



The Alchemy of Stone

Ekaterina Sedia

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Mattie, an intelligent automaton skilled in the use of alchemy, finds herself caught in the middle of a conflict between gargoyles, the Mechanics, and the Alchemists. With the old order quickly giving way to the new, Mattie discovers powerful and dangerous secrets -- secrets that can completely alter the balance of power in the city of Ayona. However, this doesn't sit well with Loharri, the Mechanic who created Mattie and still has the key to her heart -- literally! A steampunk novel of romance, political intrigue, and alchemy, *The Alchemy of Stone* represents a new and intriguing direction by the author of the critically-acclaimed *The Secret History of Moscow*:

The Alchemy of Stone Details

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From Reader Review The Alchemy of Stone for online ebook

Chris says

When I re-read *The Little Mermaid* as an adult something about it bugged me. This something bugs me more and more each time I re-read the story. It's not the pain the mermaid feels when she walks; all of Andersen's characters seem to get tortured, the Ugly Duckling was a male and he got frozen in the ice. No, with the mermaid, it's how the prince treats her. She sleeps at the foot his bed, he rests his head on her breast. It's like she's his personal lap girl with whom he has groping benefits.

I can't help wondering if Ekaterina Sedia feels the same way for *The Alchemy of Stone* is very reminiscent of "The Little Mermaid".

Unlike "LM", Mattie, the protagonist, isn't looking for a soul; she's looking for her independence, to be her own person. She is a clockwork girl, which means even so often her gears run down. There is only one key that winds her up. This process makes her feel violated. (In fact, whenever Mattie is opened, it almost feels like a rape. This is a brilliant touch). Guess who has it and doesn't want to share?

You guessed it. Her creator, a man.

Her creator, Lornarri, has freed her, but he still exerts control over her in a variety of ways, not all of which sit well with Mattie, her friends, or the reader. Lornarri reminds me very much of the prince in "The Little Mermaid", crueller, but he has that same selfish thinking, that disregard for the women who are connected to him. A me first attitude, and let's not think about anyone's feelings, at least anyone who is not my equal.

Mattie is an alchemist and despite being non-politic, soon finds herself caught up in the revolution that is taking place in her world. This comes about due to her desire to help the gargoyles. No Disney cutie pies, the gargoyles are the creators and keepers of the city where Mattie lives, and they find themselves dying off without any means of reproduction. In this struggle for control of an unnamed city, Sedia touches on the cause and effects of terrorism, the roots of revolution, and the effects of such violence on the community and the groups within that community. It is true that these issues are not dealt with startling depth. This isn't to say that she does a bad job; she doesn't. In fact, the book is timely in the topics it covers; it is hard not to see some of it as a mirror of current events.

The focus of the book, however, isn't on politics, but on gender roles and the idea of humanity. Reviews on the back of the block, liken Mattie to any women and considering the roles of female supporting characters, the idea of a woman's role and woman's independence is what Sedia seems to be examining. Who doesn't feel like a wind-up girl sometimes? These gender roles are also used in "The Little Mermaid". The mermaid wanted a soul, more than she wanted the prince, so she wouldn't become foam on the waves. Mattie is not looking for a soul, though one could she has one and the best one of the novel. Is she more human than those around her? Does she have more of a soul? The same questions are raised in Andersen's tale, when the mermaid's compassion is compared to the thoughtless of the prince. Why do her sisters help her, but the prince cannot even think about her? It is easy to see the connection of this story to Andersen's fairy tale.

Anzu The Great Destroyer says

I never thought I'd encounter a book like *The Alchemy of Stone*. It's something I can't describe in mere words.

I'm serious. I can't find words to describe it but here goes my weak and unworthy attempt.

It's a heart-breaking story, and yet it has many emotional and happy, at times, moments. It shows a character's determination and strong will when everything falls to pieces. It's a story of unshared love, pain and misery. It's a story of hope and a lesson in life. It's an unusual point of view. It's a different side of fantasy. It's a wonderful experience that made me have a smile on my lips and a hole in my heart.

Ekaterina Sedia is an artist. Reading her words is like taking a closer look to a highly detailed painting. It was my first book from her works, and I assure you it won't be the last.

I won't give any details about the story or the characters because anything I saw could be a spoiler. I'm not so cruel; I won't take away the pleasure of discovering *The Alchemy of Stone's* magical world and characters. I can tell you this. Get the book if you're in the mood for something different. Don't go near it if you're expecting an easy read and a happy ending.

Need more convincing? Here's one of my favorite quotes. Spoilers ahead so there is still time to walk away. Ready?

Here you go.
(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

El says

First of all, this cover is amazing. Secondly, at the top of the cover it says "A Novel of Automated Anarchy & Clockwork Lust".

Tell me the last book you read that was billed as such.

This is a pretty inventive story about an automaton named Mattie. Oh, sure, another automaton story, she says. Snooze. But, no, really, this was a fun read. Mattie is better than most automatons, definitely created to be superior to others, and, unlike other automatons, she is liberated. She is still dependent on her creator, however, who literally holds the key to her heart - the key is required to wind her up periodically. Though liberated, her creator refuses to give the key to her, certain that if she has the key, she will no longer need him for anything, and then she will no longer return to him.

