ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

FANTASY

The Underground
Roxanne Bland
Blackrose Press
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Books in which supernatural beings thrive among unwitting humans remain quite popular. Imagine a setting in which these otherworldly creatures, known as “zots” in Roxane Bland’s debut novel *The Underground*, fear exposure by humans to the extent that some use their powers to control the masses.

In Bland’s paranormal Seattle, werewolves, witches, vampires, and elves are all zots who must appear like people in public so the full-blooded humans don’t kill them. Top vampire Master Kurt exerts much psychic control over the city’s humans and many of its zots. A coven of witches, including Garrett Larkin, routinely cast peace spells. Things get even more interesting when an alien ends up in the midst of all of the zots. Melera flees to Earth, hoping to escape her warring galaxy.

Parker Berenson—alpha werewolf, servant to Kurt, and Garrett’s former lover—struggles to keep his grip on power in his pack while he resents being in the thrall of Kurt, after losing Garrett to him. Parker also develops an attraction to Melera, when they aren’t trying to attack one another. To add to the tension, there’s sex, and lots of it. Can everyone uncouple themselves long enough to discover who is a threat to whom? If the true threat cannot be contained, humans may turn against the zots; the zots’ only hope would then lie in a secret sanctuary known as The Underground.

This book has a mature content advisory for its frequent graphic sex scenes. In an ingenious move, Bland establishes the characters as sexually expressive and makes coitus integral to the plot so that most of the sexual content moves the story along. Even Melera, with her alien body parts and out-of-this-world moves, evokes sensuality.

One might think an alien, humans, magic, vampires, werewolves, witches, and elves would be too much for such a short novel, but Bland manages to flesh out the vampire, witch, and werewolf societies fairly well. Because there are no elves as main characters, elfin society remains woefully underdeveloped. Also, the author sometimes introduces new facts about her

supernatural beings exactly when the revelation of such facts becomes necessary to the plot.

Parker's constant struggle to stay human as he dialogues with the wolf part of himself is a stroke of pure inspiration, mirroring the self-talk that all humans engage in as they come to terms with different aspects of themselves. In a refreshing change from stories where one witch has most of the power, all of the witches of Garrett's coven expend much time and energy creating spells. Things do falter slightly, however, with Kurt's character; he has so much magic that he seems invincible.

Fans of strong female characters will appreciate that witches pray to THE GODDESS (always written by the author in all capitals), who answers their prayers. Melera is just as complex as Kurt, Garrett, and Parker. Readers empathize with the amnesiac alien warrior who forgets her mission. However, she unfortunately becomes unnecessarily comical when Bland spells out her broken attempts at pidgin English. The constant reminder of her mispronunciation undercuts her otherwise forceful character.

These factors, however, do not prevent *The Underground* from succeeding as erotic fantasy.

Jill Allen