

The Contaminants

Devin K. Smyth

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Aboard a spacecraft, two teens hold out hope for new life on post-apocalyptic Earth in this believable YA science fiction novel.

The Contaminants, a work of dystopian fantasy for teens from Devin K. Smyth (the pen name of Kevin Speth), serves as the first volume of his New Dakota series. Composed of two believable first-person narratives and based around two father-child relationships, this is a novel that prizes emotions as much as it does technology.

Fifteen-year-old Jessil Calloway vividly remembers the day the world ended. Amid nuclear explosions, she and her brothers raced to board the *Colin Powell* spacecraft. Hard as they tried, though, they could not pull their father to safety. Fellow passenger Soraj is the son of Dr. Guyat, the head of the New Dakota regeneration project. His team will engineer accelerated evolution of plants and animals to repopulate Earth. However, there is something sinister about the first so-called purification step. After receiving news of human survivors on Earth, Jessil and Raj join the descent team to look for her father.

Smyth has successfully created two distinct voices; Jessil's sounds younger and more conversational, like she is writing a diary, and Raj's is more formal. These voices alternate throughout the novel, with each entry headed by the day and time to keep the time line understandable. The two central father-child relationships provide a clear structure, allowing for parallels and contrasts between the pairs. Dr. Guyat is perfect as a villain who believes that he is working toward a good end.

The Contaminants imagines a plausible future in which overpopulation, global warming, and nuclear weapons have rendered Earth virtually uninhabitable. Some technology in use—such as Soraj's SOLE device, which might resemble Google Glass—seems plausible. The sci-fi creatures Jessil and Soraj encounter on post-apocalyptic Earth (including giant winged lizards, huge worms, and domesticated tortoises) are a nice touch, and the Mount Rushmore setting recalls classic suspense stories like *North by Northwest*.

The novel is on the thin side; it could have done with another subplot or two to add some complexity. However, the subtle eugenics theme will give teen readers plenty to think about while they follow the fast-paced story, and Smyth strikes a good balance between tech-speak and genuine emotion. Moreover, there is a welcome spark of hope at the end; Jessil's last line is "I have to believe it's going to be a good day."

Although adults with a taste for dystopian fiction could certainly enjoy *The Contaminants*, it is probably best suited to adolescent or teen fans of *The Last Wild* series by Piers Torday or the *Ashes Trilogy* by Ilsa J. Bick.

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