



vN

Madeline Ashby

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Amy Peterson is a von Neumann machine, a self-replicating humanoid robot.

For the past five years, she has been grown slowly as part of a mixed organic/synthetic family. She knows very little about her android mother's past, so when her grandmother arrives and attacks her mother, little Amy wastes no time: she eats her alive.

Now she carries her malfunctioning granny as a partition on her memory drive, and she's learning impossible things about her clade's history – like the fact that the failsafe that stops all robots from harming humans has failed... Which means that everyone wants a piece of her, some to use her as a weapon, others to destroy her.

vN Details

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Author : Madeline Ashby

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From Reader Review vN for online ebook

Melissa says

While it's certainly possible to read this & get a lot of satisfaction from it, it's also possible to read this & want to throw it across the room, especially if you admire precision in writing. This book makes me yearn for a stringent editor. It all hinges on one plot point that is so nonsensical, I wish that anyone along the path to getting this book published had brought it up to Ashby & helped her troubleshoot it a bit before it went to print. To wit: the failsafe. Each vN is equipped with a failsafe that makes them shut down or memory wipe or experience catastrophic failure or some such if they see humans being hurt, to the point where a human cuts his hand & each vN in the area has to shut their eyes or turn away. But if vN were originally manufactured to assist those left behind after the Rapture, why on earth would this failsafe be part of their construction? I'm no Bible scholar or anything, but it seems pretty obvious that once the Rapture takes place, it will not be all fun & games for those who don't get into heaven. If Amy isn't allowed to attend the school her parents put her in because the principal is afraid she'll failsafe if a human child gets hurt, how on earth could the principal herself be a vN? Wouldn't *she* failsafe if a human child in her care got hurt? The failsafe also makes vN somehow fall in love with or want to please humans whenever it becomes convenient plot-wise for Javier to act like a Lab puppy when a human says something nice to him even though he's really in terrible danger. If this is the case, why would there ever be a need for vN prisons or laws regarding their behavior? If Javier is any indication, whenever a vN does something humans don't like, couldn't you just tell them to knock it off?

There's just so much potential here, so much working for the story that is awesome. There's a cannibal robot that takes on the characteristics of the other robots she eats. There's a group of vN who want to deactivate their failsafes so they can target pedophiles who have been using vN to act out their urges on non-human children, for pete's sake! Unfortunately, every time the failsafe got brought up it I lost the thread of the story because I was so angry at the silliness of it. Also, robot sex is not something I'd like to think about, and poor, poor Nate.

Bradley says

I'm gonna have a hard time reviewing this one not because the book was hard or particularly idea-dense, but because my expectations mismatched the resulting tale.

Don't get me wrong, it's still about self-replicating machines and it eventually gets to the meat of good ideas explored relatively well, but for the longest time, I just had the impression that I was reading a YA novel. Not even a very good YA novel. Family issues, growing up too fast, being on the run, hanging out with that flawed boy. It took too much time. I wanted worldbuilding.

Of course, that's my issue, not anyone else's. I suppose I just wanted something spectacular based on that cover. *sigh*

The ideas have potential. A potential herd of babies? Sure. Potential. Subverting "protective" programming to find your own destiny outside of what the humans want? Potential.

Unfortunately, most of what I read skirted the edge of noise. Human drama, mediocre situations for large

parts of the novel, and missed opportunities. I'm not saying it's a bad novel, just an average one. Nothing grabbed me. Which is a shame... because I liked the author's Company Town novel.

I'll continue because I already bought the second novel, but I probably wouldn't have, otherwise.

Win some, lose some.

Sarah says

This was a YA sci-fi story about robots.

Amy was quite a meek girl until her mother was attacked, and the sudden eating of her grandmother was a bit odd, as was how quickly Amy went from acting like a 5-year-old to acting like an adult.

The storyline in this was about Amy eating her grandmother, and ending up in jail, only to be rescued by another robot called Javier. Amy and Javier then went on the run together, but I didn't find that all that interesting really, and the book dragged for me.

The ending to this was a bit odd, and I don't think I'll be reading the sequel.

