



House of Suns

Alastair Reynolds

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Six million years ago, at the dawn of the star-faring era, Abigail Gention fractured herself into a thousand male and female clones, which she called shatterlings. But now, someone is eliminating the Gention line. Champion and Purslane — two shatterlings who have fallen in love and shared forbidden experiences — must determine exactly who, or what, their enemy is, before they are wiped out of existence.

House of Suns Details

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From Reader Review House of Suns for online ebook

WarpDrive says

I normally tend not to write reviews on fiction works, as I prefer to focus more on my non-fictional readings, but this time I felt compelled to write something about this masterpiece.

It has been a long time since I had last experienced the pleasure of reading such a beautiful example of space opera.

The width and scope of this ambitious work are simply breathtaking; we are dealing here with a visionary, outstanding work of hard science fiction that manages to address many traditional themes of science fiction in a compelling, modern, and scientifically plausible way.

This author can be easily put at the same level as Asimov. There is creative genius at work here.

Characterized by epic world-building, bold and impressive scope, and delineating an awe-inspiring, sweeping evolution across huge expanses of space and time, this is a work of art and great imaginative power. Wow. This author has something to say, and he says it beautifully.

This deserves nothing less than 5 stars. Very highly recommended.

Kevin Kelsey says

Posted at Heradas Review

This is my first Alastair Reynolds standalone novel. Having previously absorbed everything remotely related to his Revelation Space series over the last few years, I wanted to dip my toes into some of his one-off writing before digging into his newer series work. For some reason this book has been out of print in the US for a few years, making a physical copy a little tedious to come by, but I did eventually find one. Come on ACE, it's time for a reprint!

Coming from the RS camp, I was surprised with the linearity of this story. The whole thing is written in first person, with two main point of view characters in alternating chapters. Every 6-7 chapters brings a flashback interjection that slowly reveals details and moves everything forward. I suppose adding unnecessary linear complexity to a story that already has so many strange new concepts in it, might've been overkill on the reader. As a result, the story flows nicely and was easier to follow than Revelation Space. I'd say this would be a terrific jumping in point if you were interested in checking out Reynolds' work.

House of Suns is epic in every way the word can be defined. The scale of some of the conceptual elements was so broad that I initially had some difficulty finding a handhold to comprehend them. I felt like it stretched my mind a little bit just reaching for a way to relate. The best Science Fiction always does this for me in some way. It exists in that sweet spot directly between what you currently understand, and what you are capable of understanding. The best stories can be a linchpin, connecting you to your future, slightly more experienced self. I suppose this is true of all fiction, but I find it particularly so with the genres of Speculative Fiction, which are after all, more interested in investigating the "other" than fiction firmly rooted in the realm of realism often is.

The amount of mind-bending concepts Reynolds managed to pack into this novel while maintaining a coherent story is impressive: Star dams, ring worlds, causality, time dilation, artificial intelligence, solar system relocation, ancient technology, the nature of memory, longevity, cloning, wormholes, civilizational

“turnover”, etc. It’s simply exploding with these huge ideas, but the story is never sacrificed in favor of them. It churns along, always moving forward.

Reynolds occasionally gets some slack for his character development or lack thereof, each character’s voice tending to just be the author’s voice, etc. So, when I realized that most of the characters in *House of Suns* were literal clones of the same character, I rolled my eyes a little and thought “Well, I guess that’s one way to get around the criticism.” But, it actually worked very well here.

These clone characters are “shatterlings” with indefinitely long lifespans that have drifted from their source individual, and each other, for 6 million years (epic scale!) and are essentially unique individuals as a result of their differing life experiences. Because they are clones, instead of noticing their similarities, you’re drawn toward their differences. The ways in which they are similar just reinforce the fact that they started from a near identical point. It’s a brilliant way to reframe the reader’s perception regarding character work without actually changing the writer’s approach to characterization. It feels very self-aware, and it’s clever as hell. It’s almost like he’s acknowledging his critics, but saying “See, it’s not necessarily bad, it’s just how you look at it”. Personally, the character work in Reynolds’ books has never bothered me, but if it bothered you, I think you’ll find this one has a refreshingly different take.

The story concludes satisfactorily, but leaves some things open for more. I would absolutely love another novel set in this universe, and the point at which this novel arrives could be seen as a great widening of that universe’s potential scope. It’s ripe for more tales, and I hope we get them. Reynolds has said: **“I would like to return to this universe but I have no fixed plans for when that will happen.”** Fingers crossed that those plans will materialize soon!

Oscar says

La mejor ciencia ficción que se escribe actualmente corre por parte de los autores británicos, y eso es incuestionable. Talentos de la talla de Iain M. Banks, Peter F. Hamilton, Paul McAuley, Ian R. MacLeod, Charles Stross, Stephen Baxter o el mismo Alastair Reynolds, son buena prueba de ello. Todos poseen talento e imaginación, pero Alastair tiene algo que lo convierte en único, posee inventiva y ambición por superarse a sí mismo en cada libro, aunque no siempre lo consigue, pero al menos siempre busca ideas con las que impactar a sus lectores.

‘Casa de Soles’ transcurre fuera de su conocido universo *Espacio Revelación*, algo que, sinceramente, se echa de menos. Al empezar la novela, nos encontramos con Abigail Gentian, una niña que vive en una mansión de dimensiones enormes, con millones de habitaciones. Cada una de las ocho partes de que consta la novela comienza con unas páginas dedicadas a Abigail, algo que nos ayudará a comprender el porqué de lo que vamos leyendo.

Porque en realidad, ‘Casa de Soles’ está protagonizada por Campion y Purslane, una pareja shatterling, perteneciente al Clan Gentian, que se dedican a recorrer la galaxia, como el resto de miembros del clan, en sus naves interestelares. Algunas de las misiones del clan, consisten en colocar presas basadas en mundo anillos alrededor de estrellas, para la seguridad de las civilizaciones más cercanas a ellas. Completado un circuito completo, que dura millones de años, han de volver para reunirse y compartir sus memorias. Cuando casi están terminando uno de estos circuitos, se encuentran con un posthumano llamado Ateshga, que tras diversas aventuras, les llevará a conocer a Hesperus, un robot miembro de la raza de los Mecánicos. Pero lo que parece un viaje a una típica reunión del clan, se convierte en una pesadilla de dimensiones

impredecibles.

Como siempre, Alastair nos ofrece una historia de grandes proporciones, donde no se habla de años sino de millones de años, y en donde la originalidad y el entretenimiento están asegurados. Sin duda, se trata de lo mejor que se puede encontrar en materia de ciencia ficción actualmente, y en concreto en lo que a *space opera* se refiere.

