Clarion Review ★★★★★ THRILLER

Project XS: Are We Ready to Be Advanced?

A. Calans
AuthorHouseUK (Dec 16, 2018)
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Descriptions play on the senses in this exciting science fiction thriller that focuses on AI.

A. Calans's science fiction novel *Project XS* questions humanity's ability to handle artificially intelligent machines.

Matt and Kayla have been SWAT partners for years, surviving only by having each other's loyalty and trust. Agreeing to a mysterious assignment, Matt and Kayla join a highly trained but emotionally unstable team to test America's greatest weapon—robotic exoskeletons. The weapons are armed to the teeth and increase a soldier's abilities.

As their orders become hazardous and ignore technological glitches, Matt suspects his superiors are putting money above lives. Matt, Kayla, and the rest of the team fight the ghosts of their pasts, self-aware robots, and each other to survive the mission gone sideways.

Matt and Kayla are the primary narrators, but the text jumps to give all team characters room to speak. They are all introduced in an illustrative way, though the women are described in terms of their attractiveness. These characters are best fleshed out through personal details, emotional inner monologues, and qualities like one's love of poetry and another's painkiller addiction. Each team member also has a tragedy in their past. These influence their decisions, and themes of survivor's guilt and PTSD run throughout.

Often, characters' conversations and inner thoughts sound more theatrical than realistic. A rushed relationship between Kayla and another teammate feels out of character for her. While a lead engineer plays an important role in the story, he is also the least established character, and some aspects of his subplot are too quickly abandoned.

As the team's mission devolves because of the self-aware AI, the story becomes predictable. It is too reliant on genre tropes, as when the AI becomes convinced of its superiority and disenchanted with human flaws. Technical details about the exoskeleton's software, energy needs, and programming are unclear. A religious undertone comes in, but is not expanded on.

Descriptions play on the senses. The book's locations, including Tokyo and an island, are described visually and according to their sounds and the feelings they evoke, as with the captured bustle of a busy city and the anxiety in a hushed forest where the team waits for an ambush. Fight scenes are fun and frightening, with gruesome explanations of rough handling and the smell of burning flesh.

While the story features robots and computers, other modern technology is absent, making it difficult to pin down the time period. Spelling and grammatical errors arise.

The entire story happens over the course of six days, and so it moves fast, but with an efficient balance of character development and action. A few surprises near the end help to tie up most loose ends.

A site-skipping thriller with a focus on AI, *Project XS* follows science fiction formulas but is elevated by its engaging

characters.

DELIA STANLEY (April 18, 2019)