

Humans: The Mark

Alexandra L. Yates

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In Humans, a diverse group of teenagers are thrown into a post-apocalyptic world of mystery and intrigue.

Alexandra L. Yates's young adult novel *Humans* features a perilous post-apocalyptic world and a bold band of teenagers fighting to save it.

A century ago, a nuclear explosion decimated the world. The surviving population was driven underground. Over time, societies reemerged, but they rebuilt with little contact made beyond their boundaries.

In Kantas City—a technologically advanced society of 100,000 people that's encased in a clear dome—people are divided into eight districts, each with a singular focus, from the sciences to arts and nature. District heads make up the government of the Red World; they are known as The Eight, with a new eight individuals selected every twenty-five years. The Eight all have special abilities, from enhanced strength to talking to animals, as well as a mysterious mark on their shoulders that both selects them for glory and condemns them to a life of isolation and training.

The latest Eight have just turned eighteen and are reaching the end of their training. Growing curious about the world beyond their dome and disillusioned with government propaganda about rebels and foragers that subsist outside, they go rogue on their final mission to find answers. Together, they discover thriving island societies and futuristic colonies similar to their own. They also begin to unravel the secret of the mark that binds them all together.

The eight leads each get their moment in the spotlight. Chapters are headed with their names and give them room to relay their own histories before the novel takes on a more omniscient narration. Cathy comes to helm the novel; her empathic ability to read others' motives and nature makes her an easy conduit. Leah, who has healing abilities, is also a compassionate focal character. Others are less developed. Most are defined by a singular trait or affect: Tabitha is arrogant; Max delights in silly dancing.

The Eight interact with one another in typical teenage fashion, though their ability to communicate telepathically adds an interesting twist. As a group they are a formidable, balanced force, but it becomes difficult to sympathize with the ruthless actions of some of them when they are split into smaller factions. At times, they act younger than their years, proving preoccupied with parties or cracking jokes in otherwise tense, somber scenes. Burgeoning crushes are rendered with realistic tenderness. References made to twenty-first-century pop culture are jarring in their futuristic setting.

A focus on the elimination of racism in Kantas City is awkward and sits at odds with the unofficial district of outliers—the poorest and most dangerous area of the city—which is named after President Obama. An island nation of people greet The Eight with awe and fear as their uniforms remind them of “the white man” who saved their ancestors from the explosions and whom they now worship. Sexual assault is also prevalent in these societies, and is stated to be eradicated in Kantas City. Such uncomfortable elements steal attention from the book’s otherwise immersive world building.

An attack from an unknown force late in the novel unites The Eight in their mission, and the dangling mystery of the mark provides tempting bait for the sequel. Alexandra L. Yates throws a diverse group of teenagers into a post-apocalyptic world of mystery and intrigue in *Humans*.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (September 19, 2019)

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