



Survival Colony 9

By Joshua David Bellin

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In a futuristic landscape ravaged by war, a colony's hopes for survival hinge on one teenage boy in this fast-paced, action-packed story "filled with interesting plot twists, compelling characters, and gripping action" (VOYA).

Querry Genn is in trouble. He can't remember anything before the last six months. And Querry needs to remember. Otherwise he is dead weight to the other members of Survival Colony 9, one of the groups formed after a brutal war ravaged the earth. And now the Skaldi have come to scavenge what is left of humanity. No one knows what the Skaldi are, or why they are here, just that they impersonate humans, taking their form before shedding the corpse like a skin.

Desperate to prove himself after the accident that stole his memory, Querry is both protected and tormented by the colony's authoritarian commander, his father. The only person he can talk to is the beautiful Korah, but even with her, he can't shake the feeling that something is desperately wrong. Whatever is going on, Querry is at the center of it, for a secret in his past not only makes him a target of the Skaldi's wrath, but the key to the colony's future.

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Survival Colony 9 By Joshua David Bellin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1186122 in Books
- Published on: 2015-09-08
- Released on: 2015-09-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .90" w x 5.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 336 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"Joshua David Bellin brings serious game in a post-apocalyptic thriller that collides breathless action with devious world building and genuine heart. A terrific novel!" (Jonathan Maberry, New York Times bestselling author of ROT & RUIN and V-WARS)

"Tantalizing mysteries abound among the human and inhuman inhabitants of the bleak landscape, and the postapocalyptic plot is satisfyingly full of twists." (*Booklist*)

"Survival Colony 9 will appeal to sci-fi fans who will anxiously await the planned sequel." (*School Library Journal*)

"This cautionary tale is filled with interesting plot twists, compelling characters, and gripping action. Fans of dystopian thrillers should find the conflicted protagonist's story thought-provoking as he discovers his identity, establishes a new family, and finds hope in his desolate environment." (*VOYA*)

"Debut author Bellin weaves a bleak postapocalyptic tale of survival against overwhelming odds, centering around an amnesiac teenager who plays a pivotal role in his colony's attempt to stay alive." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"An amnesiac struggles to make sense of his place in a war-ravaged world where small bands of human survivors scramble to stay one step ahead of a menacing, body-snatching threat." (*Kirkus Reviews*)

"Set in a gritty post-apocalyptic world, SURVIVAL COLONY 9 is both an adventure and an exploration of what it means to be human. This debut novel made me feel almost as desperate to find out the secret behind Querry Genn's existence as he felt. And what a surprise when everything was revealed!" (Margaret Peterson Haddix, author of *The Missing Series*)

About the Author

Joshua David Bellin has been writing books since the age of eight (though his first few were admittedly very, very short). He is the author of *Survival Colony 9* and its sequel, *Scavenger of Souls*. When he's not writing, he spends his time drawing, catching amphibians, and watching monster movies with his kids. A Pittsburgh native, Josh has taught college English, published three nonfiction books (one about monsters!), and taken part in the movement to protect the environment. You can find him online at JoshuaDavidBellin.com.

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Survival Colony 9

1

WEST

"Querry."

My dad's voice in the dark.

“Son. Come on. Time to get moving.”

His hand on my shoulder, shaking me from sleep.

“Querry. On your feet. Now.”

I opened my eyes to more darkness and my dad’s shadowy shape filling the tent. I couldn’t make out his face, but I could hear his quiet breath. There was no urgency in his voice, there never was, but I knew this was for real.

I swung my legs over the side of the cot and fished for my boots. I could see my dad’s silhouette where he’d lifted the tent flap, letting in a pale slice of light.

“Skaldi?” I asked, fumbling with the laces.

He grunted.

“How many?”

He half turned, moonlight carving his angular features from the night. “It only takes one.”

“How close?”

