

Meritropolis

Joel Ohman

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Ohman's dystopian vision is well-paced, imaginative, and suspenseful to the very end.

A walled city set in a dystopian future has an unwavering societal structure known only as the System. In *Meritropolis*, a captivating book by Joel Ohman, protagonist Charley navigates his way through the darkness of its secrets—and of his own thoughts. With his own personal agenda and his unfortunate knack for acting on impulse, will Charley successfully bring the System down, or will he ultimately be another victim?

Set in the year AE 12—twelve years After the Event—the citizens of Meritropolis struggle to come to terms with the System that they pledged to uphold, but that threatens to kick them Out. Monstrous hybrid “animal combinations” make it impossible to survive outside the walls without training and weaponry. Individuals are given Scores that determine their worth—their merit—and whether they should be allowed to stay In, or should be “zeroed” Out.

Troubled by a vivid dream that crystallizes his disgust, Charley attempts to internalize his feelings in order to lay low and learn the System and its weaknesses. This plan quickly dissolves when he foolishly attacks a few guards and is forced to serve the System as a Hunter. Because of his high Score, Commander Orson—the current leader—looks the other way whenever Charley causes more trouble.

Throughout the story, other perspectives beyond Charley’s are given, giving the narrative a deep, rich feel. What is known about the other characters is intriguing, yet limited, leaving the reader wanting to know more about their backgrounds and mindsets.

Major themes are presented with only cursory introspection by the characters, allowing them the comfort of ignoring the tugs of internal debate. For instance, many of the characters hate the System, but absolve themselves of any responsibility to effect change by telling themselves that there isn’t anything they can do. Even Charley, who seems to hate the System the most, doesn’t think about what he would do without it; he just knows that it needs to go. The deepest contemplation found in the book is when Charley reflects upon his own actions and wonders whether he really is better than the System’s guards, or if he’s just another mindless drone.

Character development and dialogue are fluid and natural, though occasionally seem one-dimensional. For example, Commander Orson has the highest Score of anyone in Meritropolis, and though he is the most intelligent, he is almost comically distracted by the looks of a particular woman. At times the story gets bogged down by details of the “combination animals,” and it seems that the only purpose of two of the characters is to offer an explanation as to what the hybrids are.

Unfortunately, there are a few things left unexplained; for example, the reason why the aerial hybrids are not encountered by the citizens if the city is only protected by walls.

Beyond its minor flaws, *Meritropolis* is well-paced, imaginative, and a good start to a fantastic series. Hints of subplots and backstories evoke a feeling of something deeper, something more. Suspense keeps the reader going throughout

the book, all the way to the final page.

SHANNAN SPITZ (October 16, 2014)

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