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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SCIENCE FICTION

Insidious

Michael McCloskey
Brom, illustrator
iUniverse (January 2010)
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"He held his breath, half expecting the power down wouldn't work, and that the machines would stay alive, and start giving *him* orders," the author writes. Bren Marcken's fear illustrates one of the biggest threats lurking in *Insidious*: artificial intelligence (AI) that turns on the humans who control it.

In the world of this novel, giant corporations and governments are vying for interplanetary resources as they try to gain dominance. Intellectually superior aliens and AI creatures are also competing against each other, despite the humans' best precautions. Insidious is the name of a covert operation of Black Core, a highly influential software company. Author Michael McCloskey's debut follows three people whose purposes are often at odds with each other.

United Nations Space Force Major Bren Marcken is in charge of the ASSAIL program, which is made up of AI creatures guided by humans. After each mission, the AIs are shut down to clear their memory. This protects against the threat of an AI realizing its intellectual superiority, and using it to enslave the humans.

Meridian, a disturbingly precocious AI, is a source of pride and fear for Bren. Their first unusual encounter hints at the potential of the inquisitive creature. On a mission, Meridian reads a line from a plaque: "Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie." Bren tells him to ignore the message. At the end of the mission, which results in heavy casualties, Meridian startles Bren by asking, "Have you delivered the message to Sparta?"

Slavery is woven into the story on several layers: humans enslave humans; robots control robots; AIs enslave humans, and so on. Though slavery is not legal, many corporations participate in forms of slavery both intentionally and unintentionally. The general distrust between different races and species adds a complex social dynamic to the story.

Insidious is reminiscent of Lois McMaster Bujold's Miles Vorkosigan space sagas. McCloskey's writing skills aren't on the same level as Bujold's, but the plot has many of the elements that make Bujold's books riveting. Fans of her books, as well as fans of science fiction in general should check out *Insidious*.

The only hitch in the story's flow is caused by the adjective-rich description of physical settings. For example, the story opens with this description, "The skyscraper entrance flaunted polished marble floors, which shone in gentle arcs below a sparkling waterfall on the left wall." Fortunately, the descriptions become more organic as the book progresses, making them less noticeable.

The end of the book, which keeps open the possibility of a sequel, leaves readers wanting to know what happens next.
(March 16, 2010)

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