ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Byron Carmichael Book One: The Human Corpse Trade
J. Eric King
978-0-615-15770-2
Four Stars (out of Five)

Byron Carmichael is a seventeen-year-old orphaned genius admitted to a summer program of advanced studies at Brandenburg University. He and a pair of twin siblings Gracie and Nick Winston are assigned to an amazing research project based on his deceased father's scientific work. The object of their studies is a revolutionary virtual reality device said to produce such a refined effect that Byron and the twins are warned "'While in the system you would not be able to interpret what is simulation and what is real life.'" Indeed the device's capabilities are greater than one book can exhaust preserving a range of possibilities for potential sequels.

The main action of Book One is set in the small town of Charcoal Landing Pennsylvania Colony during 1760. The villains of that era promote murder for profit gathering organs to meet a new demand from medical schools. The eighteenth-century criminal operation appears to have ties to the ominous Devonshire Corporation of the present day. Throughout the story the heroes discover mysterious notes of warning that focus their thinking while forming the building blocks of a broader message. The ratio of action to dialogue to exposition is nicely geared to keep things moving along. The slightly sheltered teen characters take initiative and show vulnerability while actively building their confidence but they inexplicably lack the desire to pursue vices common to their age group.

There's something here for those who like to learn as well as be entertained—from a simple explanation of how virtual reality functions to factual information on the wool trade which emerges as critical to plot development. King's career in medical pathology provides background for truly ghoulish crimes yet the grisliness that weaker-stomached readers may fearfully anticipate is generally pretty restrained.

Along with laudable integration of scientific and economic information come historical faux pas. Hamburgers with chili sauce are served in a mid-eighteenth century tavern well before they were invented. Tertiary characters are routinely referred to as “Colonial men” yet that label fits every male except the British soldiers stationed in the colonies so its use only undermines the credibility of the setting.

Dr. Carmichael’s last words were presumed to be “He will know how to right what I have wronged.” As foretold the similarity between Byron’s mind and his father’s is enough for Byron’s decisions to perfectly echo the elder’s fast action in the face of a crisis. The ending points directly to an upcoming sequel and suggests that what is known so far about the villainous shadow corporation is only the iceberg tip of the coming intrigue. However the wrap-up’s quickness and leftover loose ends could frustrate those who intend to read this as a standalone.

Byron Carmichael is a fresh mystery-adventure which shows that the past and the future are equally filled with peril as is the process of growing into one’s full abilities.

Todd Mercer