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Clarion Review ★★★☆☆ SCIENCE FICTION

Terra Forma

J. Russell
CreateSpace (Jun 11, 2011)
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The year is 2047 and scientist James Kennedy has convinced governments throughout the world to move beyond their differences and the lingering threat of terrorism in order to work collaboratively to “terraform” Mars for colonization.

To make this possible, individual countries and US states acting independently build open-source-designed tug spaceships that will direct asteroids to collide with Mars, thus changing the planet’s orbit, increasing its mass, reanimating its core and magnetic field, and adding water—the requirements for supporting life. J. Russell’s *Terra Forma* opens with celebrations surrounding the impact of the first asteroid. The multifaceted story proceeds as the tug-ship crews carry out their duties. Back on Earth, Kennedy handles political and family issues.

Routine tasks and burgeoning romances between crew members are shaken when terrorists strike. Civilian tug crews are forced to do battle in space, and Kennedy must work with the military to combat the terrorists on Earth before it is too late. Adrenaline-pumping fight scenes and rogue asteroids provide action-packed sequences. The fast-moving story is interrupted by flashbacks to explain characters and events, and some passages are fractured by missing words, conflicting verb tenses, or punctuation errors.

Technological and scientific information set the novel in a plausible near-future world without overburdening the lay reader. The political, military, and personal story lines occurring on Earth add depth to the plot beyond what is unfolding in space, especially Kennedy’s struggle with family concerns as he pushes the Mars project forward.

The likable main characters on the tugs engage in enticing flirtations that escalate to explicit romantic scenes. Russell’s diverse cast yields credibility, as does mentioning a gay crewman and a lesbian relationship. Less believable, however, are the otherwise strong female characters being referred to as “girls”; they also have throw rugs on their spaceship and recite the words “to serve and obey” in a secular wedding ceremony. Likewise, the terrorists intending to thwart the terraforming endeavor are not portrayed in a convincing manner, although some of them do struggle with conflicting ethics and allegiances.

Russell’s story is more than an action-thriller romance set in space. He presents a hopeful, not-too-distant future where humanity can unify around “a common effort greater than the pyramids, higher than the Moon, truer than religion” and, in doing so, build a bridge between cultural and geopolitical differences not only in space, but also on Earth. The author’s stated reason for writing the book, “if you have a dream, put it on paper,” is reflected in his main character’s drive to achieve his dreams. The portrayal of the tug-crew members’ repetitive work and their search for friendship, love, and personal meaning is also significant.

Terra Forma, Russell’s debut novel, is a refreshing crossover entry in the science-fiction genre that will surely appeal to adult fans of political thrillers, military action, and general fiction alike.

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C. WILLIAM GEE (August 2, 2012)

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