Of course therein lies the biggest clue that she should definitely take that key and run as far as her metal feet will take her because he is a LOSER.

There's this bit of class warfare going on as well, between the Mechanics (like Mattie's creator, Loharri), the Alchemists (like Mattie herself), and the gargoyles (the... well... gargoyles who serve as sort of like the chorus throughout the story).

This isn't just a story about how human an automaton can be. There really is some heart here, you really do cheer for Mattie. When her face literally breaks, you feel something. Maybe because you can see a little bit of yourself in her, and you realize that even a female automaton can have to deal with the same issues that any woman deals with at some point in her life. You want her to have her liberation and her fucking key, and you want Loharri to stop being a prick.

This is the second book I've read by Sedia, and I'm really digging her. I'll be reading more of her.

But seriously, look at that cover. It's like Nine Inch Nails, but without Trent Reznor.

Algernon says

[9/10] a rare gem: an original fantasy book that relies neither on sparkly vampires or on bloodthirsty / foulmouthed mercenaries. Steampunk meets gothic meets fable meets social revolution. beautiful language, restrained emotional intensity, promising author

Sarah says

A gorgeous and original vision. Mattie is a magnificent character, an emancipated clockwork automaton and alchemist. The city in which she resides was created by living gargoyles. The relationship between Mattie and her creator is a fascinatingly flawed one, and it is a joy to be witness to her ongoing self-discovery. Sedia has a poet's ear for prose. I've seen it called steampunk, and certainly it has some of the trappings: a windup girl, a mechanical omnibus, etc. I've seen it called urban fantasy, but it seems to transcend that genre as well. It's beautiful, whatever it is.

Ben Babcock says

There are so many ways to describe Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone*. It's a sombre symphony of motifs, ranging from women's independence and sexuality to the ramifications of rapid industrialization. And deceptively so—despite the intriguing back cover copy and the seductive tagline, "a novel of automated anarchy & clockwork lust," I wasn't quite convinced of *The Alchemy of Stone*'s brilliance until the denouement, when everything suddenly came together in a wonderful, cathartic moment.

In the city of Ayona, hewed from stone by the ever-watchful gargoyles, the Mechanics and the Alchemists duel for political control of the city while the peasants labour in the mines and on the farms. Mattie is an emancipated, clockwork automaton who has chosen to become an alchemist (and she's competent at it too). Though she is legally a free woman, she can't break her bond to her Mechanic creator, Loharri. He retains the key that will wind her clockwork heart and exerts an insidious influence on Mattie throughout the book.

The Mechanics have recently achieved a majority in Parliament, but when someone destroys the Duke's palace, the city gradually slides into chaos. Mattie is politically apathetic (and she can't vote anyway), but she is close to people on both sides of the conflict and inexorably becomes involved. Still, her outsider's perspective provides us with valuable insight into the tensions and fears that motivate both those in power and the masses who are unhappy with them. It's clear that the Mechanic-controlled Parliament has an agenda, and we get a glimpse of a counter-agenda from Sebastian, Iolanda, and the revolutionaries. However, there are very few specifics in both cases. Sedia focuses less on the political aspirations of either side than the power conflict itself, mostly because it parallels the power conflict between Loharri and Mattie.

The revolution's root cause is the rapid industrialization driven by the Mechanics. Machines are the answer to everything: transportation, manufacturing, even food production, thanks to mindless automaton labourers. Despite the improvements these machines often make, there's disadvantages too, both aesthetic and practical.

The factories in the city are eyesores, polluting the river and belching smoke into the sky. The peasants who still have jobs tilling the soil receive little pay and little gratitude; still, they are luckier than the orphans raised in inhumane conditions to live out their lives as miners, striving to satisfy Ayona's insatiable appetite for coal. The result: the riots of the Industrial Revolution, accelerated just as the steampunk technological innovations accelerate in the book. We go from initial attack to the end of the revolution quite quickly, or at least it seems that way. Likewise, the revolution spurs unintuitive improvements in technology: the Mechanics construct a "Calculator" that will analyze the situation and provide them with the best possible course of action; Loharri manages to perfect audio/video recording in a very short time and use Mattie as an unwitting spy. The pace of this progress isn't very believable, but as a storytelling device, I suppose it works well.

The revolution is but a backdrop to the personal journey of discovery of Mattie herself. Initially, she seems to pursue her goals with a single-mindedness only a clockwork person can possess. Yet as the story progressed, I realized that one could also interpret that pursuit as a form of selfishness—such a human attribute, or an attribute of the flesh, as the gargoyles would no doubt describe it. Mattie, though made of gears and springs, whalebone and ceramic, feels pain—and pleasure—and her emotions run the gamut from lust to passion to anger. She is a person, in all sense of the word. And she is a woman.

The personhood of robots is a Big Question; entire books, science fiction or otherwise, devote themselves to unravelling that mystery. Sedia, in a sense, has bypassed this issue, taking Mattie's sentience as a given so that she can explore more pertinent problems. This is what Mattie has to say about her gender (to the female character Iolanda):

". . . why do you consider yourself a woman? Because you were created as one?"

"Yes," Mattie replied, although she grew increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation.