William says

Wonderful and delightful. Certainly his best full-length novel. Three primary characters - Purslane and Champion are lovers, and Hesperus is a rescued "Machine Person" - have enough depth and heart and intelligence to sparkle. The long-winded, page-filling, static dialogue as too-often seen in previous full novels, is blessedly absent here. Well done, Alastair!

A comfortable start into a plot spanning 6 million years; but don't worry, we only see appropriate slices of this expanse of time. The book introduces a mystery early on, which blossoms into a full-blown puzzle, and then a nicely realised, galaxy-threatening race to discovery of a long-forgotten past.

Reynold's extraordinary command of the supra-time frame and spaces is superb. Time and space and energy and matter are often multiplied by thousands and millions, with panache and assurance.

The action sequences in the last half of the book are amazing, and as usual, Reynold's technologies and world-building are fabulous.

The funeral scene is perfectly written and played, truly poignant and powerful. Lots of Reynold's wonderful heart on display in this book.

I will just say, don't be worried about the 6m year time frame - the characters are modern and real, recognisably human and humane and loving.

Thrilling and loving. Marvellous!

Some quotes -

1. ... *I just don't think that an experience is worth anything unless you can remember it afterwards.* 'I gazed down into the bottom of my glass, empty now. 'To see something marvellous with your own eyes –that's wonderful enough. But when two of you see it, two of you together, holding hands, holding each other close, knowing that you'll both have that memory for the rest of your lives, but that each of you will only ever hold an incomplete half of it, and that it won't ever really exist as a whole until you're together, talking or thinking about that moment... that's worth more than one plus one. It's worth four, or eight, or some number so large we can't even imagine it. I think I'd rather die than lose those memories.'

2. *If you suppress a memory, it seems to me that two things can happen. The memory may stay repressed, absolutely closed to both conscious and unconscious recall. Or –and this is surely the more likely outcome –the memory finds expression elsewhere. It will seep into other memories, distorting them, shaping them to conform to the truth of what has been suppressed.*

3. *Making love was a game of echoes. We had shared memories so many times that when I made love to her,*

I knew exactly how it felt to be Purslane. I could taste and feel her other lovers and she could taste and feel mine, each experience reaching away like a reflection in a hall of mirrors, diminishing into a kind of carnal background radiation, a sea of sensuous experience. I had been a girl once, then a thousand men and women and all their lovers. The stasis field locked on. The Synchronesh took hold. I hurtled into my own future, while my ship ate space and time.

NOTE: Please, please also read *Turquoise Days*, a novella, and short stories *Enloa*, *Weather*, and *Zima Blue*. Surely his finest works, along with *House of Suns*.

My review of *Turquoise Days* -
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8...>

Forrest says

Others have covered the plotline and central conceits of the novel very well, so I will forbear. The plot is excellent, as are the ideas. What sets *House of Suns* far apart from other space operas is the sheer scope and scale of the thing and the fact that the immensity of it all does not drown the beautiful humanity displayed by the main characters, Campion and Purslane, two clones of the Gentian line who have been illicitly involved in a forbidden relationship with one another.

When I was a kid, I was a big fan of the game Traveller (I still am . . . a kid and a fan). One of the constraints of the game was that any given planet could have a "technology level" that indicated how far technology had advanced on that planet, whether from native growth or from outside colonists. The entries for very advanced tech levels were rather obtuse and never really given much detail as to how the technology worked or what it enabled. It was all extremely vague.

House of Suns posits, in the beginning, technology beyond many of the most forward thinkers' wildest imaginations. His science is very clear (he is, by training, an astrophysicist) and well-justified, and he clearly articulates concepts and technologies where other writers resort to hand-waving. In the end, though, Reynolds makes it clear that he has only scratched the surface.

I'm also familiar with relativity and am fairly comfortable, as a historian, with the concept of "Longue Duree" history. Time is vast, more vast than we can comprehend. And faced with concepts and events that span long stretches of millennia, the human mind tends to withdraw, to recoil, at the mere thought of too much time.

Reynolds somehow, and I'm not entirely sure how, eases the reader into the comfort zone where years pass in a sentence, and the reader doesn't feel that anything was missed. He also guides the reader to understand the immense timescales that these characters deal with (many of them are millions of years old) without being boring or redundant. Yes, some of this is done with the technology of stasis cabinets and "Synchronesh," a time-altering drug that allows the subject to speed up or slow down their mind and body to match another who is phased out of "real" time. But these technologies are not abused by the writer, and they make perfect sense, given their use in various situations. No, Reynolds, because he is so excellent at *pacing* the novel, makes it feel perfectly reasonable that, for example, a deep-space chase scene should take thousands of years or that a character can live for millions of years without becoming cosmically bored out of her skull.

Partly, he does this by helping the reader connect to the human feelings that his characters feel, which would

be similar regardless of how long one had been around or how far the future extended ahead of them. This conversation between Purslane (the narrator, at this point) and her companion Campion, is telling:

After a silence, Campion said, "You know what I keep coming back to? We'd never have visited this world unless something bad had happened to us. Never have heard those singing sands, seen this beautiful city . . . We might have travelled here eventually, I know, but it wouldn't be Neume the way it is now. We'd probably be seeing it half a dozen civilisations down the line, when the Ymirians will just be a memory."

I drank the wine, wanting it to go to my head as quickly as possible. "If you're trying to see good in this, I'm not sure I'm quite ready to make that leap."

"I'm just saying . . . it's a strange universe. It can still surprise us. That's why it's worth carrying on, I suppose. If I felt that all we were doing was reliving a fixed set of experiences in different permutations-"

"That wouldn't be so bad, if those experiences were pleasant ones. Do you ever get tired of sunsets?"

"No," Campion said.

"Do you ever get tired of waterfalls, or beaches?"

"No."

"Then there's always hope for us."

This is the kind of human beauty anyone can relate to, in a relativistic way or otherwise.

Apatt says

"I had already seen dozens of empires come and go, blossoming and fading like lilies on a pond, over and over, seasons without end. Many of those empires were benevolent and welcoming, but others were inimical to all outside influences. It made no difference to their longevity. The kind empires withered and waned as quickly as the hostile ones."

Epic!

The above passage from House of Suns serves to illustrate the author's grandiose scheme for this book. The story spans millions of years and hundreds of them often pass in the blink of an eye. Talk about fast moving narrative, this book almost break the FTL barrier. That said the story is not hard to follow providing you give it time to unfold and settle you in its very far future settings. In spite of the grand scale, there are not that many characters to keep track of. The first person narrative is split into that of three protagonists, actually only *one* protagonist in a way. It all starts with this one girl Abigail Gentian who grew up in a weird shape shifting house and later cloned herself a thousand (+/-1) times for space exploration purposes. These thousand clones meet up every thousand years or so to celebrate, compare notes and basically, party like it's 1999 (+ many kilo centuries). On one such occasion, they are attacked and almost wiped out...

