



Mars Away

Jeff Christopher Leonard

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Mars Away delivers a compelling view of the near future, coupled with human drama and a big dose of interplanetary adventure.

In Jeff Christopher Leonard's ambitious science fiction thriller *Mars Away*, a nightmare journey to the peak of the solar system's most massive volcano, with the fate of humanity on the line, takes everything that NASCAR champion Devin "Devilspree" Xyear has.

It is 2050, and Mars is the last place that eighteen-year old Xyear wants to go, but victory on the track and the deaths of both of his beloved parents hit him hard. It's a lot for a normally stable, law-abiding young man to handle, and he suffers a very human breakdown involving drunk driving and an assault on a policeman. As punishment, he is drafted to be part of a plan to make Mars habitable for the massive migration to come.

Leonard paints a dark but believable picture of the near-future as he relentlessly drives his protagonist from luxury digs in Santa Cruz, California, to the giant boiling caldera atop the Martian volcano Olympus Mons. An exploding population, chronic shortages of food and clean water, and runaway pollution have rendered life unsustainable on humanity's home planet.

Characters, especially Xyear, are human and sympathetic, filled with doubts, fears, hopes, and dreams, and acting on all. The plot is linear and episodic, lacking interweaving threads. Its main job, it appears, is to get the protagonist to Mars for the book's climactic scenes. While this narrow focus leads to missed opportunities, it also makes for a fast-paced story.

Life on Mars is related through exposition, particularly in the book's beginning. Scenes are set bluntly, as with the suicides of two colonists. However, they still contain fascinating details about what human life on Mars might be like. "Mars itch," a form of cabin fever, afflicts colonists, and transparent domes of "virtually unbreakable superplastic" shield them from radiation and meteors.

A basketball game played in Martian gravity, between new arrivals, and long-term residents, shows much about characters and setting through action and description. Dribbling doesn't work right for Xyear and the new arrivals, and low-gravity slam-dunks result in collisions with the backboard. That game elegantly foreshadows the obstacles and hazards of the final desperate mission to plant a nuclear bomb in the crater atop Olympus Mons to set off the terraforming of Mars.

From literal pitfalls on the treacherous surface of the red planet to the emotional pitfalls of love and death, *Mars Away* delivers a compelling view of the near future, coupled with human drama and a big dose of interplanetary adventure.

GARY HENRY (February 1, 2017)

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