KIRKUS
REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

7R1B3
(Tribe)
John Mayo-Smith
Self (610 pp.)

BOOK REVIEW

In Mayo-Smith's debut techno-thriller, a handful of people test out the idea of automated government, but it could prove dangerous when some local officials consider it a threat.

When computer technician Kurt Porter found a bug in a contract-bidding program that gave certain companies an unfair advantage, he was framed for cybercrimes that he didn't commit. Then he gets an early release from prison, although he has no idea why. Outside the prison walls, he meets university professor Anika Patel. It's not a chance encounter—Anika knows that, before serving his sentence, Kurt wrote 7R1B3, a government-automation program. She's implemented it in a small town in New York state, Ocean Grove on Fire Island, where she's the mayor—a job offered to her by mysterious benefactor Raemond Station. But Raemond has an even bigger plan in mind to create a micronation, somewhere near Turkey. Raemond contacts various people to implement his grand scheme; the ragtag group includes mechanical/electrical engineers and twin brothers Jiang and Qi Zhang, and popular, Puerto Rican blogger Mia Cardona. They work together, with 7R1B3's guidance, to build the new sovereign nation of Naja, beginning by establishing a new economy. The obstacles that they face, however, are substantial. Turkish President Ömer Ozturk's public support of Naja puts the new nation in the cross hairs of his rival, Pecer Erbakan, who heads Milli Istihbarat Teskilati, Turkey's secret police. Also in the mix is Dark Aurora, a computer program created to counter 7R1B3 through such methods as a direct cyberattack and turning deadly drones against the team.

From the start, Mayo-Smith establishes an unhurried pace that makes for an engaging thriller. For example, it takes a while for Kurt's backstory, including the reason for his incarceration, to come to light. Other characters have equally curious backgrounds that connect to Raemond's recruitment; Anika explains, for example, that she'd been desperate for employment following a sex tape scandal, and Mia uses the job opportunity to escape an abusive boyfriend. Often, the story cloaks elements in mystery. Raemond's and Dark Aurora's origins are murky, and Koban Goran, an agricultural chemistry student in Eastern Turkey, has a role in Naja that isn't made clear for nearly half the novel. Not surprisingly, bits of computer code and related terminology appear throughout, but Mayo-Smith's concise prose is explanatory without ever feeling condescending. His clarification of 7R1B3's experiments with artificial intelligence, for example, includes an apt reference to the well-known, real-life video game SimCity, describing a "scaled up…absurdly realistic" version of that game's environment. Indeed, the scenes in which 7R1B3 communicates with Dark Aurora aren't as complex as they might have been; for instance, 7R1B3's reasoning is perfectly understandable as it tries to determine whether Dark Aurora is sending botlike random messages. The story also has its share of action, primarily involving assaults by the MIT, but the people in Naja face other menaces—including deadly snakes. The memorable final act includes more than one shocking death.

A sci-fi-tinged suspense novel that's as smart as it is entertaining.