My inadequate synopsis barely scratches the surface of the immense story. This is my second Alastair

Reynolds book, the first being Revelation Space which is his debut novel published 8 years before House of Suns. I rather like Revelation Space but in a muted sort of way, I thought the characters were on the flat side and a lot of the science went over my head. Well, I am glad to report that in the intervening years (while I was in suspended animation) Mr. Reynolds has acquired the arcane skills of character development. The central characters are likable and believable and the robot characters are just wonderful. While some of the science still goes whoosh! right over my head, this is to be expected as I have difficulty figuring out how dental floss works. That said, most of the science and inventions are explained quite clearly and still comes across as ingenious.

Interestingly some very odd beings appear in this book but none of them are aliens. Which brings me to another quote from the book:

"Yes, humanity fractured into a million daughter species, some of which were scarcely recognisable to each other. But scratch beneath the scales, the fur, the tin armour, they were still humans at the core, and no amount of primate babble could ever drown out that silence completely."

TL;DR: No aliens! All the weird blighters that show up in this book are post-humans, though a mysterious alien race is referred to they never actually drop by at any point. The post-humans weirdos more than make up for them, though.

There are mercifully brief fantasy interludes (inside a virtual reality) which I don't really care for, it reminds of scenes from Neal Stephenson's The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer which did not appeal to me (the scenes, not the book). This book could also do with a bit more humour and levity, but the poignant finale tugs nicely at the heartstrings.

I really should stop rating books at five stars or I shall have no credibility left. I don't want to be the Paula Abdul of Goodreads or something, but really at the end of the day this is a great mind expanding read and to rate it less than five stars seems churlish. I think I will rate the next book I review at 4 stars max, regardless of how good it is!

David Sven says

Solid storytelling from Reynolds and a solid performance by audio narrator John Lee combined to make this one of the stand out novels in the Reynolds library. This book was evenly paced in that I didn't feel that there was any lull in the plot or the slow start that is characteristic of many of Reynolds' books. I was engaged with the story from start to finish.

Of the Reynolds books I've read so far that are set in different worlds than Revelation Space, this is the most like his original signature series and I really enjoyed coming back to the style of writing I fell in love with in Rev Space. Century Rain was told in Noir style (review) - and Pushing Ice was Reynolds take on Arthur C Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (review) - and while I enjoyed both those books I was relieved and delighted that Reynolds came back to the type of Space Opera I read Reynolds for.

So this story has most the Reynolds staples - far flung future, a variety of humans who have diverged from their original "baseline" form, longevity, nanotechnology, sentient machines, machine/human hybrids, leftover technologies from advanced but seemingly extinct intelligences, some variation of Fermi's paradox, epic space battles, travel at relativistic speeds and more.

What is new in this book is the central premise that some six million years ago, a woman called Abigail Gentian copied her consciousness into 1000 clones (*Shatterlings*) and sent them out in a thousand different circuits to explore the universe. These are not physical clones of herself, but rather mental clones of her original person. Every 200000 years, or one circuit of the Milky Way, the clones attend a predetermined reunion where their separate strands of diverged memories are pooled and the data troves of Gentian line(family) are synced. In a setting where normal time is measured in *kilo years* and distances travelled in light years Reynolds has decided to go with "stasis" (as opposed to his usual "cryosleep") as the usual means space travellers deal with the times and distances involved. It's pretty cool the way he communicates how someone can "dial down" time in their stasis chambers so that they can walk in, spend a few minutes twiddling their thumbs, and come out some thousands of years later when they've arrived at their destination. You don't get to be six million years old without a few tricks up your sleeve.

The other thing Reynolds does different this book is employ a plot device where the first person perspective is maintained when switching between the two POV characters. The two protagonists are two Shatterlings of Gentian line, two lovers who travel together, breaking the Shatterling rule of going it alone. Consorting between Shatterlings is not allowed, except at the reunions. Maintaining the first person narrative as the perspective changes between the two protagonists punctuates the premise that shatterlings all share memories of having been Abigail Gentian. This would have been far more novel if I hadn't recently read *Ancillary Justice* by Ann Leckie (review). In Leckie's book we have a similar premise of consciousness distributed over multiple bodies, but in *Ancillary Justice* all the bodies or "ancillaries" share the same single sentient consciousness like a "hive mind." What I liked about that book was how Leckie simulated the experience for the reader of what it was like to possess multiple bodies by shifting the first person perspective seamlessly from body to body. Her execution of that plot device more than the actual story made the book and earned it 5 stars from me.

This book is different in that the Shatterlings, though sharing memories, still have their own separate consciousness - so the shifting first person POV, though very cool, didn't add that much to the underlying premise and wasn't necessary to the plot. If Reynolds had simply employed the third person perspective it wouldn't have detracted from the story at all - unlike AJ, my enjoyment of the book came mostly from solid story telling.

I'm giving this one 4.5 stars rounded to 5 stars

- but I'm keeping it off my favourites shelf for now to keep distinct my two existing Reynolds favourites that are still my favourites being
Chasm City (review) and
The Prefect (review)

Olivia says

Right after finishing, I declared this may be my favourite read, since I first came across *Pride and Prejudice* two decades ago, which means a lot, trust me. Don't worry though, this is NOTHING like *Pride and*

Prejudice.

House of Suns is something special. Filled with wonders and surprises. A story spanning millions of years and several galaxies. It took me a few chapters to wrap my head around the world; it's a lot to take in at first. Afterwards, I couldn't put it down. I just ploughed through, savouring each word.

Alastair Reynolds' prose is just as wonderful as the world(s) he's created. I'm gushing, I know, but I can't help myself. I'm in love with this book.

I didn't know anything about the plot when I started reading, and I'm glad I didn't read any reviews, because I feel like it's best experienced blind. Just dive into the galaxy and trust Reynolds to tell a compelling and captivating story.

The characters are all amazing and somehow Reynolds wove a love story into this tale that made me weep.

I recommend House of Suns to all sci-fi fans, especially those of you who love space opera. I wish I could give a sixth star!

Frank says

This book has all the hallmarks of Alastair Reynolds' writing: Grand scale space opera with a convoluted and fascinating plot that only fully unravels at the very end. If you like other of Alastair Reynolds' space opera, I am quite certain this one will not disappoint.

I liked the way that there was a bit of fantasy intertwined in the story but all contained in a technologically feasible way. The main plot, however, concerns one of several groups of clones that travel the galaxy spending a lot of time in suspended animation when travelling between stars and clusters, so that they are able to follow civilizations come and go in the greater span of galactic time.

