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Under The Empyrean Sky (The Heartland Trilogy Book 1)



Synopsis

Fear the Corn. Corn is king in the Heartland, and Cael McAvoy has had enough of it. It's the only crop the Emyrean government allows the people of the Heartland to grow—and the genetically modified strain is so aggressive that it takes everything the Heartlanders have just to control it. As captain of the Big Sky Scavengers, Cael and his crew sail their rickety ship over the corn day after day, scavenging for valuables. But Cael's tired of surviving life on the ground while the Emyrean elite drift by above in their extravagant sky flotillas. He's sick of the mayor's son besting Cael's crew in the scavenging game. And he's worried about losing Gwennie—his first mate and the love of his life—forever when their government-chosen spouses are revealed. But most of all, Cael is angry—angry that their lot in life will never get better and that his father doesn't seem upset about any of it. When Cael and his crew discover a secret, illegal garden, he knows it's time to make his own luck...even if it means bringing down the wrath of the Emyrean elite and changing life in the Heartland forever.

Book Information

File Size: 2786 KB

Print Length: 370 pages

Publisher: Skyscape (July 30, 2013)

Publication Date: July 30, 2013

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B00C7XTOOG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #20,134 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #2

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Customer Reviews

I picked this one up because, after all these years of enjoying Chuck's online rants, I thought I should give his fiction a try. I've bought several of his books, but read none--that TBR pile is REALLY high. The last one I tried was Dinopocalypse Now! and was just too zany for me (too many ingredients in that soup). This one, I really liked. Set in the Heartland, an analog midwest, where the farming folk now work for the Empyrean, a group of hoity toity rich folk distant from the ordinary folk in the same as as the Capitol from the Hunger Games and hundreds of other young adult dystopian visions. What keeps that from making me roll my eyes though, is Wendig's visceral descriptions and character dynamics, especially for the main character, Cael. Seriously, that line describing someone's eye being destroyed? (shudder) Wonderfully awful. Also in the tradition of dystopian young adult, we have a contrivance which means that young people have to marry the person selected for them instead of their heart's choice. Those artificial structures are one of my pet peeves with the entire genre, but once again props to Wendig for getting me past that by centering me fully in the emotions of the moment for Cael and his love, Gwennie. The relationships were complex, as real ones are, full of jealousies and sense of duty and attempts to do what is expected intermixed with dreams of getting away. All in all, quite a good story, and I will probably be back for more in the series.

Cael lives in the Heartland, the vast stretch of country that once was home to many farms, family owned and growing everything that could be farmed. Now, it is all owned by the Empyrean, and the only crop that is grown is genetically engineered corn, which is used to make the corn syrup that provides the wealth to keep the Empyrean flotillas floating high above the common people. Cael and his crew of scavengers are out on their ship, looking for old machinery and parts to sell when they discover a secret garden of illegal vegetables. Cael sees the bounty as his way out of the dismal existence the Empyrean forces the Heartlanders to endure. Instead, he finds a rebellion, a new connection to family, and the chance to make a difference. I read recently that Wendig considers himself a horror writer. I don't know if I would say that for all his work, although some definitely has a creepy aspect. This dystopian tale perhaps walks a line that comes close to horror, with its not-quite-sentient-but-certainly-aware engineered corn, and the Blight, a disease that turns people into almost plants. It's quite an interesting concept, and touches on many of today's controversial issues in both climate and food production. And it paints a somewhat scary picture. But not one without hope. That sliver of light does exist to push Cael and his friends on, even when they don't realize it. The plot moves quickly once it gets going. It is a bit slow at the front end, but once the

story is set-up, it gains momentum. Characters are well written, if not exceptional. The setting is the star here, at least for me. The Heartland is bleak and unfriendly. The people who are little more than forced labor for the Empyrean rulers are hard and tough. Most have a fatalistic attitude about everything. The Empyrean flotillas are like distant stars- too far to touch, a dream of wealth and power that most on the ground can never achieve. There is some mention of sex, but nothing explicit. The books are aimed at older teenagers, so that is not unexpected. There is also a fair bit of cursing, but, again, teenagers do curse, and, if you have read any of Wendig's other books, the language should not be a surprise. All in all, this was a good read and sets up the next book nicely.

This is not a subtle dystopia. The primary issue is that the Earth's surface is now a monoculture of highly-engineered (and toxic) corn. The representative of the orbital-dwelling oppressors is named Agrasanto. That said, YA doesn't need to be subtle. It's very clear how and where Wendig has taken the future events, and it is, as it should be, a story about the characters. Wendig gets a lot of grief about the teen leads who cuss fluently, have sex, smoke and drink illicitly, etc. Do the grief-givers *remember* being teens? And rural teens, at that? The teens-who-acted-like-it are what sold this book for me, with a prose style well pitched to both the audience and the tone of the story.

For this older adult and aspiring novelist, YA is a guilty pleasure. I liked reading this book a whole lot, and immediately plunked for the next one. I've been enjoying Chuck's blog for a while now, but this is my first read of his writing, and I liked it a lot. I'm not a fantasy/sci fi writer, but I enjoy the genre primarily for the creative world-building, and this one is excellent on that score, with lots of interesting ideas that facilitate social commentary, with vivid language to get it across. The characters are good but not great--what brought it down to 4 stars for me--but they work in the context of the story, and may deepen in books two and three. I think the stuff about swearing and violence is nonsensical, given the content of TV, films and video games that kids are exposed to. It's a quick read, very entertaining, with a well-thought out social commentary side that makes it more than just a twinkie. I'm looking forward to the next one, which is now on my phone.

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