

## Heart of Earth

**Mark Laporta**

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*This fun YA sci-fi novel—with well-rounded characters, interesting premise, and lighthearted dialogue—will delight readers of every age.*

*Heart of Earth*, by Mark Laporta, is a sci-fi novel centered on a group of teenagers doing their best to save Earth from invading aliens, and learning about themselves along the way. While the generally lighthearted narrative of teenagers saving the world gets somewhat bogged down in confusing jargon, the character growth and fish-out-of-water concept keep the story amusing.

Leading the group is teenage extraterrestrial Ixdahan, who has been exiled from his privileged home in another universe for selling confidential information to the evil Vrukaari. Forced to “transmog” from an emotionless, tentacled alien into an awkward human boy named Derek, Ixdahan scrambles to comprehend the foreign culture of Midwestern teenagers without his usual telepathic abilities. Ixdahan's new friends, the talented Lena, her best friend Callie Ann, and goofy Vance, help Ixdahan adjust to the town, but they notice something a little off about the new kid. Ixdahan's betrayal of his homeland soon comes back to haunt him when he discovers the Vrukaari plot to invade Earth, a plan that involves the earthling friends he's grown attached to.

While characters develop slowly, the changes each goes through are, for the most part, organic and allow for a satisfying ending. Lena, in particular, is an incredibly relatable and multidimensional character. She makes sage observations, such as her lamentation that teenagers have “to make important decisions before you even had time to sort out reality from fantasy,” that give the novel heart and make it more than just a fun read for sci-fi lovers. Derek, too, shines in his dialogue with Lena. Their simultaneous annoyance with, and latent attraction to, each other makes their banter entertaining.

The narrative could benefit from more clarity regarding the parameters of the world. At times, the summaries of the alien aspects are convoluted, and slow the progression of the plot. This is evident in moments such as Derek's regaining of his telepathic abilities. Derek decides to “use the metadigital transponder to forge an active link to the deepest layers of the Galactic Array. With the transponder, he might be able to examine these stray mentallic traces more closely.” Soon, Derek's “mind burned hotter, brighter than before and...got it!” Moments like this, which should be tense and significant, are softened by such distracting language, and the pace, as well as the characterization of the protagonist, suffers.

Since the third-person narrative shifts focus to characters beyond Derek, including dimwitted Blade Northrop, the plot moves at a steady pace. The perspective of Blade is colored by his arrogant swagger, perpetual cigarette dangling from his lips, and favorite cowboy boots, a present from his washed-up, country singer dad. The poor fool barely comprehends what he is getting himself into when he signs up to work for the Vrukaari leader, Yarrow. The threat of the Vrukaari is never more menacing than when Blade interacts with Yarrow. Clad in a tasteful dark blue, crushed velvet track suit, Yarrow still manages to be intimidating. When Yarrow commands Blade to “‘Sit. Listen,’ ... his mouth drawn into a taut red line” and his “intense black eyes ... overwhelming,” he makes the kid shake in his boots. The

villain is a dangerous cocktail of vanity, blind ambition, and tackiness.

*Heart of Earth* will delight readers of every age with its well-rounded characters, interesting premise, and lighthearted dialogue. The sci-fi aspects are entertaining and fun, and the character growth will keep the attention of those who don't typically read the genre.

PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (August 13, 2014)

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