

Book Review

Conform by Ariel Sullivan

A dystopian novel with themes reminiscent of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Hunger Games*, this book gives a glimpse into a world where the citizens are living in a tiered cityscape as most of the world is laid to nuclear waste.

The Illum have ruled since the Last War, creating a society where genetic abnormalities mark a person as 'below.' Citizens are divided into The Elite, Minor Defects, and Major Defects, each with assigned rights, roles, and status— instantly recognised by colour, in true *Handmaid's Tale* coding. The Elite, in colourful finery, live in opulence in the Clouds; Minor Defects, in grey, handle clerical work in Hightown; and Major Defects, in blue, toil away in Lowtown. But this is a ruse - while Major Defects do the labour, most live Below—in hidden tunnels once used during nuclear fallout, but now transformed into a vibrant underground city of art, music, and, of course, rebellion. Enter: The Reaper. The unknown Reaper, rebel leader, wants to usurp the authoritarian regime and fight injustice.

Our main female character, a Minor Defect, finds herself stuck in the middle of these warring sides. All her life she has been indoctrinated to want to become a vessel for the Greater Good, Mated to an Elite, enjoying a life of luxury.

However, all is not as rosy as it seems with a life in the clouds. Emeline soon finds herself in a Procreation Contract with not just any Elite, but the Enforcer of the Illum. Conditioned to be meek and compliant, not traits she comes by naturally, she expects her Mate to be harsh and uncaring, but is surprised to find that Collin is almost normal behind closed doors - their relationship soon feels like something more than just a contract.

Emeline becomes a target of animosity and speculation: shunned by her fellow defects and used as a pawn in The Illum's game - a game in which she is always a step behind, her sheltered upbringing leaving her naive and exposed to being used and manipulated. At work one day, Emeline meets Hal, a Major Defect. Dressed in navy and, of course, dashing and handsome, he is intriguing and infuriating, making her question her loyalty to the Greater Good.

As Emeline's match with Collin proceeds, and Hal continues to turn up at her work, she soon finds herself drawn to both men. Her Illum Mate is a conundrum, at times cold and overbearing, and other times treating her as his equal. Clearly a man with dark secrets, talking with him often feels layered and confusing. Emeline still feels inextricably drawn to him, and begins to wonder if he feels the same, but his mercurial moods leave her uncertain. Time with Hal feels easier, discussing the famous works of art that Emeline is tasked with destroying, they bicker about The Illum and The Elite, but he also shows outward care and affection towards her that draws her in.

As Emeline learns that both men and their factions are committing immoral acts, she wars with herself over right and wrong, in her naivety she wants to label one side as the villain and one as the hero, struggling to reconcile this with the men she knows. There is a whirlwind of emotions, society balls, subterfuge, sub-plots, secret rendezvous, rebel attacks, Illum-sanctioned revenge and betrayal of the worst kind, before we come to the end of the book and while much has been revealed, you find yourself still questioning who is who and what, exactly, just happened there?!

This is not a book without flaws – a fair few of the plot twists were guessable, everyone falls in love immediately, Emeline's behaviour was often immature and her impulsive actions and reckless attitude to her own safety have dire consequences for others. Having said that, I did enjoy this book. This was Sullivan's debut novel, and the first in a trilogy. I look forward to reading the second instalment. She has recently published a prequel set in the days post-Last War, as the humans who survived the nuclear fallout aim to expand out and back up to the surface, their underground city no longer able to sustain them. I've added it to my never ending TBR pile.

Lauren James: Mundella Primary School: May 2026

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." Dr Seuss