6 out of 10

Andrew says

Amy pinched the skin of her arms. If you couldn't brag in the brig, where could you? "I've got fractal design memory in here. Even if I'm cut up, my body remembers how to repair itself perfectly. I'll come back in one piece, no matter what."

"Oh, believe me, dollface, I know. I've seen it happen. You put some vN shrapnel in the right culture, and it grows right back. Like cancer." He snorted. "But whether what grows back is actually you? With all the memories, and all the adaptations? That's like asking how many angels can dance on the head of a pin."

Amy imagined her skin sliced thin as ham, suspended in the shadowy clouds of vN growth medium. Maybe she wouldn't even miss her mom and dad. Never once seeing their faces or hearing their voices or feeling their arms around her would probably hurt a lot less, if she were smashed into a million pieces.

The film industry, some days, can be rather depressing. Following his work on Lincoln, Steven Spielberg is set to direct the film version of Daniel H. Wilson's Robopocalypse, a novel of grand ambition but marginal creative substance. Wilson's novel is an emotionally hands-off tale of a robot uprising that threatens humanity—an end result that is made immediately apparent. Madeline Ashby's debut novel vN, on the other hand, tells a similar, though much more open-wounded tale of a developing machine supremacy and its

uncertain future alongside its flesh and blood creators. vN succeeds where Robopocalypse and others like it fail: it keeps the story human and emotionally grounded—even when the emotions are software and nothing more.

vN is Amy's story. Amy is the five-year-old daughter of Charlotte and Jack: a von Neuman, self-replicating humanoid mother and an organic "chimp" of a father. With her growth restricted via a specialized, controlled diet, Amy is growing at the rate of a human child, though she is most certainly not human herself. Like her mother, Amy is a vN, a (for the most part) socially accepted creation designed, originally, to be a human companion following the Rapture—to befriend those poor, unfortunate souls left behind. Naturally, such an event did not occur, and vN's have been integrated into society to varying degrees of success. As the vN species has developed, with different models for different purposes, some have been able to make the transition, to more or less "pass" for human. This is due in large part to the failsafe—a part of a vN's programming that makes them feel sick when a human is hurt in any way. It's "*a humane response to inhuman behaviour.*" When Amy's grandmother Portia threatens her mother, Amy intervenes—and in the process, learns that her failsafe no longer functions as it should.

vN succeeds because Ashby never contradicts her characters or justifies their humanity and the very human way they are written through unearned means. In fact, without giving anything away, the nature of Amy's empathic subroutines, through which she is able to function in the specific manner she does, apart from all other vN, is explained in a pseudo-scientifically satisfying manner—not to mention true to the novel's presented world. It is far more believable than simply falling back on the all-too common trope of artificial intelligence evolving along natural humanistic paths.

Without wanting to beat the Spielberg horse into the ground, vN shares a lot in terms of its emotional journey with the film A.I. Artificial Intelligence. While A.I. is more or less the tale of Pinocchio, of a young artificial boy's journey to become real, vN is about Amy's journey to accept herself as an artificial life form, and to understand how and why she is and will always be different from others—from humans, her organic father included. Similar to A.I., however, is the overwhelming focus on family—both the traditional organic definition of, and the vN clades of similar models banding together (and in some cases, attempting to kill one another).

Amy's journey is set in motion when she succumbs to instinct, violating a social contract of sorts that, until the end of the book's prologue, helped maintain a level of peace and comfort between humans and the vN communities among them. In doing so, in exhibiting a sort of empathy both wonderful and to be feared, Amy is involved in an incident that pries her from her parents, and simultaneously from her childhood. The issue of family and being removed from one's family and forced to find definition through other means is further accentuated by four modes of abandonment presented throughout the novel: Portia abandoning (in a way) her offspring in an attempt to perfect her model; Jack's father abandoning him for falling in love with and marrying a vN; Javier abandoning his children to fend for themselves, believing in a more machine-like sense of development through world, not parental, interaction; and at the highest level, society—humans, creators of the vN in the first place—wanting to abandon their creation should they, in any way, exhibit autonomy not constricted by their failsafes.

