



Sister Alice

Robert Reed

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"An epic tale of visionary futures and scientific speculation."

--*Library Journal*

Millions of years from now, humanity will be on the brink of self-destruction. The world's great leaders have created an elite group who, by their superior wisdom and abilities, keep the peace, maintain progress, and otherwise safeguard humanity's future. Genetically enhanced, they are the carriers of Earth's greatest talents, a force unlike any in the history of mankind.

For ten million years, the Families dominated the galaxy. But then Alice, a brilliant scientist of the Chamberlain family, took part in an attempt to create a new galaxy. Her experiment unleashed vast forces that the family could not control, causing a catastrophe that killed untold billions of people on many worlds. Before she was punished for her role in the debacle, Alice visited Ord, a younger Chamberlain. Only he, of all the people in the galaxy, knows what Alice tells him. Her words launch him upon a quest that will take him across the vast reaches of space. He must discover his own true nature, and somehow restore the family honor. Sister Alice is his epic story.

Sister Alice Details

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Author : Robert Reed

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From Reader Review Sister Alice for online ebook

Ray Henderson says

Robert Reed thinks big and pulls it off well

An enjoyable book by the creator of The Great Ship.
This definitely isn't the common serial space battle nonsense.
If you like great leaps in concept, you will enjoy this book.

Richard Valentine says

Robert Reed's collection of short stories-turned-novel was ambitious and interesting, but towards the end he pushes so many ideas toward you that the story bogs down a bit. The ending was a bit unsatisfying, but I understand why he wrote it that way. Overall, it was a very good book, and I'd recommend it.

Natalie Williams says

In some ways, this reminded me of David Lindsay's "A Voyage to Arcturus" in it's far-reaching dreaminess. It is a vision the melds the hope of humanity, astrophysics, quantum potential and human frailty into a futuristic tale of loss and possible redemption. Descriptively, it is lush with fantastic images and sensations that propel the reader along on a cosmic, metaphysical ride through vistas and experiences some have yet to even dream of . . . and the endings not half bad either! I'll be reading more of Mr. Reed.

Matthew says

I'm hovering between three and four stars. This was more of a book about thoughts and ideas rather than a novel with a concrete narrative. That's not true. There's a story in there, but so much of tech and science in the novel is off the scale (we're talking in the realm of humans as star ships) that it's really difficult to comprehend what's going on. Let alone understand the process through which our characters are able to accomplish these god like feats.

There's less than 10 main characters in the story as well, and they're not fleshed out well. A few of them are just archetypes, as that's how the families of humanity have been separated in this far future. Throw in an ending where the causal linearity of the story is thrown into question and you've got a book where you look at it with appreciation for what it achieves, but little understanding of what really was going on.

Gene Steinbacher says

To a certain extent I enjoyed this book but I found much of it confusing. And I did not understand the ending at all. Would recommend it only for the hardcore SciFi readers.

David Roy says

I'm realizing how many of Reed's stories have a young boy as the protagonist.

The ending was a frustratingly vague mystery. "... and everything." ???

Christopher McKitterick says

Here is a novel that stimulates thought and conversation - I found myself discussing the ideas with people who hadn't even read it yet. It inspires one to pondering the Big Questions.

In many ways, this could have been written as fantasy rather than SF, but it would have lost a lot of its threat and realism, if you can call it that. This is a story about gods and about humanity, and what it means when a simple, though good-hearted, human child (well, a child in terms of immortals) is prematurely granted god-like powers in order to save the universe (no, really). These powers (called "talents") are never really explained, nor is the mechanism for just about anything in the book, which is why it feels like fantasy. But of course such millions-of-years advanced technology would appear as magic. How could we understand its workings? So I never felt cheated.

An important line is this: "We are nothing but talents, really. We are genius and power and focus and skills beyond number <...> In every consequential way, are nothing... nothing but clothes donned for the narrowest of occasions..." Is this not also true of us primitive humans? If you strip away the things we do and how we think and our innate talents, who are we? But is a creature who is almost entirely comprised of add-on talents still a human? A creature who can off-handedly destroy inhabited worlds and create universes - is that still human?

Caryatid says

Disappointing, specially after reading Marrow which was superb.
Wordy and messy and vague.

Roddy Williams says

'Some 10 million years in the future, a thousand trustworthy humans and their cloned offspring have been granted an incredible power. With it they can build worlds wherever they wish and terraform any wasteland. With it they preserved a peace that lasted for eons.

But the arrival of a woman as old as The Great Peace itself generates uncertainty and fear. For she brings with her a dire warning: the tale of an ancient crime that may yet tear the universe asunder.'

Blurb from the 2003 Orbit paperback edition.

This novel is a fix-up adapted from five stories originally published in ASIMOV'S SF magazine:-

Sister Alice (November 1993)

Brother Perfect (September 1995)

Mother Death (January 1998)

Baby's Fire (July 1999)

Father to The Man (September 2000)

Ord is apparently the youngest child of the Chamberlain family, one of a thousand families whose members – augmented by near-immortality and quantum cyborg talents – maintain a peace within the galaxy which has lasted millions of years.

We discover early on that the Chamberlains are not a family in the normal sense. Ord is merely the latest model in a series of clones that now number more than 22,000. Rank is assigned by what number the clone is in the chain, so when the Chamberlains receive news that Alice, their number twelve (and hence only the eleventh clone to be created) is to visit after an absence of millions of years, the family begin to speculate on her motives.

Alice, shunning the rest of the family, befriends Ord, and confesses that she was the architect of an experiment which has gone tragically wrong, creating an explosion which is already causing devastation and which could potentially engulf the entire galaxy.

