

★ **The Mars House****Natasha Pulley**

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Earth burns, placing billions of people in a state of crisis in Natasha Pulley's visionary novel *The Mars House*.

January accepts a spot on a refugee ship to Mars as a means of escaping the “fairy-tale nightmare” of fire-, flood-, and war-ravaged Earth. He lands in a world beset by cold, where water is scarce, terraforming has taken root—and xenophobia against Earthstrongers runs rampant, even shaping elections.

For Tharsis Naturals, seven generations acclimated and stretched to willowy heights by low gravity, January's kind represent a danger: one bump could take a life. Once a famous ballerina, January is now regarded as primitive and frightening. Once apolitical, he's electrified to take part in protests against Aubrey Gale, the senator who wants to force Earthstrongers to naturalize—even knowing that it will maim or kill many.

But Gale is not who January expects. When their televised exchange lands January in jail, Gale swoops in with a proposal: a marital arrangement, sparing January naturalization—and preserving their own path to electoral success. And the more time that January spends with Gale, the more confused he becomes: there is humanity beyond their image. They may even be lovable.

Tharsis is made captivating via a mix of everyday details (people use kilowatts as currency and are enraptured with reality shows) with wild, imaginative ones: there are mammoths with myths about Earth, with whom Gale can communicate; there are haptic implants, solar arrays stretching into the atmosphere, and Earthstronger body cages. Sharp explanatory footnotes provide hundreds of years of context—with a bite. To Gale, it's rote; to January, it's all still a wonder. As the two challenge, listen to, empathize with, and finally see each other in time to face an incalculable threat together, they are irresistible.

Subverting a tale about creeping interplanetary fascism with the power of profound, even reckless compassion, *The Mars House* is a dazzling novel about humanity's future.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2024)

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