“Let’s hope we don’t find out.” He let the flap fall and approached me in the renewed dark. His hands gripped my shoulders, guiding me to my feet. “Ready? Let’s get moving.” He lifted the heavy canvas and ushered me into the night.

The hollow where we’d camped bustled with activity. Everywhere I looked, men and women in identical gray-brown camouflage uniforms were taking down shelters, packing camp stoves and propane tanks, loading bundles onto the three remaining trucks. The nozzles and tanks of flamethrowers gleamed dully in the hands of the three sentries on the eastern fringe of camp. Nobody spoke, but there were plenty of quiet sounds: the pad of boots on dusty ground, the clink of metal against metal as tin pots, plates, and cups were rolled into packs, the whisper of tents collapsing. Enough moonlight peeked through the shrouded sky to show figures, but not faces. We don’t use fires or lanterns unless we have to. Fires draw the ones that are hunting us, and fuel is too precious to waste. But our eyes are sharp, even at night.

Not that there’s much to see. In the daylight, just about everything is brown, like us. Land, sky, and water.

“I’ll be right back,” my dad said. He took a step toward the small knot of trucks lined up on the western edge of camp.

Then it hit me. “West?”

He looked at me sharply, but nodded.

“The Skaldi always come from the west.”

“Seems times have changed.”

“But—”

He returned to where I stood and held up his right hand, palm facing me, then tapped his forehead with his first two fingers. “Focus.” He forked his fingers and pointed straight at me. “Eyes open. Mind sharp. Remember.” He nodded emphatically and headed for the trucks. His bad hip made him move unevenly, his right leg seeming about to crumple with each step. He huddled with his officers, giving orders in a quiet but forceful voice.

I knew my job. Working as quickly as possible, I tugged my cot from the tent, released the legs, and folded it in half. Next I yanked the tent stakes out, collapsed the frame, and rolled the tent into a tight bundle. When I hoisted everything onto my back, it was like carrying another body around with me. But we needed every inch of space on the trucks to hold the fuel drums and supplies, the stoves and tools and ammunition, while still leaving room for the people too young to keep up with the rest of us. My dad had been giving me driving lessons for the past month, showing me how to work the heavy, awkward stick, how to put my weight on the squeaky brakes, but that was only in case of an emergency. Realistically, it would be another couple years before he let me take a turn behind the wheel.

If the fuel lasted that long.

If we lasted that long.

I wiggled my shoulders, trying to find a more comfortable fit. Even with the sun down, sweat beaded on my forehead, pooled under my arms. The whole procedure had taken me just over seven minutes, which was good but not great. My dad wanted me to get it down to five. When I first started breaking camp on my own, he would stand there with a stopwatch while I fumbled with all the stakes and straps, his presence making me way clumsier than I would have been if I was practicing alone, and when I finally finished he’d hold out the watch without saying a word. Then the watch stopped working and he kept count instead. Which was even worse, him standing there counting the seconds in his head. Even now that he trusted me to keep my own time, I couldn’t break camp without seeing him there, silent and impatient, counting for me.

I made one final check of my area, verified that nothing was missing, nothing left behind. Then, bent under my pack, I hurried to where the trucks were parked and being readied for evacuation.

I double-checked our coordinates. The command truck pointed due west.

I tried not to think about what that meant.

The little kids had already been loaded onto the back of the rear truck, seven of them in all. They were keeping quiet, sitting among the dark mountains of crates under the canvas frame, only their eyes visible in the moonlight. I could tell they were scared, though. Most of the time, in daylight or when there hadn’t been an alarm for weeks, you could convince yourself they were just kids, having fun, playing kick the can around camp, getting into arguments, who tagged who or where base was or whatever. But they grew up in a hurry. Kids six, seven years old, kids with gaps in their mouths from lost baby teeth, wouldn’t cry even when they had to move out in the middle of the night. That was one of the first jobs my dad gave me, once he decided I was ready for the responsibility. I’d come to their tents and take their hands, lead them in a chain to the trucks, and they wouldn’t make a sound. The littlest of the bunch, a five-year-old named Keely, the son of my dad’s driver, would peer out at me through uncut bangs, brown and as thick as they say the forests used to be. He’d squeeze my hand so tight I knew he was determined to prove he was brave. I’d squeeze back, glad he was too little to realize I was trying to prove the same thing.

