



## Lakes of Mars

### Merritt Graves

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*Lakes of Mars is an epic science fiction adventure, full of arresting action sequences and thoughtful meditations on pressing topics.*

Gritty, mysterious, and layered, Merritt Graves's *Lakes of Mars* is an intricate story in which the mental fortitude of students is tested as they face pressures and a possible conspiracy.

When he is shipped to the outer reaches of the colonized universe to train for Fleet command, Aaron leaves his tragic past on Mars behind him. At the Corinth School, he is the target of bullying, but he also befriends Sebastian, a high performer in the school's simulated battles. In between classes and simulated battles, he falls for Eve, a fellow student who's researching the cure for a disease she's incubating.

Then Aaron discovers that something is off about the Corinth School. He is torn between competing theories and is left unsure of whom he can trust: his new group of friends, or a high-ranking student officer, Caelus, who claims to know what's going on. Amid all of these challenges, Aaron sorts out reality from falsehoods, hoping to convince his friends to help him stand up to a surprising, formidable foe.

The book inhabits a complete universe. Exciting and useful features include Mylan brain chips that prevent inventive thoughts and complex drugs that allow people to "tie-in" to each other's minds. The backdrop of the Corinth School is interesting; drama unfolds against it, as does the story of colonization throughout the known universe. Abandoned Earth is referenced as mostly a desert, and the drama is more varied and compelling because of this.

Aaron is an interesting and self-sacrificing narrator. His brushes with sleep deprivation, "tie-in" fluid, and drugs make him unreliable and cloudy. Related ambiguities help with plot advancement, though, including his layered dream and nightmare sequences. Secondary characters have depth, if there are so many of them that they are difficult to keep track of early on.

The interplay between the book's world building, including its technology and scientific elements, and the motivations of its cast is strong. Characters make both foolhardy decisions and well-thought-out choices, but they also adapt as necessary: a plan for stopping an attack on a nearby planet changes in response to unexpected obstacles, for example. Plot developments are realistic and complex, holding attention and resulting in excellent surprises. Tension and action scenes propel the story toward an unexpected and engaging ending.

*Lakes of Mars* is an epic science fiction adventure, full of arresting action sequences and thoughtful meditations on aggression and leadership.

LAURA LEAVITT (August 14, 2019)

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