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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

New Terra and Beyond: The Expanding Human Universe

Richard Michael
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Richard Michael's novel *New Terra and Beyond* has the techno-scholastic appeal of an Asimov Foundation adventure, with characters that exhibit the pioneer perseverance of L'Amour's Sacketts. Emphasis on both family values and patriotism is paramount in Michael's work.

By writing in the first person through the voices of a multitude of characters, Michael gives readers a shifting perspective—like that of a movie filmed from different angles and with a variety of lenses and filters. This kaleidoscopic narration revolves around the heart of the story: the characters Alex and Myrna Davis and their extended families.

The book begins on the Earth-like planet of New Terra. The action takes place on the continent of New Anglia in the city-state of Valhalla Falls. Here, readers are introduced to a young girl named Myrna Ellsworth (later to become the matriarchal Myrna Davis) and her precocious younger brother, Kenneth.

Valhalla Falls is an agrarian community. Influenced by a group of fanatics called the Terran Circle, which is led by a dictator named Jason Thomas, Valhalla citizens become suspicious of all advanced technology, especially that left behind by the astronauts who founded New Terra (whose existence they attempt to deny). Further, people who employ arcane scientific practices are accused of witchcraft.

Myrna's best friend, Amy Bunker, believes that, "if Valhalla Falls caves to the Terran Circle, it will be absorbed into the theocracy of that dictator Jason Thomas, who has swallowed up the rest of New Anglia—then the witchcraft trials will begin here, also." Amy's words are prophetic: Myrna is accused of witchcraft and heresy when she accesses an AIB, an artificial intelligent being left behind by the settlers to aid the community.

Myrna, Kenneth, and Alex are instrumental in the defeat of the dictator. The rest of the novel follows the further exploits of Myrna, Alex, and their progeny, and their effect upon mankind's expansion throughout the universe.

The author's skill at characterization and letting the story unfold through so many points of view creates a wonderful tapestry of human endurance. But the style is not consistent throughout the novel. Sometimes the author resorts to an omnipotent third-person narrator, a device that is awkward within the predominantly first-person narrative. Also, there are instances when the characters reveal information that they cannot possibly know, such as what another character is thinking.

The inconsistencies in the writing should have been addressed during the editing process, but they aren't too detrimental to the strength of the story. Unfortunately, the book is missing quite a few pages, creating an obvious gap.

In spite of these shortcomings, Michael's science-fiction novel is both an adventurous ride through the expanses of outer space and a tribute to the potential nobility of mankind.

LEE GOODEN (February 23, 2012)

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