I don't know if Keely knew what we were running from. But he definitely knew we were running.

I joined the other teenagers, clustered by the back of the command truck, talking nervously in low voices, waiting for my dad to give the order to move out. Eight total, counting me, though as usual, Yov hadn't showed up yet. Most had no parents, or only one, and my dad relied on them to get ready on their own.

"What's taking so long?" one girl, Nessa, said in a pinched whisper.

"Maybe it's a false alarm," a boy named Wali whispered back.

"If it's a false alarm, why are you whispering?" Wali's girlfriend, Korah, mimicked his hushed voice. She shook her black hair and made a face. The others giggled nervously, all except Kelmen, a dimwitted giant who always looked like he had no idea what anyone was talking about.

That was when Yov showed up, slouching toward us with his pack slung carelessly over one shoulder. He was the oldest kid in camp, about seventeen, and taller than most of the grown-ups.

"How do we know this isn't some kind of drill?" he said, not bothering to lower his voice. "Did the scouts even report in?"

"The scouts to the east, you mean," I said.

Everyone got really quiet. Yov glared at me.

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I mean."

"Well?" I said. "What do you think?"

"We're supposed to think now?" he sniffed. "Isn't that what daddy's for?" He smirked at me. "Space Boy."

"Shut up," I said.

"And if I don't?"

"Hey!" Keely's father, Araz, leaned out the driver's side window. "Skaldi have ears, you know."

"You sure?" Yov shot back. "Because I was under the impression they followed our lovely stench."

"Wise guy," Araz muttered.

"So did the scouts report in?" Yov called out.

Araz opened his mouth to yell back, but he caught himself and spoke in a tense undertone. "We're leaving, aren't we? Figure it out yourself, genius."

"Yes sir!" Yov tossed him a pretend salute.

Araz looked like he was about to exit the truck. Then, saying something under his breath, he pulled his head back in the window.

Yov put his hands on his hips and turned dramatically to face me. The smirk never left his lips. Korah got my attention, rolled her eyes, and let out a loud, exaggerated sigh. I looked away, feeling my face grow warm.

With Yov, it was easy to forget my dad's orders. With Korah, it was impossible to remember anything.

We waited without saying another word while workers hurriedly loaded the rest of the supplies onto the trucks, hauled up the ramps, and slammed the tailgates. As usual, it took forever for the oldest person in camp to climb into the cab of the rear truck, a crazy old woman clutching a large, bottle-green jar to her chest. I watched my dad move from vehicle to vehicle, making sure all the little kids were on board and the equipment tied down, giving final instructions to the drivers. To save fuel, they wouldn't start the engines until he gave the order. When he was satisfied with the preparations, he came over to us.

"You ready?" he said.

Everyone nodded. Even Yov kept his mouth shut.

"Query," my dad said, "you forget anything?"

"No," I mumbled. A little wave of giggles and shoves passed through the group. Yov, I noticed, was grinning broadly. My dad looked me up and down, but for once he didn't pursue it.

"Stay close," he said to all of us. "And stick with the group. No heroics, right?"

We nodded again.

"Good." He signaled and his second-in-command, Aleka, a tall woman with a severe face, joined us at the back of the truck. They consulted quietly for a moment before he hobbled off to make one final check of everything. He looked once over his shoulder as he left, and I tried to stand straight under the burden of my pack.

Aleka eyed us dispassionately. "If we get separated, don't wander," she said. "Lay low and wait for my signal. Query." I stepped forward. "You're staying with me."

"What for?"

