

BOOK REVIEW from Edge Boston September 22, 2010 by Jeanne Harnois

***Human Scale* by Kitty Beer**

Human Scale is the second novel in Kitty Beer's planned trilogy on what climate catastrophe will do not just to the planet, but to those lucky enough to survive it. Yes, in Cambridge writer Beer's future vision, they are the lucky ones, although at times it may not seem so as they grasp and clutch at their all-too-brief moments of happiness.

While this novel does stand alone, having read the first ([What Love Can't Do](#)) one gets the sense that *Human Scale*, which takes place in 2062, is an interlude, a bridge between the chaos of the 2040s that immediately followed the climate catastrophe that was the setting for *What Love Can't Do* and before the next highly anticipated piece in this trilogy.

This isn't a scared straight story as the 1983 movie *The Day After* was for nuclear war. Its themes are clearly what the future holds if we continue on the path we are on now, but it is not concerned so much with the science or with the preachiness--this also isn't *Silent Spring* or *The Coming Global Superstorm*--as it is with how humankind will continue on despite the destruction. In *Human Scale*, Beer presents us with life as it is for Vita Gordon and those in her orbit. The only expanded scene of "Why?" comes toward the end of the novel when one of Vita's young students recounts his lesson and his confusion: " 'I want to know why.' He appeals bleakly to his mother, as if she could surely solve the tragic puzzle. 'Why did it take them so long? They knew. Why didn't they get it?' " Even though this message is at the core of the novel, though, her main characters are too busy trying to survive and bring both the planet and civilization back into balance to get all philosophical about it.

The passionate Vita Gordon, while exquisitely drawn, is not one of Beer's strongest characters in terms of sense of purpose. Without a doubt, she is a passionate, nurturing woman. But rather than being internally driven, she is merely a foil for the opposing forces that swirl around her dueling for control of her spirit, will, and, most importantly, her heart.

The Zorians are a militant, power-hungry (in terms of both political power and fuel power) group whose figurehead--the corpulent Zoria--is said to be pregnant with Jesus Christ. This, though, is not the son of a forgiving God, but rather an angry, pissed off one. One of the main tenets of Zorianism is that this God smote the planet to punish the sinners and won't stop or allow Jesus Christ to be born and save the world until mankind has sufficiently atoned for their sins (and then some). And even then all won't be bliss. As Zoria puts it: "But woe unto those who fail to follow the Way, Jesus will send them all straight to hell."

Not everyone is going along with the program, however. The Credos, a ragtag revolutionary group, believe that the climate change was wrought not by God but by man's foolishness. While they don't always agree on how, they are determined to fight the priests for control over the scarce resources making them available to all and bringing the planet back into balance while

they're at it.

Vita is caught in the middle of this struggle by the two men in her life: The husband she once thought she loved, Drake, an avowed Zorianist, and her lover, Alex, a leader in the Credo movement. The catalyst in her burgeoning enlightenment from acceptance of the status quo to the true ways of the world is her daughter, Lorna, who is a victim of the priests' chilling virgin decree.

No matter which side they are on, the central characters all have passions as extreme as the weather. They don't just make love, Vita and Alex "make love intensely, reaching heights neither of them has yet experienced, discovering worlds." For his part, Alex feels "as if the sky has opened up and swallowed him and he's in a spiraling vortex both ecstatic and terrifying."

But the reader is often left speculating whether or not these passions are genuine (i.e., true to character) or a result of Beer's evident love of words. Her descriptions are lush, alive, and simply explode on the page. For example, during the summer solstice celebration on Tully Island, a singer doesn't just step up on stage and sing, rather, "Stella, wearing a blouse displaying hefty cleavage in a blur of lace-frosting on angel food cake-sings in a sweet, scratchy voice." There are no ordinary looking people and no one ever has a so-so day. But while one can easily envision Beer enthusiastically crafting every single description with sheer delight at her perfect choice of words, she seems impatient with things like grammar and sentence structure. At times she seems to be giving stage directions: "She fixes her face, combs her hair, dresses again in the neat cream-colored outfit. Frankly enjoys his watching. Comes to gaze down at him affectionately." If this followed a consistent pattern, it might be seen as a clever style choice, however, it comes and goes, much like the freak hailstorms that plague the new Bostonians, but without the lasting damage. Her prose otherwise dances across the page.

Human Scale is a riveting story that sweeps the reader along on a tide of emotion, survival, and, above all, passion. We are with Vita Gordon and those she cares about right from the beginning, mourning their losses and cheering their successes--for their tears and triumphs are our own.

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