"And because of the clothes I wear."

"So if you changed your clothes . . ."

"But I can't," Mattie said. "The shape of them is built into me—I know you have to wear corsets and hoops and stays to give your clothes a proper shape. But I was created with all of those already in place, they are as much a part of me as my eyes. So I ask you, what else would you consider me? . . . I assure you that my femaleness is as ingrained as your own."

Mattie identifies herself with *The Alchemy of Stone's* female characters, like Iolanda and Niobe, who themselves are struggling for some power over their own destinies. She expresses horror that the city's mindless automatons were never aware enough to know their own lack of freedom; hence, she cherishes what little freedom she has. Yet there's something much more sinister about Mattie's creation: Loharri built her in a form designed for servitude. She repeatedly experiences a desire to help or please Loharri even as she resents his reticence to surrender her key. Though emancipated, she often accompanies Loharri places in the role of "his" automaton, possession rather than person, somehow less "real." The combination of Mattie's femaleness and her illusory freedom is a potent reminder of women's struggle to emancipate themselves from the role of devoted housewife. Sedia manages to make Mattie's plight resonate even for me, a young male who lacks much experience when dealing with gender discrimination. And the culmination of this aspect of Mattie's journey is, for me, the most fulfilling part of the book.

It's worth mentioning Mattie's faces. Most of Mattie is fairly durable, but her faces are made of porcelain and prone to cracking or even shattering completely. When this happens, she must go to Loharri for a

replacement—a shameful, degrading circumstance, at least from her perspective. Think about how much importance we humans put on one's face: it's an outward representation of our personality; we associate faces with specific individuals. The facts that Mattie's face is artificially, so easily breakable and mutable, that her expression and appearance are controlled by her creator all contribute to this tragic sense of not being "real" despite her obvious sentience.

Sedia, for the most part, executes these themes with skill and confidence. Occasionally, however, she does falter, and that inconsistency is why I demure from five stars. To be honest, getting through the first two thirds of the book was more chore than diversion. I can understand why some people would probably put it down after the first few chapters. Yet my opinion of the book experienced a reversal in the last act; the final third is captivating in its tragedy and beauty. Without spoiling it too much, Mattie is definitely a tragic heroine, her downfall ultimately residing within Loharri's spiteful betrayal of her.

Loharri is a fully realized character. He's passionate but phlegmatic, prone to fits of enthusiasm and malaise. Mattie's complex feelings about her creator alone justify calling three dimensional. He was kind enough to create her with an independent mind in the first place; he allowed her to learn alchemy and emancipated her on request. Yet he refuses to hand over her key, which would truly grant her freedom. And he uses her, both indirectly, by compelling her to see him at regular intervals, or directly, by using her as an unwitting spy. This duality is mirrored in his role as a Mechanic politico. He seems more open and accepting than most Mechanics, yet when Mattie attempts to question the wisdom of a party policy, Loharri becomes defensive. He displays the same general xenophobia the other Mechanics have, blaming the revolutionary atmosphere on the increasing population of "Easterners" in Ayona. Clearly, Loharri is not a very nice man. Yet he created Mattie, who is equally clearly a nice woman, determined to care for those society has left by the wayside, such as Ilmarekh the Soul-Smoker and the gargoyles.

So when Loharri betrays Mattie one final, irrevocable time, it's the most poignant turning point in the novel. Suddenly he has crossed the line from passive antagonist to active villain. When Sedia made me hate him *for* his actions rather than for how Mattie *saw* his actions, that's when *The Alchemy of Stone* captured me. It's unfortunate that it took almost the entire book to reach that point; certainly other books have captivated me from the first page until the last. However, when it did happen, it was as swift and irrevocable as Loharri's betrayal.

Sedia's prose is lyrical and haunting; she never wastes words or wants for imagery. That's why I label *The Alchemy of Stone* a symphony. The entire book feels like a score—set in a minor key, of course—that could easily be put to a ballet or some sort of opera. I've criticized the plot, and some of the character development, but the atmosphere of this book is potent and unforgettable—maybe even unforgivable.

Andrew Liptak says

This was a surprise in my mail earlier yesterday - I've been trying to get a hold of this book, *The Alchemy of Stone*, for a little while now, and had some problems. This third book by Ekaterina Sedia was one that I was really looking forwards to reading, and it was a fun book to read - While I waited for my computer to restart, I finished the last 150 pages in about an hour.

The story follows Mattie, an intelligent automation in a world that is very steampunkish. Mattie is an alchemist, trying to discover a way to prevent the gargoyles in the city from turning to stone and dying out. They seem to predate the human inhabitants of the city, and are responsible for its construction and character. At the point in the story, the city is overcrowded, and divided. There's a political rivalry between the Alchemists and machinists, which spills over into violence with the Duke of the city and his family is

attacked and killed, culminating in civil war between classes. Mattie is at the center of this, as an Alchemist, but her creator, whom she is bound to, is a fairly cruel machinist who will not let her stray too far from needing him.

