



## Autonomy

**Jude Houghton**

Kristell Ink (Jul 31, 2016)

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*Autonomy's is a world without easy answers, in which even salvation may come with a high human cost.*

In Jude Houghton's brutal dystopian novel *Autonomy*, humanity struggles to reassert itself after a near apocalyptic environmental collapse, and despite the dictatorial control of the ironically named, technologically advanced world government, the Autonomy.

*Autonomy* is built on a discomfitingly possible vision of the near future, in which Earth's resources have been destroyed by unchecked climate change, and humanity depends entirely on artificial, or artificially navigated, environments and on advanced AI. Citizens of the first sectors enjoy relative comfort, but at the expense of those in Sectors 2 and 3, who live lives of incomparable drudgery, kept afloat only by the soothing, prayer-like simulations of *Faith*, which promises eventual peace in exchange for hard work.

Balmoral is born in a lower sector, the daughter of a factory worker and machinist, whose lives are moved to financial ruin by her birth. Pasco and Tristram are the beloved sons of a president in the first sector—a man who questions how humanity is used, but who finds himself too weak to effect any change within the Autonomy. Their paths intersect for one reason alone: an accident in her infancy leaves Balmoral with special gifts, including the ability to manipulate the overarching AI in transformative ways. Tristram is charged with stopping her before the resistance can get to her; Pasco, always uncomfortable with his privilege, finds himself connected to her by something more fundamental, and something almost unheard of in a world where survival is the first priority: love.

Intricate and chilling prose afford this dystopia uncommon power, and the turns that the novel takes are engrossing. Though it takes contemporary human flaws to their most nightmarish conclusions—the Autonomy is a world in which climate change persisted unaddressed, in which capitalist principles ran away similarly unchecked, and in which religion is at most a tool by which to control the masses—it avoids the preachiness it might easily slip into. Resistance forces know that the Autonomy is inhumane, yet are still distressed when they must take life to undermine it; even the worst of the leadership experiences occasional pangs of guilt and regret. No worldview is long expressed without also addressing counterpoints. Balmoral proves to be a complex heroine, one capable of exacting terrible vengeance, but who strives toward one simple means of redemption: exposing the truth to those fettered by the false comforts of AI. A scientist whose work looks toward humanity's next precipice calls himself a "biological Oppenheimer," and wrestles with the knowledge he possesses; the manipulative Maglan declares that "mankind is capable of incredible things," but still considers himself bound to try to route it as a whole. *Autonomy's* is a world without easy answers, in which even salvation may come with a high human cost.

The novel's settings can be inferred from the people who populate them; most exist somewhere in coastal Asia, with the desert city of Aviv and a water-clogged London standing as perhaps the only wholly recognizable places. The horrors of unbreathable air and arid land are effectively conveyed, as is the desolation of desert landscapes. Expressions of love and lust are sometimes heavy-handed, but also come as a relief amongst incredible acts of violence.

Out of situations considered untenable except by extreme manipulation, *Autonomy* raises last, hopeful possibilities, holding attention through to its end—an end that may or may not contain humanity's new beginning.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (August 3, 2016)

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