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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SCIENCE FICTION

The Blue River Valley

James Howerton
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All teenagers feel different at some point in their lives. Even the most beautiful and popular can sometimes feel like they don't quite fit in. In The Blue River Valley, James Howerton takes this difficult truth to an extreme with the character of Cathy Holmes. Cathy is beautiful, brilliant, and extremely athletic. At fifteen, she is a cheerleader, the girlfriend of the quarterback of the football team, and an excellent student. But Cathy has a secret. She is a hybrid—her mother is a human, and her father is from the planet of Mara.

Hybrids are illegal throughout the universe, because no one can know how they will develop. Cathy's grandfather, Kosan, who is an ambassador on Mara, hid her from the Bhutaran hunters who came to kill her when her existence was discovered just after her birth. As her story unfolds, readers see that hiding her abilities from everyone has made Cathy lonely and confused. She reaches out to Sherwood North, a boy with a longtime crush on her, just as galactic politics brings war to Mara, increasing the danger that Cathy lives with every day.

Howerton's debut novel is enjoyable, with teenage characters that are realistic, if somewhat stereotypical. Sherwood is a "geek" but also a karate expert and a poet. Cathy is the image of perfection that nearly every teenage girl would like to achieve. Their love–hate relationship reveals two lonely kids who are unsure of themselves, but also desperate to make a connection with another person. The excitement of turning sixteen is summed up eloquently when Kathy's grandfather asks her karate instructor to explain the significance of this age. The instructor's answer is simple and elegant: "Sixteen is the beginning of the world," he says.

The galactic conflict is the guiding force for all that the characters go through. This setting is well-developed, with many inhabited planets and a powerful council that oversees laws throughout the galaxy. Howerton colors his world with discussions of physics and philosophy that are intelligent and thought provoking. For example, Kosan states, "God and religion are not the same thing—they are in most cases exactly opposite." Unfortunately, the characters exhibit an excessive amount of cynicism. Cathy's uncle Rel, another Maran ambassador, says, "Planets far beyond Earth die in an instant. It happens every time your heart beats. This place has not yet come out of the soft dream. Earth has yet to be born to the terrible galaxy, the endless canyons of time. All I can say is, don't leave the dream."

Howerton has juxtaposed a story about finding a sense of self and a sense of belonging against a cruel and hopeless galaxy. It is a fascinating pairing. Ultimately, The Blue River Valley leaves readers with sense that happiness is fragile; there is much that can take it away, but it is still worth seeking.

CATHERINE THURESON (June 28, 2010)

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