

## Crew of Exiles

**Neal Holtschulte**

Haste Publishing (Oct 3, 2022)

Softcover \$13.99 (409pp)

979-898589480-6

*In the inquisitive science fiction novel Crew of Exiles, cybernetic outcasts unravel the mysteries of the human experience.*

Neal Holtschulte's post-apocalyptic novel *Crew of Exiles* concerns the moral dilemmas and charm of post-human existence.

After Beryl tampers with the social order of the post-human Transcendents, he finds himself on Earth, trapped in a human body that's vulnerable to asthma and a limb disability. Escaping into virtual reality to assuage his pains, he encounters Fife, a gaming hero who seeks to understand those around her.

Fife notices that her fellow virtual reality players have disappeared across Earth; in the real world, she recommends that she and Beryl team up to investigate a recent star ship crash nearby. Beryl is reluctant, but does so as a matter of convenience. At the crash site, the two encounter Nesh, a gender-ambiguous life form who once served a powerful post-human, Water. Meanwhile, Ohnsy, who is overprotective of her unmanned star ship, develops into a hostile foil for the new, searching team of three. All four characters are used to explore the surreal nature of virtual reality, as well as concepts like free will and mortality.

The prose is humorous and engaging, using physical descriptions of bodies and their sensations to ground Beryl's quips about human existence on Earth. Beryl's unhappy narration is further offset by Fife's optimistic attitude. Having been trapped in virtual reality since she was young, Fife's lingo links to a mindset wherein victory, teams, and power-ups are the norm. However, she is also driven by an earnest desire to help those around her—and to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of human beings. Environmental cues lead to a slow reveal of the soft apocalypse that humanity experienced.

Thick with intellectual inquiries, the narrative delves into universal questions about death—and about how artificial intelligence, post-human life, and the near immortality that results from genetic engineering impact humanity as a whole. But some of its discussions become repetitive, and some of its perspectives are too forceful. Additionally, the book's developing characterizations are cut short for the sake of its climax, which leaves some questions unanswered. Still, the gradual reveal of the foursome's back stories is charming. They face relatable moral dilemmas throughout the book, and the camaraderies that they form despite these challenges are intriguing.

In the science fiction novel *Crew of Exiles*, cybernetic outcasts unravel the mysteries of the human experience as they search for survival, purpose, and friendship.

ALI ORTIZ (October 4, 2022)

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