Clarion Review

Science Fiction

Reader: Daughter of Time: Book 1
Erec Stebbins
Twice Pi Press
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Five Stars (out of Five)

From cross-genre author and biochemist Erec Stebbins comes a gripping science-fiction epic that will propel readers toward wonder. Ambra Dawn is a gifted girl born in the not-too-distant future with abnormalities that place her in grave danger. Her challenges, however, also come to represent humanity's—if not the universe's—greatest hope.

Ambra has an idyllic childhood, living safely with her family on their Midwestern farm until preteen difficulties lead to the discovery of a growth on her brain. Her family's pursuit of a cure brings them the unwanted attention of an enigmatic agency whose operatives kidnap Ambra and remove her to a remote facility. There she is subjected to medical modifications that give the growth room to develop unhindered. She is trained, with other human captives, in the art of directing her psychic energy to powerful ends, otherwise known as "reading."

Once these lessons have run their course, Ambra finds herself enslaved in an intergalactic system known as the Hegemony, sold into the service of aliens who find her gift useful and her worth negligible. But Ambra is no ordinary Reader, as these creatures quickly discover. Rescued by Xixians, the universe's most advanced and pacifistic species, Ambra's gifts are nurtured. She becomes the singular center of hope for the Resistance, a multispecies group of Readers who wish to upset the dictatorial Hegemony and bring harmony to all existence.

To succeed, they'll have to vanquish the ruthless Dram, the ruling species so intent on universal control that they'll stop at nothing to isolate, and capture, Ambra. And she will have to hone her gifts to unlock the Orbs, mysterious centers of light attached to all planets that host intelligent life. If she succeeds, it will only be because the energies of all Readers, past and present, have joined to help her.

Reader is an intricate project, its various worlds and species well imagined and

sympathetically rendered. The narrative is fast moving and covers many elaborate scientific concepts, yet it arrests reader attention at each turn. As its subjects are monumental—a girl caught somewhere between deity and monster, a species in fetters, and a universe in peril—the novel traverses considerable territory. Nevertheless, Ambra's narration maintains the story's center. Readers will find her, even at her worst, a very appealing heroine.

Stebbins employs adverbs a bit too freely early on, and some symbolism (as with seminal Reader Richard Cross's moniker) can seem overdone, but these are minor complaints to make of an otherwise impressive work. The book's last twist is an inspired one, and it is certain to hook Ambra Dawn a loyal following for her coming adventures.

Theology, physics, existential questions, space, and time: novels that cover this much ground—and that maintain their allure throughout—are rare. As such, Stebbins may well earn himself a grateful audience with *Reader*.

Michelle Anne Schingler