

The Price of Safety

Michael C. Bland

World Castle Publishing

(384pp)

978-1-950890-79-8

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Michael C. Bland's dystopian novel *The Price of Safety* is set in a future with a government that's powerful enough to eliminate all danger, but that can't eliminate the threats posed by government itself.

In 2047, no crime goes unpunished. Dray Quintero, an engineer working with dark matter, is at work when he receives a panicked call from his teenage daughter, Raven. She has accidentally killed her boyfriend, which surveillance cameras will show as a murder. To save Raven from a death penalty, Dray and his family flee. They are pursued by the Agency, a sinister government organization that preserves the illusion of a safe, crime-free society at any cost. The resulting flight and chase fills the book.

While the book's characters are distinctive, most are present to fill roles. Dray's strained marriage to Mina is underexplored, and Raven is kept offstage much of the time. Raven's sister, Talia, is a stereotypical technogeek, while Raven's connection to a rebel opposed to the government is revealed, but underdeveloped.

Dray's family's flight, and the subsequent chase, fills the story. Dray narrates in the moment, and action and technology (an imaginative array of plausible and creepy inventions) drive his tale. These include a mini-computer that's inserted into every citizen's brain at an early age and that results in perpetual connectivity. But just as the rebel protesters suspect, the implant also monitors each person's contacts, whereabouts, and activities, feeding back calming but false perceptions of reality.

Convincing descriptions of the surveillance society show that it is filled with cameras and drone swarms. Sharp realism captures how technology's omnipresence alters human culture. Narrow escapes follow one after another without pause; most of the settings within these chase scenes are a blur, though one chase through Chinatown is tense because of its bright details, including of colorful shops, crowded streets, and an arms dealer who conducts her business with the dispassionate air of an empress.

Although the story broadens to include betrayal, death, and the rise of a determined resistance group, its pattern of nonstop pursuit means that few individual encounters are impactful. Major events near the end of the book pass without emotional release, and strong hints suggesting that Raven will become more active in the rebel cause remain open.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (March 25, 2020)

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