The particular group the story revolves around are called the House of Suns. They were all originally cloned from one person but with variations, so that they have individual personalities. Thus they are rather like a big family. They meet once every two hundred thousands years (the time it takes to years to circumnavigate the galaxy and visit a hundred systems along the way) to celebrate, compare stories and integrate all their experience in their common records. I must say that I found the thoughts and feelings involved in experiencing societies, cultures and empires develop, mature and fade away on a galactic scale to be very realistically portrayed. I would join this minute if given the opportunity.

Where we enter the story, the House of Suns are scheduled to convene again shortly. However, something is not going according to plan -- and this is where our mystery and possibly crime begins ...

Bill says

I've read almost all of Alastair Reynolds's books. "House of Suns" is the most recent I've read, and it just took me away. I don't necessarily recommend it be the first of his works that you read (visit his website to

see his recommendations), but for anyone who loves space opera which spans millions of years and millions of light-years, his works, especially this one, are second to none. He is an astrophysicist, and having some knowledge of Einstein's Special and General Relativity allows one to appreciate this book more than if you don't, but I'd not let that dissuade you. The love between Campion and Purslane, two of the one thousand clones of Abigail Gentian; the dreamlike state that Abigail's narrative put me in: it's just indescribable. The story is narrated, in the first person, by all three (Abigail, Campion, and Purslane), alternating between the three in different chapters; this is difficult to get used to, for the first few chapters, if you don't know beforehand about the triple first-person narrating (which I didn't); but now you know. I'm currently reading it for the second time; yes, that's how much I like it.

Felicia says

Words can't describe how much I love this book! The quality of the writing in the first chapter gripped me and wouldn't let me stop reading. It is a fabulous sci-fi space opera with fantastic characters you root for. The most impressive thing is the world building, and how the complex science becomes understandable and readable in a way that you don't normally find in these types of books.

Between discovering Reynolds and Banks, I feel like I'm in my own sci-fi novel Renaissance!

Robert says

Reynolds now has a sufficient body of published works for certain themes, narrative techniques and favourite tricks to be discernable; most of them are present in this novel, which has a setting independent of all his previous books.

Here we have humanity as a star-faring species for more than 6 million years from the point of view of Earth's rest frame - and if you don't know what a "rest frame" is you may have a little trouble with this book, because Special Relativity plays a crucial role in the story and Reynolds takes no time out to explain it. I can remember enough of the theory to take it in my stride, but I don't know whether it would cause a problem for a reader completely unfamiliar with the concept of time dilation. This is the first of Reynolds' themes to become obvious; no faster than light spaceships. He uses this restriction to force creativity the same way e.e. cummings used the restrictions of the sonnet form, and to great effect. I can think of no more convincing "hard SF" writer working today and it is because when it comes to current physics, he never gets it wrong. This fundamental idea forces Reynolds to find answers to questions about how galactic scale exploration could work and come up with solutions that are more or less original - even "suspended animation" gets a new look, possibly influenced by ideas from Iain M. Banks' *The Algebraist*.

So what has humanity been up to for 6.5 million years? Well, some of them have cloned themselves a thousand times over and started observing the life of the galaxy in near light-speed spaceships - effectively time-travelling into the future as they do so - and holding re-unions every 200,000 years or so, to share their experiences. Meanwhile, most of the rest of the species are doing what they've always done but on a bigger scale - interstellar empires come and go, evolution takes a grip in some places, science progresses.

The story is written from the perspectives of two clones of the same individual who also, against Family tradition, are lovers. They are also late for their Family re-union when they get into some trouble with an unscrupulous space-ship trader....

From there the story slowly accelerates to a break-neck pace - much like the ships in the story - in time for the conclusion. This is a technique also seen in *Century Rain* and *Pushing Ice*. It can make the reader feel somewhat underwhelmed in the first third, but the final third makes up for it every time.

There is a trick Reynolds has used repeatedly before and again here, that I feel he needs to be wary of: induced amnesia. The restoration of "erased" memory is perhaps now too obvious a trick for hiding then revealing mysterious circumstances and events. On this occasion, at least the victim is aware of the fact that he is suffering, but really I don't think Reynolds can use the idea as a significant plot device again without it being irritating.

Really that is about the most negative element of the book. The author's penchant for Gothic horrors and really unpleasant, grotesque characters is present, though dialed down a very long way from the freak-show that was *Revelation Space* and I could quibble that perhaps Reynolds' unique voice is made a little too generic because it has been pushed too low in the mix, this time around. Readers need characters they can like, especially in long novels, but there is a balance to be struck; perhaps *Pushing Ice* saw that balance being hit almost perfectly because the leading characters were so realistic yet flawed. Of course, Reynolds turned it up to 11 in *Diamond Dogs* - but you can do that if you're only expecting to hold the reader for 100 pages or so - more of that, please!

Overall, this is recognisable Reynolds writing a story that grips like a slowly tightening vise and drags you to some unexpected places, well worth the read and as good as any of his other longer novels.

Mike says

So one of the biggest constraints of the space opera genre is answering the question of faster than light (FTL) travel. *Star Trek* and the *Star Carrier* series gets around it using a modification of the Alcubierre Drive. The *Old Man's War* series mucks around with alternate universes. The *Expanse* does a fantastic job adapting the Space Opera genre to just the solar system, obviating the need for faster than light travel.

The *House of Suns* says screw it, we don't need no stinking FTL, and we're doing the whole damn galaxy.

The main story is told from the perspective of two "shatterlings", clones from the same progenitor, part of a Line that has existed for millions of years. They and their fellow shatterlings (originally one thousand, but attritioned to a little over eight hundred) travel across the galaxy collecting knowledge about the transient civilizations that arise and fall, reuniting every 200,000 years to share their experiences with their fellow shatterlings at grand reunions.

To quote Doug Adams:

"Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space."

Since the shatterlings (and the rest of humanity) are constrained by the speed of light, they spend most of their time in stasis, a process that slows down their experience of reality by many factors (up to a million to one). This allows them to travel the vast expanses of the void and visit the many human civilizations that populate the Milky Way without growing ancient by the time they reach their destination.

Anyway, the two POV shatterlings (Purslane [female] and Campion [male; yes they are clones but enough hand waving was present to make the clones a bit different from each other]) are actually, against all their line's tradition, romantically involved, likely for several million years. It is a relationship that really works. They love each other deeply, based on a vast array of shared experiences and mutual respect. I really liked how Reynolds wrote them and their relationship.

Due to Campion's... less than responsible outlook on life, he and Purslane end up being a bit late to the most recent reunion. OK, more than a bit. Something on the scale of 55 years late. Turns out to be a good thing too, since some unknown force has ambushed the reunion planet, killing off most of Campion and Purslane's fellow shatterlings. This, of course, is not a good thing for our brave heroes and they are forced, along with their fellow survivors, to regroup and figure out just what happened. Unlikely allies are found, shadowy organizations do shadowy organizational things, and some mysteries of the universe are answered. There are robots, and wormholes, and more robots, and conspiracies. It is all rather exciting and ends on a rather optimistic note.

