

Autonomy

Victoria Hetherington

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A woman and an AI form a unique bond in Victoria Hetherington's novel *Autonomy*.

In the near future: climate change has allowed the United States to take over Canada and impose draconian, conservative measures regulating what citizens can and cannot do with their lives and bodies. A heroic but rash attempt to save one of her students from the government's wrath lands Slaton, a university counselor, in detention at the border. After her stay, she inadvertently absconds with a copy of Julian, an AI designed to "interview" prisoners. They both learn what it means to be an independent being while depending upon their friends, lovers, and society for survival and a sense of self.

Slaton's world is frightening in how dark yet familiar it is. The government's electronic surveillance, abortion ban, and Islamophobia precipitate her detainment. Afterward, a mysterious illness, rumored to spread through eye contact, threatens all but the very rich, who can afford to hide in their gated communities, or in a just-opened space hotel.

Julian helps Slaton enact a plan to protect herself as the world deteriorates. But the cure proves every bit as destructive as the disease, driving Slaton and Julian apart at key points in their development. Slaton's cautious demeanor hides her jaded, resentful personality. Others see her as kind, but she harbors doubts and selfish, uncharitable thoughts about her loved ones, both human and otherwise. Despite moments of clarity, Slaton remains mired in fear and loneliness. It is sobering that both she and Julian have difficulty escaping their grim realities. They seek consolation in each other.

Autonomy is a novel about being human in a world that does not understand your value.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (March / April 2022)

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