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Clarion Review ★★★★★ SCIENCE FICTION

The Changed

A. Michael Marsh
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When unique, fascinating characters are introduced, their lingo and personalities are translated well into precise and engaging dialogue.

The apocalypse story line that introduces a world where sickness has nearly eliminated humanity and a few warring factions survive to rebuild is becoming as commonplace as “boy meets girl.” So, while A. Michael Marsh’s *The Changed* is not a thoroughly original story, it is a well-written and perfectly targeted interpretation that is clearly a labor of love from a science fiction fan. Marsh’s attention to detail, authentic character development, and perfectly balanced themes of faith, responsibility, and loyalty make this book hard to put down and easy to recommend for young teens.

The book begins with the protagonist, Oscar, wandering through the abandoned city, contrasting his once-carefree life with the death and uncertainty around him. Watermarks of rust, fibers of carpeting, the smell in the air, and the sounds of nylon backpack straps are all painstakingly described. Oscar and his friend, Alan, bust each other’s chops, behave bravely when afraid, and look after each other with all the unspoken dependency of brothers. With realistic dialogue, Marsh crafts two very real kids. When Oscar is startled by Alan and grumps at him for it, Alan retaliates with, “Don’t get all butt-hurt. You’re just mad because you didn’t even think to check the front door.” When other characters are introduced, their lingo and personalities are similarly well translated into dialogue.

The characters are widely varied, not in small part due to a mutation in some of the survivors that has caused them to take on bizarre physical and paranormal traits. A woman who has experienced a biological mutation that gives her tree-like features and a kinship with plant life is spunky and tough but has a soft, maternal heart. A hulking giant has the ability to miraculously heal his wounds, and even Alan has strange glowing eyes and can bond with animals. While those who are called the “Changed” are pure fantasy, Marsh offers a well-crafted explanation involving science, legend, and the cosmos.

Marsh’s story is most successful in the way it neatly explores fundamental views of what it means to be human, what it means to believe in God, and how truth can be manipulated. Without committing to a religious philosophy or espousing one particular view of spirituality, Marsh opens up broad questions. At the beginning, Oscar describes faith in God to Alan based on what his father has told him. Later, Oscar has to decide for himself what he believes and how best to act on it.

With some strong language and clearly spiritual themes, *The Changed* may ruffle some feathers. But with influences of Arthur C. Clarke, Stan Lee, Richard Matheson, and others, it could also easily galvanize the budding science fiction fan in any high schooler. It is a novel that whets the appetite for further knowledge and ends with the right balance of questions answered and unasked.

SARA BUDZIK (March 4, 2014)

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