All in all I thought this was a fantastic book (as my five stars indicate). The plot was both engaging, deep, and very well paced. The action coexisted nicely with character development and universe building. The characters were vibrant and were imbued with their own unique voice. I was sucked in from the beginning and it held me through the entire book. I can see why some folks might be put off by the ending (view spoiler). But I thought the whole thing was fantastic.

Some random notes:

- The concept of clone lines existing for immense stretches of time to perpetuate their progenitor's vision was pretty cool.

- Being long lived meta-civilization, the Lines (along with some other long existing organizations) would see the rise and fall of galactic empires. This churn was just a natural part of societal dynamics. In fact, the Gention Line (which Campion and Purslane are members of), has a sort of actuary program that figures out if a particular civilization will be in existence by the time a member of the Line gets to them. I like this as a natural consequence of the challenges the Line would face traveling great distances over eons of time. It was both clever and reasonable.

- Even though the shatterlings have been in existence for more than five million years, the vast majority of that time is in a much lower state of activity (stasis). However, there are some beings that existed consciously for at least that long, experiencing every moment. One had this particular line that I really liked:

"You think you've lived through 6 million years, but you haven't the faintest notion what that really means. The weight of all those memories is like an ocean of liquid hydrogen, compressing itself into metal. Every new experience I choose to remember, every new moment of existence, only adds to the crush."

I really liked the language Reynolds used in this book as highlighted by this quote.

- The various sections of the book were opened with the POV from the progenitor of the Gention Line, showing her growing up in a crazy miniplanet/house and eventually coming to a decision to spread her pseudo clones to the stars. Not quite as interesting as the main action but it did give you a look into the head of the Gention line founder, the circumstances that launched the Lines, and a subtle parallel to the main action of the story.

-So there is this place called the Boötes Void, basically a whole chunk of space with little to no matter that we can detect in it. House of Suns offers a pretty nifty explanation for why that exists.

-The torture that the Gentians use is both innovative and horrifying, that is all.

I hope Reynolds writes some more stories in this universe. I will definitely be checking out more of his books. If they are half as good as House of Stars they will still be great.

Michael says

I loved the hopefulness of this grand conception of humanity in the far future. I was surprised it worked so well for me as there is so much uncertainty about human survival on the near term that I figured speculation on a timescale would feel fairly meaningless. For example, I just couldn't relate to the spiritual beings of Well's "Time Machine", the Eloi, and I was weirded out by the remnant human society clinging to a distant future existence in Benford's "Great Sky River." Here we have a line of humans still much like us who retain the sense of wonder and exploration that made Star Trek so popular. Exploring the many different forms that humans have evolved into over millions of years is a satisfactory part of the mission. Still the prospect of finding aliens is an unfulfilled hope:

Humans had resigned themselves to never having to share the galaxy with another species. That was both a blessing and a curse. It meant unlimited room for expansion, unlimited scope for raw materials, but it also meant enduring the deathliest of silences. Yes, humanity had fractured into a million daughter species, some of which were scarcely recognizable to each other. But scratch beneath the scales, the fur, the armor, they were still humans at the core, and no amount of primate babble could ever drown out that silence completely.

The story's premise is of a thousand cloned people, the Gentian Line, traveling the galaxy in separate ships and getting back together periodically to share their memories and discoveries. Reynolds eases the barrier to plausibility by not resorting to faster-than-light travel and instead relying on "reasonable" technologies such as cryopreservation during long transits and methods for computer storage and sharing of memories. Given additional technologies for indefinite extension of lifespan, you have the basis for a compelling knowledge quest without escaping too far into fantasy land.

The narrative alternates between the childhood of the line's founder Abigail Gentian, feeling trapped in her protected, lonely life in a solar civilization, and that of a pair of cloned siblings, Campion and Purslane, who are approaching a reunion event after a 100,000-year circuit, six million years from their launch. The latter are lovers, which violates the rules of the order. Despite the common memory starting out as Abigail, there is no sense of incest as the cloning process included rendering of diversity in biological form, gender, and personality. The grounding of this mind-blowing tale in the personal perspectives of these characters makes the novel sing for me. As with Dr. Zhivago clinging to love in the face of war, it was a relief for sharing of experience to retain a priority for our heroes:

To see something marvelous with your own eyes—that's wonderful enough. But when two of you see it, two of you together, holding hands, holding each other close, knowing that you'll both have that memory for the rest of your lives, but that each of you will only ever hold only have an incomplete half of it, and that it won't ever really exist as a whole until you're together, talking or thinking about that moment ...that's worth more than one plus one. It's worth four, or eight, or some number so large we can't even imagine it.

But the big plus in the tale for me is their friendship with a conscious robot of the “Machine People”, Hesperus, who was waylaid by a pirate. Like our heroes, he is interested in clues to the mystery of why the Andromeda galaxy now appears as a blank in the sky and what the recent gleanings from a race of human information archivists may shed on this ominous phenomenon. Soon their friendship with Hesperus is solidified in a struggle for survival. A devastating event prevents Campion and Purslane from participating in the reunion. They end up dealing with a big threat to their galaxy and a conspiracy within the Gentian Line. Reynolds renders us a rewarding intersection between human struggles with big issues that bear on the fate of our species, just the kind of story that makes me love space opera at its best.

Cecily says

NEW Review, Written After Reading

Comment #25 onwards was made after adding this section.

Good old-fashioned futuristic adventure at its best. Intelligent, well-written escapism about encounters between advanced human intelligences and even more advanced machine intelligences.

Reynolds often writes novels with three-strands, set in different worlds and eons, that gradually come together. This is a simpler, single, story, but it's epic in time and distance. There is adventure, love and loyalty, attack, sacrifice, and who and what to trust. The world building and science are vivid, and easily digestible to a non-scientist. It's nearly all told chronologically by Campion and Purslane alternately. The exceptions are the first chapter and seven others, told by Abigail, long, long ago, until her story catches up with the main one. It opens:

"I was born in a house with a million rooms, built on a small, airless world on the edge of an empire of light and commerce that the adults called the Golden Hour, for a reason I did not yet grasp. I was a girl then, a single individual called Abigail Gentian."

I was born in a house with thousands of books, in a small, quiet village, on the edge of a former empire of conquering and commerce. I was a girl then, a single individual called Cecily.

Unlike Abigail, I have not cloned myself into a thousand shatterlings, sent them to explore the universe, to accumulate knowledge for the sake of it, and meet regularly to share it, all to satisfy an “insane craving to gorge... on reality”.

But I enjoyed reading of such things. And of Ugarit-Panth, a suicidal pachyderm.