This was a fun read, but not as good as I'd hoped it would be. It felt like a quick look into a vastly complex and interesting world and I didn't get the depth that I would have liked, and that easily could have been there. That being said, what I got was still a very good, engaging read. Where the story is somewhat lacking, it is made up for with the character of Mattie and the various struggles that she comes across in the story. Where most people would think of a robotic being as fairly robust and durable – watching any sort of movie about robots will tell you this – Mattie is weak, timid, and fragile, both physically and mentally. At several points, she is easily broken after being attacked, and must be rewound by her creator in order to function. She is shy, and eager to please her master, Loharri, while at the same time despising him and yearning to be completely free from his grasp, which is not possible, as he literally owns the key to her heart.

There are many themes which run through this book that all intersect with Mattie, but the dominant one can be considered one of transitions. The city is changing, physically as there is a boom in construction and the machinists are taking over, building new things daily, which precipitate in a sort of political change. Between the Machinists and the Alchemists, there is a dual nature to Mattie as well, who was built by a machinist, but rejected that way in life, instead focusing on life. While the exact roles of the machinists and alchemists in this society aren't entirely clear, they do bring up another duality, one of life and death, or fulfillment vs. automation, role vs. job and emotions vs. logic. There is a class system, we see, as angry coal workers, forced off their fields by robots, are tasked with mining coal, while the machinists are content to blindly follow another sentient automation, the calculator.

This, to me, is an interesting theme, as it relates to themes that went on during the Renaissance period, a period of much change, but without the magic and fantasy elements. To some extent, the book has several issues that are still highly relevant today, if not more so. To what extent is a culture vibrant and full of life when it overwhelmingly utilizes machines and devices? At one point, a character that Mattie befriends, Naobi, an outsider, notes that the people of this city aren't happy or content, they just exist. When reading that, I had to wonder how much of that was a sort of social commentary on today's society, where the television, computers, mobile phones, MP3 players are the dominant forms of entertainment and recreation, rather than something that might be more fulfilling. It's certainly something that I have thought about often.

Another dominant theme that the book approaches is the city's response to the death of their Duke, where foreigners were rounded up, harassed and at times, had their souls removed or were threatened as such if they weren't cooperative. This was a somewhat chilling, if very unobvious point in the book that is extremely relevant in today's society after 9-11. Thankfully, this isn't an overwhelming point in the novel. While it doesn't detract from the reading, I always get nervous when any artist, whether it be a writer, singer or painter, uses their material as a soapbox, for it dates and lessens the material that they are releasing.

The final big theme of the book is that of life and death. This is prevalent everywhere, from the machinists who create life from nothing, to the alchemists who preserve life, to the soul seeker who seeks to prevent it, while the gargoyles are slowly dying out. It seems fitting that Mattie, an automation, relates to all of those fields, while not alive herself, is a conscious being, actively seeking to preserve the gargoyles who still remain. More ironic, she is unable to remain alive without her human maker, who holds her fate based on his whims.

This isn't really a positive book when it comes to tone – it's dark, gritty and at times, downright depressing, which came as a real surprise to me, especially at the end, when things came together. I can't really remember a book that has done this, one that really puts the characters into place.

Mattie is the true center of the novel, and is a brilliantly conceived character from the start, one who is

curious, afraid, at times strong, and one who changes over the course of the story. While she is built, automated, I never once thought of her as a robot, but as an organic being – at times, I was trying to imagine her as a robot, and had a hard time doing so, which is absolutely fantastic, given what type of character she is – this is something that few authors that I've come across have been able to do, turn a machine into a character that you can really and truly care for, one where you don't have to stretch your imagination to imagine her being hurt or having feelings.

At the end of the book, I was happy to have gotten into a book and finished it in a day. The Alchemy of Stone was a fun read, engaging and interesting. I'd highly recommend it.

(Originally Posted: <http://jeditrilobite.wordpress.com>)

Mariel says

Do kids stare at you? Not like they look at other adults (just more adults in a taller treetop world). Unknown quantities. Not them. Not the other them (meaning adults). Deciding to be afraid or not, or where to place you in budding perspectives. (Could be looks of judgement. My little niece stares only to proclaim that my hair looks bad. After loooong periods. THAT'S what you wanted to say? I'm sure she gets it from her mother. She always hated my hair.) Still deciding who everyone else is. Staring. What do those looks mean? Do you ever exchange looks with children right back? (Are they just a mini adult who will proclaim that your hair looks bad?) I always had a staring problem. My ex once told me that kids stared at me because they sensed that I was one of them. It depressed me very much, back then, because he really didn't get it. The look is because the inbetween space is undecided. The other is boring. I do know how Mattie feels. Looked on to complement, not as your own whole self. Pulled along in case you get in someone else's way. Expected to make social mistakes. It's an awful feeling. It's the new people she meets that interested me. Potential.

The whispered thread going through all the voices I try to listen that speaks to me was ALMOST there. Over what makes a person a person, what is a soul, men versus women, control. Society blah blah. I know the expected mistake feeling. Is it wrong that I wanted the other voice to be louder? I feel it was more important. I've been looking for stories that have that thread for as long as I can remember. I hold them inside when I find them hoping they'll be around at a time when another peice will fall into place. Elizabeth Bowen's The Death of the Heart (Portia is the apart kind of eyes and staring). Gary Oldman dancing with the kids in Sid & Nancy (he's one of them). Yukio Mishima's moments of all the same bodies in tangled limbs and laughing arms for a kid again festivities. No eyes, no thinking. One of them. (I have more. I don't have enough. I want to figure this out.) The decision limbo... To be afraid? To be? A part... Whatever it is, you can't see what it is they see from those tall tree tops.

