Clarion Review

Thriller

Dystopia Now
Harvey Hiestand
Air Raid Press
978-0-9893149-8-5
Five Stars (out of Five)

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Satire and action combine to present a humorous and compelling story in Harvey Hiestand's novel *Dystopia Now*. The book can be read as a straight thriller—there are plenty of exciting plot twists—but its lifeblood is its skewed, often humorous, vision of a possible future.

Dystopia Now is not science fiction—though the story takes place in the future, it's a near future that greatly resembles our present, albeit exaggerated for effect. Zeno Jacobs is an employee at HRW, a firm that makes money by hiring employees (collecting government subsidies for doing so) and then finding ways to force them out and hire replacements. Zeno is assessed on his ability to keep employee turnover and company profits high, but as he navigates his daily tasks, others are not content to merely watch while the United States is gripped by economic unfairness.

As the Los Angeles area falls apart, ravaged by increasingly violent protests, Zeno meets and falls in love with Shasta MacCalistaire—a tall young woman who, because of financial pressures, shares a bedroom with over forty other girls. Searching for a way out of the chaos, they find themselves on the brink of salvation but forced to make choices that test their morals to the core.

Bob, Zeno's superior at HRW, delivers this warning when Zeno tries to shelter his employees and their families at the HRW building: "'All right, Zeno. But you remember this is a *business*. We can only be humanitarians as long as it suits *our* interests. If I sense *for a second* that you're not mitigating our losses, I'll make you process your own termination. *Understand?*

’” Hiestand manages here, and many times throughout the book, to strike a delicate balance—Bob’s statement seems outrageous, but at the same time, could easily be uttered behind the closed doors of any modern corporation.

From Mr. McClusky, an enigmatic and largely forgotten employee who has somehow kept his job long enough to qualify for a pension, to the winding labyrinth that HRW employees must navigate to reach their cubicles every day, Hiestand’s novel plays like a raucous combination of the films *Office Space* and *Apocalypse Now*.

Hiestand tells his story through Zeno’s first-person narration, and the choice works well, as does the love story between Zeno and Shasta. It’s this emotional element, and the breezy appeal of narrator Zeno, that raises *Dystopia Now* from the level of mere clever satire to that of an affecting novel.

Dystopia Now is highly recommended for those who like a dose of humor with their speculative fiction. Written with an eye on the problems of today, Hiestand has crafted an entertaining book that will leave readers wondering just how far-fetched his vision of the future really is.

Peter Dabbene