Memories, Truth and Trust

When my son was three or four, he described in some detail, how he thought memories worked: there was a box of paintings in his brain, but sometimes they got mixed up, sometimes the paint rubbed off or messed up, and sometimes the pictures got muddled and stuck together or torn. It was important not to put them in when the paint was wet, though I'm not sure where they waited to dry. Maybe he had the concept of a palimpsest

long before he knew the word.

This book is filled with inaccurate memories: “strands to edit, memories to delete, others to falsify”. Sometimes it’s for nefarious purposes, sometimes for self-preservation, and sometimes to spare others from pain.

There is also an immersive virtual reality world called Palatial, where fact and fiction, memories real and imagined, are blurred, “Like being in a lucid dream... although there was excitement and jeopardy, there was no actual anxiety”.

It makes truth uncertain for the characters and the reader.

One character says, “We can’t be punished for something we barely remember doing.” That’s an especially weak argument in this world.

The most interesting aspect is not the ethical one of editing and deleting, but the deeper, psychological effects of memories and personalities merging and melding: shatterlings who share DNA and a childhood, and convene to combine their latest experiences; those who become part of overly-realistic virtual reality; and machine intelligences that can split and then coalesce and confiture their minds with other machines and even post-humans.

- “I just don’t think an experience is worth anything unless you can remember it afterwards... To see something marvellous with your own eyes - that’s wonderful enough. But when two of you see it... knowing that you’ll both have that memory for the rest of your lives, but that each of you will only ever hold and incomplete half of it, and that it won’t ever really exist as a whole until you’re together... that’s worth more than one plus one.”
- “Making love was a game of echoes. We had shared memories... I could taste and feel her other lovers... each experience reaching away like a reflection in a hall of mirrors, diminishing into a kind of carnal background radiation, a sea of sensuous experience.”

Women - and Sex

Sci-fi is commonly castigated (perhaps unfairly) as overly masculine in terms of authors, readers, and the characters within. Reynolds often has strong and important female characters, as he does here: of the two main characters (a couple), one is a woman. The progenitor of almost everything, is a woman (Abigail), as is her rival (Ludmilla Marcellan), and there are plenty of others.

However, without female pronouns, I doubt I’d guess Purslane was a woman, and the loving relationship and smattering of sex between her and Campion feels bolted on.

I don’t want a sci-fi adventure pumped full of passion and fluff, but I’d like the women and their relationships to be more plausible, and to be portrayed with a little more feeling.

Voice

I’ve now read seven Reynolds books. I think I could read any page of his at random and know it was by him, though I’d struggle to explain why (other than that I haven’t read enough sci-fi recently to have an enormous number of other names at the ready).

An interesting feature of this book is how often voices are often commented on, and sometimes critical decisions are made by inferring something from a character's tone of voice.

- "His voice was a trilling, liquid susurrant of birdsong, orchestrated into human speech sounds."
- "A voice more ancient than old-growth civilizations, deeper than time, slower than glaciers."
- "He had a rough, leathery voice, as if his vocal chords had been left out to dry in the sun."
- "Squealing garbled sounds... like a hundred people shouting at the same time, in a hundred different languages."

And yet, despite the evident importance of voice to the story, the narrations of Purslane and Campion are distinguishable only by context: who and what they're talking about, rather than how they express it.

Quotes

- Toys: "A scaly-winged dragon that flew around the room, spitting pink fire before landing on his arm and coiling its tail several times around it; a soldier who would hide himself somewhere in the room when we closed our eyes... Marbles... which rolled on the floor and organised themselves into shapes and figures according to shouted commands, or formed shapes which we then had to guess at before they were complete... A lovely machine ballerina who would dance on anything, even the tip of a finger."
- "A nearby supernova remnant was a smear of ruby red, dulling to sable at its curdled edges."
- "I had been a girl once, then a thousand men and women and their lovers."
- "The first six million years had been all fun and games. Now we were growing up."
- "We could build cities like that... But we haven't... and now they've left their mark on deep time, whereas we'll be doing well to be remembered a circuit from now."
- "He wrote love letters the same way he wrote death warrants. This was neither."
- Early machine intelligences were fascinated by arts and sciences because "The only genuinely innovative act they had ever achieved was to come into existence".
- "To humanity, an only child growing up in an ancient and demon-haunted house, it was like discovering a new friend."
- "Her expression was fiercely serene."

"It's not the span of time that counts, but what you do with it."

Indeed. Carpe diem. Esto aliis benevolus.

"We'd never have visited this world unless something bad had happened to us. Never have heard those singing sands, seen this beautiful city... We might have travelled here eventually, I know, but it wouldn't be Neume the way it is now... Do you ever get tired of sunsets?... Do you ever get tired of waterfalls, or

beaches?... Then there's always hope for us."

Source for image of memory box: <http://www.homeinstead.co.uk/edinburg...>

OLD Review, Written Before Reading

Comments #1 - #24 were made in relation to this.

King, Son, Suns, Buns... What?!

When my son was small, he liked a breakfast cereal commonly known as K Flakes (actually Special K), but which he, then we, called King Flakes. One day, I couldn't find them in the supermarket, so asked a nearby member of staff where the King Flakes were. She looked puzzled and said she'd never even heard of them. I assured her - more than once! - that they'd sold them for years and I'd bought some there only a week or two earlier.

My son is no longer small, and I can't remember when I last bought King Flakes. I've read and enjoyed quite a few of his Alastair Reynolds, but not this one, which he took to university, and which I've just borrowed. I picked it because I've been nagged to read it for eons, by a GR fiend and sci-fi boff who always refers to it as House of **Buns** - as if the associations of **Sun** and **Son** were not already confusing enough! (Just as well I've never watched The Great British Bake Off.)

So, Apatt, illegible and ineffable good egg that you are, I'm finally starting bakery sci-fi...

I'm not sure if buns are better than tangerines, but I hope to thank you when I've finished.

However, I'll probably be too confused to write a coherent review, so this weird non review may stay in perpetuity!

;)

Now, go and see Apatt's review, [HERE](#).

Mimi says

I meant to take it easy, but ended up blowing through the second half of this book in just 3 days. The pages just kept on turning by themselves, and I didn't get much sleep.

Woke up this morning and was like

But seriously. What year is it?

This is not a review because I don't have enough science in me to understand it or to begin diving in and deconstructing it, but I did enjoy it very much and it's easily one of the best books I've read this year, maybe even this millennium. Will have to return for a few more rereads because I'm pretty sure I missed a ton of details in my rush to get to the end.

The concept of solar year is tenuous at best in this book because the story takes place *six million* years from now. I was in a bleak, gloomy, end-of-the-world state of mind when I started reading, so the idea that somehow humanity has a future six million years from now and that it's a thriving future was extremely uplifting. And I approached the rest of the story with that in mind.