She shot me a look, but didn't answer. "Yov." He gave a lazy nod. "You're in charge tonight. I need you to keep an eye on the others."

"What's so special about him?"

"I need you to watch the others," Aleka said. Her eyes never left his.

For a minute he stared back, and I was sure he was going to give her grief like he'd done with Araz. Korah opened her mouth and seemed about to intervene when Yov let out a laugh. It sounded loud and tinny in the quiet night.

"We clear?" Aleka said.

"Yeah," Yov shrugged. "Whatever."

Aleka took my arm. I could feel my ears burning, Yov's eyes boring into my back. I couldn't get his question out of my mind.

What's so special about him?

"I can walk," I said, trying to shrug away from her.

"I need you to stay close," she said, but she let go of my arm.

My dad leaned out the passenger window of the command truck, looking back at us. Under his long hair his dark eyes glittered, and his face was unsmiling beneath his beard. I'd never seen him smile that I could remember.

He nodded to Aleka, or to me, and his head disappeared into the cab.

With a rattle and cough the trucks started up, filling the air with the oily smell of diesel. The ground shook as, headlights off, the line of trucks rumbled up the hill and out of the hollow. Aleka waved a hand and our group started to march, the two of us in the lead, the rest behind. I heard Yov grumbling under his breath, but I couldn't make out the words.

At the crest of the hill, a trio of bare trees drew twisted shapes against the night sky. Through clouds of dust and exhaust I saw the other walkers, the twenty or so adults who weren't driving or babysitting, trudging up the opposite slope, their packs double the size of ours. Behind them the sentries marched backward, flamethrowers at the ready. In the gray light everyone looked shadowy and leached of color like old photos, the kind I'd seen people take out of their packs at night and caress with their fingertips, as if they were trying to cast a magic spell to bring the scarred, glossy images back to life.

When we reached the top of the hill I leaned a hand against a tree trunk, its bark as dry and scaly as thorns. The land to our west stretched into darkness. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but the knot in my gut wouldn't let it go down.

Did it really matter which way we were heading? East, west, it all looked the same.

I took a step.

Then I heard a sharp hiss of breath from behind me, and I turned to peer back down the hill.

A tall, thin man stood in the swirling smoke we'd left in our wake.

He could have been anyone, with his camouflage uniform and shadowed face. But the way he moved was wrong. All the grown-ups in camp moved with purpose, keeping the drills and rituals intact, never showing hesitation or doubt no matter what they felt. This man moved in a drifting, unsteady way, taking small steps in one direction, then the other, as if he was up to his waist in water. Only his head, turning back and forth like a snake tonguing the air for prey, seemed fixed with intent.

"Skaldi!" someone yelled.

The man in the hollow froze. His nose lifted into the air, more like he'd caught the scent than heard the sound. For a second he stood rooted to the spot, swaying slightly.

Then he dropped to a crouch and sprang up the hill toward us, one hand propelling him across the ground, the other tucked at his side. His face stayed in shadow, but I caught a glint of his teeth, bared and white in the moonlight.

Aleka grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the trucks. The group behind us broke formation and ran in the same direction. Korah shouted above the confusion. Doors slammed and my dad's voice barked orders.

A yellow burst of flame exploded from the rear truck, its heat searing my eyeballs. The next thing I knew, Aleka had thrown me into the back of the command truck, whispering harshly, "Stay down!" Then she disappeared.

I lay still and listened to the chaos outside. When I couldn't take it anymore, I lifted my head to look over the cargo door, but just then Araz hit the gas and all I saw as we blasted into enemy territory were the zigzag trails of flame against a sky without a hint of dawn.

"The colony!" my dad's voice rose for a second before drowning in the trucks' roar. "Protect . . ." Then I heard nothing more.

The colony. HSC-9, Human Survival Colony Number 9.

Survival Colony 9. The only home I can remember.

I just wish I could remember how I got here.

Or who I am.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Guadalupe Winn:

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Joseph Jackson:

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