

When She Woke

Hillary Jordan

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“When she woke, she was red. Not flushed, not sunburned, but the solid, declarative red of a stop sign.” In Hillary Jordan’s dystopian novel *When She Woke*, Hannah Payne is a Red, a criminal. Chroming—the genetic altering of skin color to match the class of a crime—has, for the most part, replaced the prison system in the US.

Unlike *The Scarlett Letter*’s Hester Prynne, who gives birth to a daughter conceived through an adulterous affair, Hannah does not. And that is her crime—the murder of her unborn child, an abortion. Instead of the letter “A” across her breast, Hannah now hosts scarlet skin.

For the twenty-six years she’d been alive, her hands had been a honey-toned pink, deepening to golden brown in the summertime. Now, they were the color of newly shed blood ... She hadn’t yet seen the mirrors, but she could feel them shimmering at the edges of her awareness, waiting to show her what she’d become.

What she’d become. This is the essence of Jordan’s novel—a modern-day twist on Hawthorne’s masterpiece that is both political commentary and literary thriller. Part of what’s disturbing about the world Jordan has created is that it’s not altogether unfamiliar, a world where faith is politics and Big Brother knows everything. Yet Jordan has created people who are far from being stock characters in a dramatic setting.

Chromes like Hannah are now society’s most vulnerable members—their every move is trackable. When they disappear no one really cares because, after all, they are *criminals*. Hannah moves into a halfway house for Chromes, a “rehabilitation center” that is as bizarre as it is safe from the outside world. There, she begins to draw lines and solidify who she will become in this new skin. There, she makes the decisions that propel the rest of the novel and inevitably, shape the rest of her life.

When She Woke is fast-paced, yet poetic; political commentary, yet empathetic. Hillary Jordan’s sharp eye for what’s at stake for her characters—the world in which they live, *and* the world of her readers—is terribly compelling.

Jordan is also the author of *Mudbound*, which won the 2006 Bellwether Prize for Fiction, the 2009 Alex Award from the American Library Association, and was named one of the Ten Best Debut Novels of the Decade by *Paste* magazine*.*

S. HOPE MILLS (September / October 2011)

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