Mattie is an automaton. A machine. A clunker. Her heart is wound up and her creator, Loharri, has the key. She's programmed to not be her own. There are other threads, too. It is hard to put all this together at once, free will and genetic make up. How much is variables? I inherited social anxiety from my mama (it was bred further by being beaten into me that no one would ever like me). If I have caffeine and forget to take my vitamins my depression is exponentially worse, and unmanageable before my period. I am not myself. How much is ME and how much is just diet? Am I trudging through my mama's footsteps? You are what you eat and mostly water. It can make all the difference, those variables, in overcoming circumstances and how I was made. Mattie was made to be a slave. She was given enough of a mind of her own to not be boring. She was made to look how someone else wanted her to look (I fought bitterly to escape that, growing up. Matching outfits, twins, that whole cliché was my life).

Not everyone she meets is like Loharri (and he wants more from her than most). But the staring. The looks of

difference and not knowing if you're going to learn to be afraid or not... What do people want from others, anyway? Girlfriends, sisters, brothers, boyfriends, fathers, children...

That's it. Making children and then they are forever your appendage, delighting in reflecting back of one's own ego, kids say the darndest things, cute little dress up outfits. But what about the rest of the kids? Mattie meets the soul smoker. The soul smoker took the job of hosting the souls of the dead until he dies and can lead them to wherever the dead goes because he had no other life. Her foriegn friend, mistrusted because she is different. Her not really a friend client, Ilonda. The feminism thread was beside the point really, I felt. It's like picking one oppressed group from history and saying that no one else had it bad. They COULD have all been in it together, if they didn't decide to mistrust after the staring moments. (I wasn't too interested in Ilonda the courtier who would only hire other women. Too fun loving girl and, like Mattie, I don't easily connect to that type because I don't know how to behave the same way.) Peasants had no jobs and were replaced with machines. The childhood objectification thing was over all. The gargoyles (holy shades of Meredith Anne Peirce's The Darkangel Trilogy here) who made the city but have been forgotten in the greed of the mechanics (like Loharri) seek out other lost souls like themselves. Kids staring to other kids staring. Almost. Mattie falls in love with their feeder, Sebastian (another persecuted foriegn) who doesn't see her past his own mechanics desire to take apart someone and see how they might work for them. "I made that. They are in my image." Child of god, machine, flesh, stone. Made of something else. Still itself.

The ending was kinda bullshit.

Pardon my foul language and potential spoilers. But bullshit.

Mattie is dead to the world without a key to her heart. Sebastian who felt she was an object suddenly decides to wait by her side? Why did Sedia go for the gothic imagery shit? Did she think it was a haunting image of the tragic metal and whale bone girl with a guy waiting by her side? Now mortal gargoyles flying over head to protect her while they still live? It wasn't. (Another book that pisses me off going for the rotting romantic image instead of what would have meant something. Into the Forest pissed me off enough for 2011, thanks. Why don't they ever listen to me?)

The gazes look away. Mattie doesn't get the chance to learn her definitions of friendship and love through experience, make her own variables. I didn't care as much who the parents were! WHY did they stare at Mattie and decide she was a cute little machine but then sit by her side at the end? The gargoyles had been honest in their whispers of staring, before. Now they owed her? Sighs. Sedia did quite well writing Mattie's chemical balances. Now what about the experience? Bullshit!

Four stars because of the voices of Do you really love me? all of the time. The more it is asked the less you are sure if you don't. How it feels when you are told you are soul mates when you don't know what that even means. Sedia got some stuff right. If only that was the asking I had wanted...

Rebecca says

I loved this book up until the last few pages.

The city of Ayona is a haunting place, atmospheric, vivid, and cruel. It's an enchanting bit of world building using lovely language. One begins with the conflict between the progressive but destructive Mechanics and the conservative Alchemists, but slowly realizes that the entire structure is built upon the slavery of children. Grace and horror intermingle. Mattie herself is fascinating and compelling, fully aware but never quite sure if she is thinking or feeling correctly because she is not sure how much of who she is has been manipulated

by her creator, Loharri.

I'm generally comfortable with ambiguity, but I feel as if Sedia promises us a certain number of answers that are never fulfilled. What exactly is the nature of the gargoyles and what will happen to them now? What were Loharri's intentions? The unresolved questions make the already ambiguous ending somewhat irritating. It's beautiful, but unsatisfying.

An ambitious work, beautifully executed, but a little too jealous of its secrets.

Alan says

I had not run across the euphoniously-named Ekaterina Sedia or her work before, but I'm glad I picked this one up. Her ornate, careful prose is unlike anything else I've read of late, although China Mieville's dark, smoky steampunk cityscapes invite comparison. Sedia's work is her own, though. Her protagonist, a clockwork automaton named Mattie, is a sympathetic device whose portrayal is just as it should be - yes, Mattie is unsure of herself when dealing with human emotions, even the ones she possesses herself, and yes, she is a sentient being whose feelings matter, even if her creator Loharri and her compatriots in the city of Ayona do treat her as a mere mechanism.

