack the vibrancy needed to make their actions and motivations believable. For example, two central characters, Al and Faith, share a rather complicated on-again, off-again relationship. While the author dedicates a lengthy section of the novel to dissecting their relationship, he resorts to telling—rather than showing—its complexities. Readers learn that "they had so much in common and bonded so well" but are rarely, if ever, shown this bond through vivid depictions of character action. The characters in this novel have incredible potential—they are interesting and diverse—but they must be fleshed out, fine-tuned, and nuanced to be both believable and relatable to the reader.

With short chapters and such a variety of perspectives, settings, and situations, the novel pulses with a frenetic energy that mimics its futuristic subject matter. The author introduces readers to a world where trees are mined for weaponry, music and movies no longer exist, and writing with pen and paper is all but obsolete. Paired with a politically charged plot, the subject matter of the novel is captivating. However, the writing is vague and lacks the necessary detail and specificity to bring this world to life. Too often the descriptions are generic and serve as more of a play-by-play of what's happening rather than prose that invites meaningful connection.

Although the author has provided readers with a look into a uniquely imagined world, the plot of this novel is still in its initial stages and is hampered by characters who are sorely underdeveloped. The character of Muhammad for example, a young and sensitive soldier, has compelling political insights but lacks the necessary depth to enable readers to empathize and care about his plight. In the same way, the plot of the novel does not contain the depth or complexity required to create a fully realized fictional world that is believable and absorbing. Loose ends are tied off rather quickly in the concluding chapters and major plot holes are ignored.

The ideas introduced in this novel—political deception, complexities of courage, love, war—are undoubtedly relevant and will appeal to readers interested in contemporary fiction. However, the major deficiencies in character and language prevent this book from reaching its full potential.

Shoilee Khan