

**Review: *Backbiters* by Debra Leea Glasheen
(Montag Press, 2017. 320 pp.)**

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In Debra Leea Glasheen's debut novel, *Backbiters*, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Giluli, maneuvers between her own culture of mahogany-eyed mutants and the culture of her pre-evolved high school classmates (pre-evolved means you and me and all humans in our current stage of evolution).

In line with its dystopian genre, the story takes place fifty four years after a Corporate World War of 2020. Giluli wavers between angst and courage as she faces the prejudice that caused her people, the Red Mighties, to create their own Nationland in a territory in which squirrels and deer are extinct, clover and dandelion are nutritional staples, and even the water of the Great Lakes is putrid.

When a pre-evolutionite leader attempts to extort the Nationland's water by threatening their future and past adoptions of mutant children, Giluli is selected to help the Red Mighty leader, Padrin Kongkassa. Meanwhile Giluli fantasizes about her own pre-evolutionite biofamily and tussles with her brooding childhood friend, Harsh, who can't seem to compete with the charming Tariq, a pre-evolutionite boy from Giluli's track team. Giluli is eventually betrayed by those around her and must choose sides.

Major themes of the novel are ethnic understanding, intelligent loyalty, coping with anger, protecting the environment, and anti-bullying. I am using it in my 10th-grade English classroom with great success. The students love the familiarity of the Wisconsin setting, and the exotic qualities of a warped environment caused by a nuclear war.

Backbiters is a rich story with layers of thought-provoking concepts, all presented in a readable style and believable futuristic world. The story touches on many social issues with sensitivity and humanity. It has traditional teen experiences—crushes, identity issues, competition, conflict, and hope - all wrapped in a culturally diverse landscape. The

theme of intelligent loyalty provides for rich conversations with students, giving them decision-making scenarios in which they can put themselves in the protagonist's place and visualize what they would do in her shoes.

Glasheen deserves praise and recognition for creating such a strong female character for teens. Giluli has all of the normal insecurities of a teenager with questions about life and love, but when presented with a challenging task and high risk decisions, she stands by herself and finds her own way. Giluli's inner dialogue is powerfully and memorably written. My students were able to imagine many possible scenarios and challenges for Giluli to face as she grows and develops in future books. Let's hope there are more on the way soon!

Teaching materials for Glasheen's novel are available at debraleeaglasheen.com; Glasheen is also available to speak to classrooms in person or via Skype.