

Runners

Justin Hale

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In the compelling science fiction novel Runners, a tight-knit crew displays true camaraderie despite the dystopian leanings of their world.

Set in a dystopian corporate world, Justin Hale's science fiction novel *Runners* follows a renegade crew of assassins as they fight for survival.

Human beings on the planet Nera consume food flavored by nanotechnology and receive news and entertainment through retinal displays. But what should be a utopian society is clouded by corporate control: physical books and ad-blockers are illegal, and democracy is a sham. Gangs run the lower levels of the metropolises, and a former group of elite assassins, the Omegas, supply them with guns.

Zan is the captain of the Omegas, and his crew has been on the run since killing their handler and predecessors. Reduced to the position of gun runners and trying to stay out of the spotlight, they cross paths with Akira, a detective who is determined to learn their secrets. Akira's drive puts her in the crosshairs of shared enemies; Zan agrees to team up with her, though their alliance is an uneasy one.

The novel generates excitement as the crew faces threats on multiple fronts—law enforcement and the Shadows and Shades (nonorganic killing machines that can impersonate humans) that seem to be cropping up everywhere. People, it seems, are being replaced. The crew's attempts to find out why and how are thwarted in multiple violent encounters. There are gunfights, gun deals, and revelations to drive the story forward.

Many of the characters come from marginalized backgrounds. There are queer characters and people of color. However, these facets of their identity are treated as revelatory moments in the text, as with Akira's disclosure of her identity and related trauma. This replicates contemporary prejudices in a futuristic world. Further, Zan's nickname sometimes blurs with his brother San's, which is troublesome in scenes where both are present—including in the book's climax. Additionally, the precise nature of the Shadows is mysterious to the point that it sometimes seems contradictory.

Still, the book handles several weighty themes well, including addiction, PTSD, and betrayal. It uses innovations in technology to hold up a mirror to human vices. And the banter between its characters is a highlight that adds levity to dark moments. Indeed, Zan's crew's obvious affection for one another drives their actions throughout the book, helping to explain their motivations—and their life-or-death sacrifices.

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JEANA JORGENSEN (June 14, 2023)

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