

The Faction

Kimberly R. Hill

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*In the haunting dystopian novel *The Faction*, a pandemic survivor is forced to reckon with deep economic inequality.*

In Kimberly R. Hill's future-set novel *The Faction*, a pandemic survivor is adopted by people from her father's privileged past.

After her family members die in a pandemic, Char is left alone in their rural home. She recalls an unfinished fairy tale that her father used to tell her, about a girl trekking into forbidden woods. Then Jake, a family friend, invites Char to join him at his estate.

Thus, Char is introduced to the bank-designed guild system that replaced the US's collapsed economy—one her father was vehement in opposing. She is pampered and piled in luxuries. Jake's mother uses her executive status in the system to procure Char a new identity, complete with a bank account and health insurance. She makes plans for Char's future with Jake. At the same time, Jake introduces Char to the Ranch, a farm that's operating under guild radar whose appeal to her grows.

The book opens with the unfinished fairy tale—an analogy that hangs over Char's own story. The fairy tale's conceit of a forbidden frontier functions in parallel to Char's postpandemic world, in which people are either privileged or pariahs. Here, dilapidated neighborhoods are populated by people without lawful work; there are guild-owned ghettos for those who can work within the system. Conflicts are pervasive.

Char narrates, observing the worlds of the haves and have-nots with wise attentiveness. She senses that she will eventually have to choose on which side she stands. But as the novel progresses, she is often indecisive, accepting developments as they come—including plans for her own wedding. Still, as she witnesses increasing injustices, often at the hands of Jake's family, tension grows. When it comes to her characterization, her thorough and patient qualities prevail; her confusion is rendered sympathetic, even through her instances of inaction.

However, the book's descriptions of how the guilds work and of the various factions lead to narrative stalls, and arguments between Char and Jake regarding her Ranch friends result in additional frustrations. As Jake's anger mounts to antihero proportions, Char is more and more moved by the counterexamples of the Ranch inhabitants, who work in harmonious collaboration with one another. Jake's secrets push her closer to the Ranch as the book progresses toward its satisfying conclusion.

An unwitting heroine comes into her own in *The Faction*, a cautionary dystopian novel in which pandemic survivors deal with additional economic tumult.

MARI CARLSON (May 17, 2023)

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