Factions and conspiracies abound in Ayona, reminding me of the ones that struggle in Colson Whitehead's brilliant first novel, *The Intuitionist*. In Sedia's world, the two main human factions are the Alchemists and the Mechanics - shapers of organic matter pitted against those who fashion devices of steel and brass, as if the sciences were bitter enemies rather than working on a continuum. It is a disastrous division which Mattie cannot bridge by herself, though she is an accomplished Alchemist whose maker is a most prominent Mechanic.

A third complicating factor are the gargoyles who long ago grew the city itself from the very stones of the earth - a dying race for whom Mattie may be the only hope of survival. The gargoyles observe and interject their own views of the human conflict from a gray, alien perspective that Sedia portrays very well.

Things come to a head when the Duke's Palace is violently demolished. The Palace is the stone centerpiece of the city, the gargoyles' crowning achievement. And it has been destroyed by explosives only Alchemists could have made - but which only Mechanics buy, and they normally only in order to extend the mines that bring them the coal the Mechanics need to make their engines. The destruction of the Palace throws the city into chaos, and Mattie, though she tries to stay as aloof as her porcelain face would make her appear, is inevitably drawn in to the conflict...

Sedia writes beautifully, even about ugly things. She is a writer to watch.

Liviu says

This was a very different read from what I expected so at first I thought that it sets up a great storyline/world and then fails somewhat to live to that potential, but the last 3rd or so of the book and especially its poignant ending made me reconsider and appreciate this one as what it truly is - a mainstream character study disguised as science fantasy.

The character happens to be a mechanical girl called Mattie, but her creator a Mechanic with a damaged face and a past that slowly revealed leads us to understand his obsessions, and why he made Mattie intelligent, self-aware, capable of feeling pain and pleasure including of a sensual type though maybe in not the usual ways and then later "emancipated" Mattie only to keep her "rewinding key" without which she will stop working after a while. Just to visit him, Loharri the mechanic claimed, to make sure that Mattie will not completely forsake him, but of course there is much more than that.

And Mattie joins the Alchemists, the rivals, competitors and sometimes enemies of the Mechanics, a strange self-aware automaton in a city full of owned, lacking sentience and self-awareness servant automatons and when she takes both an important project and an important noble customer, Mattie unwittingly gets embroiled in plots, revolution and much more.

Highly, highly recommended but with the caveat above - a very inventive world, but the focus is on the character study, Mattie, Loharri, Iolanda, Niobe, Sebastian, the Soul Smoker, the gargoyles, rather than on the workings of the world and such.

Sandy Parsons says

I wanted to like it. I really did. I picked it as my choice for the book club, after all. But after a promising start, I kept feeling like I was reading a sketch of a larger story, with an occasional burst of wonderful imagery, or a hint of a really cool idea. I loved the metaphor of Mattie and her heart, and the key to her heart, which she could never quite possess (and arguably, she sometimes seemed programmed not to want to actually achieve, all her protests notwithstanding). The soul smoker was probably the only character I cared enough about to perk up when he was around, but then the scene would end without anything really happening. I loved the homunculi, and their squishy, needy passion. The gargoyles, too, intrigued me, but none of it ever fleshed out (no conscious pun intended) into anything I cared about. By then end I didn't care about any of the characters, and in fact, the two human women had entirely interchangeable voices. I felt like the war was some background noise but who won? Don't know, don't care. In spite of all that, I felt that the writing style was often beautiful and engaging, so much so that I didn't have a problem slogging through to the end (which is usually the case with a book that I've lost interest in). So this book suffers from the opposite problem that books often have. Great writing, mediocre story.

Tras says

A truly beautiful novel. Mattie's journey into 'humanity' will touch all but those with hearts of solid stone (excluding the gargoyles, of course, who adore and protect her). In many ways, Mattie, an automaton, is the most human character in the book; the one that most of us will be able to identify with, care about, and, perhaps, fall in love with. Her innocence and desire to become truly emancipated drive her story as she contends with life's ups and downs, and the machinations of others. Poignant, wonderful, and heartbreaking. I adored this book.

Nikki says

I feel like an odd one out, here. I expected to love this, and people whose opinions I trust really loved it, often giving it five stars. But it never came together for me: I wasn't sure what the main story was meant to

be, what I was meant to take away from it. I never really managed to picture Sedia's world or characters, or connect whatever dots I was meant to connect.

Partially, probably, this is because I didn't want to. The relationship between Mattie and her creator is a powerful one, and he's a disturbing character. I found him cruel, manipulative -- abusive, even. He creates her with the capacity for independence but keeps her chained to him, makes her to serve him but gives her the intelligence to resent it, makes a person with free will in a world that won't accept her as a person at all. He gives her the illusion of freedom, the illusion that she can do and be what she wants, but keeps her close with the horrible joint leash of pity for him and need of his key. He creates an autonomous creature, but then disregards what she wants and needs. The thing about her faces hurt me the most, the way he ignores her preferences and tries to shape her personhood with his own.

