



Cold Earth Wanderers

Peter Wortsman

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A mother and son's parallel journey and serious social commentary elevate this novel above other Orwellian dystopian books.

Sometime in the distant, undisclosed future, after highways and byways have been filled in and streams and rivers rerouted underground, the only way to travel will be up. Taking urban sprawl to a whole new level, Peter Wortsman's *Cold Earth Wanderers* follows sixteen-year-old Elgin Marble's turbulent descent into the underworld of Block 367790.

Discontent ever since his father, a respected elevator man, was chosen for early disposal, Elgin's rebellious "horizontal tendencies" attract the attention of Quirt and Belfry, special agents of the IVT (Institute for Vertical Thinking) eager to apprehend him, most likely for delivery to the dreaded thirteenth floor. Hiding deep below the surface, Elgin joins a group of insurgents known as Crabs (for their digging and tunneling), who long for outward expansion and freedom from the all-encompassing concrete Blocks.

Superficially, *Cold Earth Wanderers* is a mix of elements familiar to many an Orwellian future dystopia: citizens are constantly monitored and inundated with propaganda, a deadly game is played by teenagers and broadcast live (in this case DENT, or "desensitization training"), and citizens are "assigned a block to which their motion was restricted from birth to disposal." Of course, the resistance is full of life, danger, and unique personalities so different from the uptight, brainwashed majority.

In and of itself, the initial story line is entertaining with many a close call, dangerous secret meetings, and exciting explorations of the underground world, but what sets Wortsman's world apart is a second, more mature layer of reflection and social commentary. The writing is literally on the wall as seen through Elgin's gradual embracing of one Crab's colorful murals, lighting the way in an otherwise cold, gray world.

While on the run, Elgin grows "from a troubled boy to a desperate young man," but he is not the only one forced to confront harsh truths. Elgin's mother, Ellen, a former horizontal parlor hostess and new widow, undergoes her own transformation as she seeks help in unlikely places in an attempt to save her son from himself. The parallel story of mother and son offers a unique perspective on events.

With its multigenerational cast of characters, *Cold Earth Wanderers* appeals on several levels. Adults and young adults alike should consider exploring Wortsman's chilling glimpse into the future.

PALLAS GATES MCCORQUODALE (Winter 2015)

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