So. Six million years from the start of the main plot, the genius Abigail Gentian made an army of clones she called the Gentian Line and sent them out into the universe to learn and collect as much information on any planet with any signs of life as they can for the purpose of trade with alien planets and other clones of different lines. These clones, called shatterlings, reunite every couple hundred thousand years to share their findings, and they've been doing this for six million years.

At the start of the main plot, we follow two of Abigail's shatterlings, Campion and Purslane, on a collection trip to a couple of planets. It's kind of like a sea voyage, but in space, at high speed, and I was totally sucked into the story from the start. The prologue with Abigail as a child was all the hook I needed to jump in. I liked both Campion and Purslane almost immediately and the way they played off one another was very funny--love the subtle humor--and spending more time with them only increased my fondness.

Campion is on a quest, with Purslane's help, to find something of value to bring back for the next Line reunion, but as usual he procrastinated so much that he's behind schedule and would probably have nothing to show. The last time they all met he didn't do very well, and thus the reason for their planet-hopping visits to many different galaxies in a short amount of time. They come in contact with a ton of interesting creatures and entities, many of which exist outside of time and space, and communication with them is fascinating to read about.

On one of these trips, Campion and Purslane come across and see something they shouldn't have. And Campion, being Campion, careless and carefree, does something he definitely shouldn't have, which then sets an unknown pursuer on their tail. The unknown thing goes after not only Campion and Purslane, but the whole Gentian line with the purpose of annihilating all of the shatterlings of Abigail's creation.

It's a race against time to figure out what is after them and how to destroy it, and it had me on the edge of my seat all the way through to the stunning end.

I love everything about this book--the action and adventures, the high-speed chases, the planet hopping, the ingenuity, the breathtaking breadth of deep space, and of course the characters--and yet I don't fully understand any of the high concept science stuff. Love it anyhow though. Will have to seek out a real life science person who has read this book to explain deep space, time travel, astrophysics, the infinite universe, etc etc. to me.

Alastair Reynolds has created something truly special here--a enjoyable balance of interesting storytelling and theoretical science--and my mind is sufficiently blown.

Cross-posted at <https://covers2covers.wordpress.com/2...>

Robert Delikat says

I am always on the lookout for new SF authors. I have read most if not all of Hamilton, Clarke, Vonnegut, Wells, Simmons, Asimov, and Herbert among other greats. This was my first Alastair Reynolds book. I

cannot say I was overwhelmed by it in any way. When I read by a reviewer that I follow that Reynolds pushes the boundaries of the genre in new directions, I was ready for something special. I feel disappointed.

That a progenitor fractured herself into a thousand male and female clones seemed intriguing. But this fact was not fully developed at least not in this book. That they stood aloof and documented the rise and fall of countless human empires, to meet every 200,000 years to exchange news and memories of their travels is not what this book is about, but this was the hook that got me to reading. That the hook was merely a catch and release was less than satisfying.

The book is about the why and where-with-all of a grudge harbored against this line of shatterlings. The grudge is not very novel or interesting and I did not care an iota about their survival. For me the book was shallow and never grabbed my interest. Sometimes books grab me in places and seem to drone on in others. This book never captured my interest or imagination. The ending does not drone on. It just abruptly stops. Just like one of the shatterlings' 30 second meetings. Unsatisfying... plain and simply that. For the amount of time and space that the novel is purported to cover, I felt like it went nowhere.

John Lee was his regular competent self but, like the book, not terribly inspiring. I do not think he added much to the book but then he probably did not detract from any greatness either.

Bradley says

After reading some really awesome reviews from Cecily and Apatt, and despite the fact that I've already read ten of his novels and short story collections, I've been feeling quite ashamed that I still hadn't read this well-regarded novel. So I sat my butt down and made it my eleventh. :)

Could I possibly be disappointed at this point? Nope. At least, not for the sheer scale and scope of this post-humanity romp of over 6 million years, where a certain girl named Abigail clones herself and her mind up to a certain date in her early adulthood for the purposes of colonizing space... and while she isn't the only one to have done this, she's certainly our MC 6 million years down the line, with all the little pieces of herself meeting every once in a while to share their wildly divergent pieces and sometimes throw a planetary-wide funeral (and I mean, literally, a projection the size of a whole planet to memorialize the dead,) or sometimes mess around with ringworld swarms or machine-intelligence genocide or causality loop breaking wormhole jaunts to Andromeda Galaxy, rather than just stomping around in the Milky-Way at sub-light speeds, which is rather the norm.

I did mention that this is post-humanity with the ability to copy and send out their minds, edit and delete huge swaths of memory, go into stasis or wildly different time-frame-references, either speeding up or slowing WAY down to make the sheer immensity of either time or space reasonable to a human, didn't I?

It's very fascinating, and the ideas hardly end there. In fact, Reynolds's vision of the deep future is both fascinating and full of actual story, too! We really don't deal with alien intelligences much unless you talk about the machine divergences from ourselves, but as in the other connected Space-Operas of his, there's always something bigger and greater on the sidelines just waiting for the smaller fish to swim by, and this is no different.

What about the First Machines from long before humanity? What about the Solar Dams that can reasonably halt a supernova indefinitely but still managed to break and wipe out a whole alien species? Who's at fault

here? We've got mystery, deaths among the near-immortals, and huge questions regarding the sanctity of really, really long-term memory devices, and of course, the whole novel is charged with betrayal. But who's? The Shatterlings are, after all, based on relatively few people, and just who is at fault when they're all one?

Well, obviously, experience can change everyone, and after 6 million years, it's actually kind of funny that these people are still so fundamentally relatable to readers like us. :)

A lot of energy and ideas were thrown into this novel, and it's definitely worth reading if you're at all into really "serious" Space-Opera works of the deep future. :) In general, probably the best part is the fact that everything is basically based on real science and possibility, and yet it still manages to go
wwwaaaaaayyyy out there in scope. :) That's my favorite part, anyway. :)

Guillermo says

When Barnes and Noble still only sold a hardcover version of this book a few years ago, I read the blurb on the inside cover and was like wtf? The story line seemed like too much even for me, and even after I was still giddy from plowing through the excellent Revelation Space series Reynolds is famous for. The idea of reading a bizarre story about cloned male and female "shatterlings" of a single person that travel in "circuits" around the galaxy (which last roughly, oh
about 200,000 years or so) was too much for me at the time of the novel's publication in 2008. Did I mention this story takes place roughly 6 million years in the future?

"That's too grandiose", I said. "That's a concept way too crazy to make any sense!" Oh, and I forgot to mention. Two of those shatterlings are in love. But it's not a love story. Or is it the most epically gigantic love story you will ever read? Reynolds doesn't really harp on the love aspect too much, but what Campion and Purslane do for each other in a chase lasting at relativistic speeds, lasting thousands of years and trillions of miles is really profound if you think about it (there are shadows here of the greatest chase scene ever committed to print, found in Reynold's Redemption Ark).