It's powerful writing, in that sense, but I didn't connect with it, and I don't think I really wanted to. There are some other really powerful parts, beautiful parts even, but it all seems so sad, so worn down, that I didn't want to feel that power.

Felicia says

I'm not sure how to review this. I think for most people this would be a three star book because it isn't EASY, but there is such beauty and strangeness to this, that I had to give it four stars, because I think for some people it will be a five. There is something lovely about it.

It's a very artistic book, the prose is very romantic and lush and plaintive, and it drew me in. It's set in an alt steampunk-ish world I never 100% understood and follows an automaton named Mattie, who lives alone but is controlled by the master who created her, who has to wind her heart every so often and won't give her the key. Gargoyles talk in riddles at the start of chapters, there are factions against factions, a lot is going on and it's not told in a straight line often.

It was strange because so much is confusing in this, but I feel a re-read would add a layer of commentary. The lead, the most soulful character, is mechanical which is so interesting. You really do ache for Mattie, she cares so much, and being caught between the rising tensions of a society you are totally drawn in. I guess this author may be Russian, which I totally get, it's very tragic and dramatic, haha.

Again, it's not an easy or quick read, and is not that uplifting, but there's a lovely artistry that was refreshing and compelled me to finish and lingered with me. Recommended for something different.

Sesana says

What a strange, lovely book. I fully admit that I decided to read this book solely because it features gargoyles. I kind of have a thing for gargoyles. I'm pleased to report that Sedia delivered far more than just a favorite (and sadly underused) fantasy species.

The Alchemy of Stone is set in the fictional city of Ayona, built by the magical efforts of the stone-controlling gargoyles. The Ayona of the novel is in the middle of a power struggle, between forward-thinking, steampunky Mechanics and slightly more mystical Alchemists. Caught in the middle are the working classes, resentful of the power both Alchemists and Mechanics lord over them and of their often miserable positions in life. So yes, it is sort of a take on the Industrial Revolution, and revolution in general.

It's a nicely constructed world, fascinating enough that I'd be happy to see Sedia write more books in this setting.

But as interesting as Ayona is, it's a backdrop to Mattie's story. Mattie is an automaton, an unusually bright one. She's smart enough to long for her own independence, and to have become as emancipated from her creator as it's possible to be. It's not enough. She wants to be the only one in control of her own destiny, to literally hold the key to her clockwork heart in her own hands and no one else's. It's Mattie's longing for freedom that drives the story, against her own construction and the will of her creator. The allegory there is obvious enough that it doesn't need to be pointed out, and it's effectively, movingly written.

I do wish that the revolution happening in the background had been a bit more than background, that we'd been able to see more of the wider story. But I'm also very, very happy with what Sedia did write, and with a perfectly ambiguous, open, satisfying ending.

Mathieu says

Un ouvrage intéressant que cette Alchimie de la pierre.

Le roman est à mi-chemin de la fantasy et du steampunk. L'histoire se déroule dans une ville (jamais nommée) dont les bâtiments les plus importants ont été érigés, pour ne pas dire façonnés, par des gargouilles il y a plusieurs siècles. Ces anciennes créatures sont les protectrices de la ville, mais désormais sur le déclin, elles se contentent d'observer les agissements des humains qui la peuplent.

Et des agissements, il y en a ! La cité, dirigé par un duc aux pouvoirs somme toute limitée, est l'enjeu d'une lutte séculaire au parlement entre les Alchimistes d'une part, et les Mécaniciens de l'autre. Les premiers concoctent potions et onguents en tout genre, tandis que les seconds ont doté la ville d'automates plus ou moins intelligents et de toutes sortes de machineries à engrenages et à vapeur.

C'est dans cette riante cité que nous rencontrons Mattie, la narratrice, une automate d'un genre très particulier. Il s'agit en effet d'une "machine" intelligente (et j'emploie les guillemets à dessein) très poussée puisqu'elle est capable d'empathie, et de ressentir tant les sentiments que la douleur physique.

Émancipée (et le choix de ce mot ne me semble pas anodin) par son maître, elle est devenue une alchimiste reconnue, mais elle-même se définit avant tout, comme automate et femme.

Et c'est là le point fort de ce récit. Le caractère profondément féminin de cette automate, sa volonté farouche d'être considérée comme un individu à part entière et pas comme un tas de ferraille, de s'affranchir définitivement de son maître en s'appropriant la clé qui lui permettrait de se remonter quand elle en a besoin, bref, d'être une femme libérée comme chantait l'autre (et même si je déteste la chanson en question, mais c'est pas le sujet)

L'écriture d'Ekaterina Sedia laisse la part belle aux émotions et au ressenti de Mattie et est très juste dans leur expression. Les personnages du roman sont très réussis, nimbés d'un voile de mystère pour certains d'entre eux, et on prend plaisir à les voir évoluer sous nos yeux.

Le personnage de Mattie est très touchant, avec son double questionnement quant à sa nature de machine et de femme, et on se plaît à suivre ses tourments sentimentaux, ses colères, ses angoisses...

