

Lambda

David Musgrave

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In David Musgrave's fascinating novel *Lambda*, a woman is enmeshed in conflicts between surveillance police, a synthetic person, and genetically human Lambdas.

"A lambda function is a small anonymous function": this computer programming definition serves as both epigraph and symbol of oppression. The Lambdas, who arrive on land from a life in the sea, are taught English, housed in flooded basements, and trained to work in low-paying jobs. They experience themselves as a collective, unlike "landers," who strive to surpass their fellows. The question of who the true lambdas are is complicated as the novel proceeds.

Set in near-future London, wherein even toothbrushes play a role in government surveillance, the story centers on Cara, who shifts between action and inaction. Accustomed to being passive, she acquiesces to the interests of Peter, her coworker in a surveillance office, who wants to date her. She's still a wishy-washy lander when she meets her first Lambdas, but her passivity is challenged when a school bombing brings out anti-Lambda sentiments.

In addition to detailed descriptions of settings and objects, shifts between points-of-view and in tone contribute to the worldbuilding. The first chapter is a transcription of Cara's interview with a synthetic person, Mr. Hello, who becomes central to the plot. Mr. Hello's voice is urbane and considerate as he describes an act of ghoulish violence, mirroring the veneer of Cara's world, which often seems to be shellacked over a brutal void. Much of Cara's story is told through her EyeNarrator Pro, an app that records what users see (along with other data) to create a narrative journal. And when Cara's toothbrush gets unruly, she's forced to reconsider her relationship with Peter.

Lambda is a riveting novel about human power dynamics that's set in a world populated by sentient objects and marked by pervasive surveillance.

MICHELE SHARPE (July / August 2022)

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