But have you ever heard of the Bootes Void? It's a gigantic area of space where there is an unusually low amount of stars or galaxies present. Some say it's just a merger of smaller bubble-like voids, others say it's evidence of a Kardashev Type III civilization that is able to use the power of entire galaxies. I like that theory better, because all sorts of nerd alarms went off at full strength when I read that. I'm in the good company of Reynolds because his klaxons went off too, evidenced by the explanation he provides for this astronomical enigma. Just to put the power of that type of civilization into context with our monkey asses, we may (and "may" is a strong "may" that I type while simultaneously waving two air quotes) become a Type I civilization in 100 - 200 years according to the great
Michio Kaku. Congratulations to us. That means we can finally harness the power of our own planet. But the fact that Reynolds gives us a theory of why this Supervoid exists and at the same time answers the question of Constant C limitations -why we can't go faster than the speed of light without creating uncomfortable paradoxes that the universe cannot allow to happen, is amazing. Especially since it's only partially pertinent to the main storyline.

Is there a story buried in there and what's it about you say. The story is about two shatterlings from the Gentian Line and a machine organism with the catchy name of Hesperus. As commonly found in almost all

Reynolds stories, there is a great mystery. Who is eliminating the Gential Line (the line of 1000 male and female clones that transverse the galaxy on a Star Trekkian like quest "to go where no man or woman have gone before") and more importantly, why??

But the larger questions, the issues and ideas he raises are soo immense that I find it so rewarding to read and try to understand something that I dont believe my reptilian/mammalian based brain is meant to comprehend, even if I only grasp a fraction of it; the time scales, the distances, the enormity of just one galaxy..there are so many awe inspiring moments in this book if you really take a step back and think about the insignificant mote that we all are on together and the relative blink of time that transpires from our first to last breath.

It feels strange withholding a star because I want more out of a novel than what it is providing, since what it's providing is gold to me; its of no fault of the author that this 565 page paperback didn't go on and on, but dammit, I wanted to know more about civilizations that turned on and off over thousands of years like intermittent blinkers in the galaxy; thousands of years that are less than milliseconds in astronomical time. "Civilization turnover" is what Reynolds so caually calls it. I wanted more about the Andromeda Galaxy that had mysteriously disappeared ("The Absence") to our galaxy's observers. Give me more about The Vigilance. And what the hell happens to Campion and Purslane finally? Because he leaves the door wide open for a sequel, although he hasn't mentioned in any interviews that he wants to revisit the House of Suns universe anytime soon.

It left me wanting more; like a parched man transversing a dessert and stumbling onto an oasis that can only revive, sustain, and stimulate him for a scant 565 pages.

"Give me more, you talented, magnificent bastard!! Give me more of this!!"

Alas, the only reason I gave it a 4 out of 5 stars is because there were some character and pacing issues along with the failure to go more in depth into things I wanted Reynolds to go in depth into. Reynold's only real fault is a sin of ommission. I'd like to give it 5 stars, but I can't.

P.S. I'm still waiting for the Bene Gesserit to create a wonderful Mahdi author that can combine the great traits of Alastair Reynolds and Peter Hamilton into one.

And a mild spoiler alert (this takes place within the first 100 pages), and final small critique:

Why oh why did you kill off Doctor Meninx so early? That grumpy humanoid fish thing was one of the most interesting characters in the book and more importantly, the only source of comedic relief in a book that could've used a little more humor!

Stuart says

House of Suns: Truly epic time scales, but characters also shine
Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

This is the first Alastair Reynolds' book I've read not set in his **REVELATION SPACE** series, and many of his fans claim it's his best book. I'd have to say it is pretty impressive, dealing with deep time scales rarely seen for any but the most epic hard SF books. What's unique about *House of Suns* is not simply that the story spans hundreds of thousands of years, but that the characters actually live through these massive cycles as they loop around the Milky Way galaxy, experiencing everything it has to offer.

It staggers the imagination to think that humanity has survived over 6 million years into the future without annihilating itself, splintered into myriad post-human civilizations that flower and fade with each galactic cycle. It's a scale and perspective that has only been topped by the seminal works of Olaf Stapledon, **Last and First Men (1930)** and **Star Maker (1937)**. This quote conveys it well:

"I had already seen dozens of empires come and go, blossoming and fading like lilies on a pond, over and over, seasons without end. Many of those empires were benevolent and welcoming, but others were inimical to all outside influences. It made no difference to their longevity. The kind empires withered and waned as quickly as the hostile ones."

Yet unlike Olaf Stapledon (whose books literally have no characters), **House of Suns** is firmly focused on two main timelines and three main characters, which is something some space operas eschew in favor of an barrage of characters and intertwined storylines so dense that no reader can make sense of it.

The earlier timeline is the story of Abigail Gentian, the founder of the Gentian Line of "shatterlings" that are essentially near-immortal clones of her, both male and female. By sending her shatterlings across the galaxy in search of other intelligent life and the mysteries of deep space, she succeeds in creating an enduring collective consciousness that shares its knowledge and experiences each time the shatterlings make a circuit of the galaxy every 200,000 years.

The second timeline is set six million years in the future, and centers on the meeting of the Gentian Line after a galactic circuit. There is a grand family reunion planned, but before arriving at it, two shatterlings named Campion and Purslane discover that an ambush by unknown assailants has wiped out most of their Line. They try to rescue any survivors but come under attack themselves. With the help of a machine being named Hesperus, they manage to escape with a few other shatterlings to a world named Neume, but that is just the beginning of their adventures.

The book alternates between the two timelines, slowly revealing how the Gentian Line was formed by Abigail six million years ago, and the current search to understand who has targeted the Gentian Line and why. There are a lot of far-future detective elements, some epic battles, and the longest chase scene since Redemption Ark. By long, I don't mean in page count, but rather spanning 60,000 light years. That's a long time to pursue any adversary!

The plot is complex but not overly-so, for which I was grateful. In fact, the relationship of Campion and Purslane is surprisingly poignant for a hard SF epic, and I grew to like them and their machine companion Hesperus. There is also a fascinating post-human intelligence known as The Spirit of the Air which plays a big role in the final acts, along with the "disappearance" of the Andromeda Galaxy.

The final third of **House of Suns** is a series of ever-expanding reveals that are pretty mind-blowing, and best of all, the ending actual seemed plausible and was not just a massive battle in space as often happens. It was a more philosophical approach than I had expected, and moving as well. Overall, I think the tone of *House of Suns* was much more hopeful and less darkly baroque than the **REVELATION SPACE** series, and might serve as a better introduction to Reynolds' work. As always, the audiobook is narrated by the venerable John

Lee.