The consequences for the Chamberlains are personally devastating. Alice is imprisoned, stripped of her godlike powers and the rest of the family become hunted as The Great Peace collapses into chaos while frantic rescue efforts are made in an attempt to evacuate worlds near the core before they are destroyed. Ord illegally receives some of Alice's talents and sets off on a mission, the nature of which he does not fully understand.

Once more, Reed has produced a novel on a grand scale, its timespan covering millennia.

In some senses it can be described as a 'Romantic' novel since it eschews – and this was also a criticism aimed at 'Marrow' – the current Classical fashion for tortuous explanations of quantum mechanics and string theory. The augments of the older members of the family are powered by masses of dark matter although the exact scientific principles are avoided, in this case a refreshingly welcome change.

Reed can, I think, be described as a modern van Vogt. the transformation to 'superman' is common in his work and he employs the same vast land and time-scapes that van Vogt once played with, paying attention to, but not controlled by, the basic laws of the Universe.

The plot (again a strange vanVogt-ian trait) ends up being far more complex than one might initially suspect. The premise is also a Romantic one, since one cannot imagine – in however enlightened a society – civilisation handing over its reins to a thousand carefully chosen beneficiaries and their cloned descendants. This novel could very easily have descended into a triumph of style over content were it not for Reed's complex strands of character motives and actions.

From one viewpoint it could be argued that this is an examination of what determines personality.

At one point Alice remembers herself as a child, with her 'father', Ian, the original Chamberlain. they are standing in a stairwell of their estate house and Ian has given Alice some cloned feathers. All are identical, he tells her, and asks her to drop the feathers one by one over the balcony.

Although identical in every respect, the feathers are subject to the changing forces around them and so no two fall exactly the same way. It is a device by which Ian explains to Alice why her brothers and sisters, although genetically identical, are shaped into individuals by the Universe around them.

There are questions raised as to which is the real personality when an augmented human becomes 99% computer memories and 1% flesh.

Later there are ethical questions raised about the morality of creating a universe in which Life can be

cultivated if the price to be paid is the destruction of entire Star Systems teeming with sentient life. This whole debate, however, is itself subverted when the reader realises that the entire sequence of events may have been part of a plan set in motion aeons before.

There are seldom any easy endings or answers in Reed's work. There are merely consequences which directly affect the protagonists.

It is to Reed's credit though, that the questions raised tends to linger in the mind and niggle away at us in the wee small hours.

Crusader says

This is a complex novel on so many levels. It will have you thinking about it for days after finishing it. I enjoyed the "Ender's Game" like quality the novel kicks off with. However I found it a bit difficult to picture and grasp the idea of godlike humans and how they actually function.

The ending has an impressive twist and will have you pondering over it for ages.

Craig says

Set in the future where many humans have obtained god like powers. This story follows the youngest son of a family that's high in power. He tries to right the wrongs his sister Alice created. This book was ok. Often I was confused by what was going on. I think that's because it wasn't engaging me enough to completely pay attention to the details. But it wasn't altogether bad. At times I did enjoy it.

Zozo says

Sister Alice is a great book. The title is bad though. Not because the story doesn't revolve around Alice who is the sister of the protagonist (because it does), but because it's lame and says nothing about the book and it misleads. And the cover is lame too: it shows some kind of spaceship, while there is not one spaceship throughout the whole book. Actually Robert makes a point of his characters not travelling in spaceships. The story I label: weird science fiction. As usual, characters in Robert's books grow older than planets. They watch the birth and fall of mountains. They terraform planets "with their bare hands". They launch new civilizations. These are once-humans with godly powers and they use them more or less wisely. It's very entertaining and I'm glad Reed managed to keep the book "not too long".

Cathy Bryant says

This SF novel is really four novelettes stuck together, and if the third one hadn't been so irritating, the book would have got five stars.

In the future, certain families are privileged. Nothing new there, really, but they have physical and mental enhancements and are practically immortal. Young Ord, of the family Chamberlain, starts to have problems when an ancient member of his family - the Alice of the title - visits, selecting him to hear her cryptic warnings and become part of her plan.

The first section is nigh-on perfect, with the world-cohesion of the Dune novels and the narrative pull of Ender's Game (only this is more emotionally mature, thank goodness). The next section continues and develops, but the third is basically a high speed chase that goes on too long, with very little happening. The speed is supposed to be high but the pace is slow and the effect is dull. The fourth section sorts things out rather well, making good use of the characters in the earlier part of the book, and I was left rather pleased. If only that third section had been better...

Recommended, and I will read more by this author.

Magdelanye says

my review, which took me an hour to write, disappeared into the GR black hole. :-(

Compelling writing and the confidence that it all would begin to hang together and become comprehensible kept me reading this overblown and disconnected science fiction thriller. I could not get comfortable with the scale of the thing, although the hero was surprisingly endearing, never entirely losing his innocent concern for the well-being of others.

RR has a talent for being both succinct and descriptive. I have no doubt he "gets it" but I wish he paid more attention to continuity.

Still, the struggle to make sense of this book was worth it for the following elegant observation:

"...the universe was a tangle of simple suppositions and principles woven together in chaotic ways. p35"

Craig says

Would give 3.5 stars if I could. The last 75 pages seemed to lose some momentum, at least for my tastes. I really like the technology leaps that this author makes. I sometimes wonder if he is thinking deep down that this could be the human story here on earth. Some immortals who will live billions of years tinkering with our little solar system. Interesting to think that some 'being' who is only a million years old is considered a child.