L'ambiance générale du roman m'a plutôt fait penser à Perdido Street Station de China Mieville, avec une

ville sale, viciée, mêlant diverses ethnies et mâtinée de technologie rétro-futuriste. Le personnage principal en revanche, m'a fortement fait penser à La fille automate de Paolo Bacigalupi.

Ces deux romans m'ayant fortement plu, c'est sans surprise que celui-ci m'a convaincu.

Megan Baxter says

Power and control, society and structure, alchemy and engineering, machine and gargoyle. This is a world populated by the strange and steampunky, with emancipated (but maybe not really) humanoid robots, and gargoyles slowly turning to stone against their will. It's also a world in flux, where feudalism may be in the midst of being overthrown by industry, and that may be, in turn, challenged by the workers.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Juushika says

Mattie is an emancipated automaton and an alchemist, commissioned by the city's gargoyles to extend their short life spans. Her research draws her into a conflict between gargoyles, Mechanists, and Alchemists, but Mattie's attempts to help are hampered by her lingering ties to her creator. A steampunk fantasy novel, *The Alchemy of Stone* has a fun magical setting and a wonderful protagonist, but overhasty pacing leaves too much of the book undeveloped. The potential here goes unfulfilled, and it's simply disappointing. I don't recommend it.

The Alchemy of Stone is an indulgent steampunk fantasy that tries to do a lot but doesn't do it very well. The setting is a delight: automatons and alchemy, steampower and atmospheric detail all paint a storybook-vivid steampunk landscape. It's magical and colorful and just a lot of fun. Unfortunately, the book often fails to go past storybook depth, and that's mostly the fault of pacing. Scenes are so short that if you blink you may miss them. There's no time to for character motivation, and so Mattie's wanderings between settings and characters seem random. Nor is there time to build relationships between characters, and the reader doesn't care about anyone but Mattie. There's no time for the reader to pause and meditate on the story, denying foreshadowing and much of the book's greater meaning. All told the pacing makes the plot feel unfocused and superficial, and it leaves little time for the sort of detail that could give the storybook setting some meaning and life.

The book goes places—in fact there's almost an excess of plot: back story, power struggles between Alchemists, Mechanists, and gargoyles, civil war, and always Mattie's search for identity and community. But the journey is one of swift jumps and starts that seem random and underdeveloped, and the conclusions feel haphazard, more stumbled upon than created. And so *The Alchemy of Stone* is promising but dissappointing. The setting is a fun playground, and Mattie is an interesting character; her struggle for self-identity is the book's strongest aspect, a touching story of humanity and displacement told through an unusual, animatronic protagonist. But the rest of the book is too swift and too haphazard, leaving everything from supporting characters to plot woefully undeveloped and making the conclusion seem more or less random. The setting drew me in and there's a lot of potential here, but it's unexplored and I didn't enjoy the book. I don't recommend it.

Brendan says

The tone and feel of this book reminds me a lot of China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* or *The Scar*, both of which take place in a steampunk world of strange creatures, mixing fantasy and science-fiction and excellent character development. Sedia brings those same ingredients to *The Alchemy of Stone*.

The novel tells the story of Mattie, an intelligent liberated automaton alchemist who works in the city of the gargoyles, both part of human society and disdained by it (the epithet for automatons, btw, is clunker). The book hinges on the abusive relationship she has with her creator, a machinist (the political opponents of alchemists) who keeps her tethered both by ingrained programming and by keeping her key, because of which she must visit him regularly to be wound up. The events of the novel turn on political rebellions and citywide battles throughout which Mattie must wrestle with the basic questions of life and purpose.

It's a pretty good book, one that I warmed to as I read it. It's also melancholy and kind of dark; I had trouble navigating the events of Mattie's life without real empathy for her difficult situation. A few more thoughts:

- * The political intrigue between the machinists and the alchemists works really well. The machinists are depicted with the scientific-rational worldview, one in which the idea of building a solution to all problems prevails. By contrast, alchemists are more in touch with nature (but no less petty or abusive).
- * The gargoyles, a part of the book both interesting and ultimately irrelevant, serve like a kind of chorus, reflecting on the events of the book and revealing key bits of information as the plot unfolds.
- * Class warfare and abuse of the underprivileged plays a key role in the novel. It's hard not to read the history of Russia—Sedia's birth country—as influencing this sub-plot. By the same measure, it doesn't feel overtly Russian (whatever that might mean).
- * The bodily experience of being an automaton comes through spectacularly in this book. There's a moment where Mattie tries to sneak up on someone, only to forget that her heart's ticking can be heard quite distinctly in a quiet clearing.
- * The blood magic Mattie learns from a fellow alchemist struck me as particularly interesting and visceral. I'm still haunted by the image of the sloppy, grotesque homunculus that soils her skirts with its bloody, muddy hands.

The book also dovetails very nicely with my New Millennium Studies class reading of *Frankenstein*. The *Alchemy of Stone* supposes a similar divide between creator and created, substituting a sort-of self-pity for disgust in the creator. Mattie's mechanic resents her desire for independence, both granting it and holding enough strings to keep her from truly leaving his sphere. In a conversation about our obligations to and from our creations, it works really well. One might also use this novel to consider the experience of parenting a teen or early twentysomething — they want their independence but they're the first person they come to when they need your help.