In many ways, vN is a love letter to science fiction nerds of all kinds. Amy's journey is tragic, its final destination uncertain, but along the way, Ashby litters the book with enough casual film and video game references to lighten the mood: the xenomorphs from Alien and a pair of Portal references in particular stood out. (Remember: the cake is a lie...)

vN feels like the start of something new. Whether or not Ashby has more planned for this world and these

characters I'm not sure, but Amy's journey, and more importantly where her journey comes to a close, leaves me feeling as if this story is just getting started. I'm excited to see what she does next.

Rachel (TheShadesofOrange) says

4.0 Stars

This was an intelligently written novel that imagines a future where our society integrates organic and synthetic life. The main character is quite young and naive, which gave the book a young adult tone. However, the book actually addresses some very adult subject matter that may not be suitable for young readers.

This was a fascinating novel that examines numerous moral dilemmas that would arise with the development of artificial intelligence life. This was an entertaining read with a good mix of action, thoughtful discussion and a touch of cannibalism.

Jonathan Bergeron says

I love the library. I do wish authors made money on each time the book was checked out, then again there wouldn't be libraries if that was the deal with publishers. The reason why I love libraries is by wandering the aisles looking for that science fiction sticker (the St. Petersburg Library System puts "Science Fiction" stickers on the spines of sci-fi books) I come across gems every now and then. First it was Fortune's Pawn now it's vN.

If you're looking for military or A LOT of fighting, then look elsewhere. vN isn't full of fighting but the story keeps the pages turning, makes it so you don't want to put the book down.

Back to the library part though. I actually did pass up checking this book out. I looked at Amazon and a bunch of reviews blasted the book. Talked about how Amy (the main character/protagonist) was just a whiner and so on. Pretty sure they were expecting some ultra-violent book and were let down. I am glad I finally shrugged my shoulders and went with my gut. If I didn't check out the book, I wouldn't have been entertained for several days.

vN is a wonderful book. It's thoughtful and puts a new spin on AI. Sure, the failsafe that prevents AIs from hurting humans is there, but it's presented in a novel way. It's not Asimov's Three Laws reworded; which is great, as I've always been a sucker for AI stories, from Neal Asher's super dark story telling to, now, Madeline Ashby's thoughtful look on it. It's just fun to read. Especially when it's not "human's inefficient, human's die".

I do recommend vN. Don't listen to those naysayers on Amazon, it's a great book. It kept me turning pages and reading in the car. I'm looking forward to reading the next in this trilogy.

Diayll says

Originally Reviewed At: Mother/Gamer/Writer

Rating: 5 out of 5 Controllers

Review Source: Publisher for Honest Review

Reviewer: Heather

vN is a very interesting, and fresh take on science fiction. At least it was for me, you know the woman who loves to watch Star Trek, Doctor Who, and tons of sci-fi movies. But let me tell you a bit more about the book before I give you my complete honest opinion and reaction.

First off, vN is short for von Neumann, which is essentially a robot with artificial intelligence. Here is the thing. They were originally created to mimic humans for all sorts of wonderful things. They made models that could be nurses, field workers, really you name it. Each model was created with a failsafe so that they would never turn on the human population. In fact, seeing a human hurt would cause pain to the vN.

That was until the world met Amy. A small vN that her mother had iterated with her human father. They had chosen to raise her slowly, unlike most robots who could complete their growth within a year. Her parents also chose to raise her around more humans than those of her kind. But they never told her why or more so her mother never told her why.

At her kindergarten graduation Amy watched as her grandmother attacked and killed a friend. An impossible feat according to the software and fail-safe designers, but Portia had done it, and shown no remorse as she continued to pursue Amy's mother. Without much thought, and an increasing hunger drive, Amy consumed her grandmother. It would not be the end of granny, no she would live inside of her, and every so often she would rear her destructive head, and take control of Amy's body.

After being caught, Amy meets Javier who was arrested for iterating too many vN. He is tough, head strong, and completely amused at how human this girl seems to be. When she cries it seems real, not her fail-safe kicking in or her hard drive trying to load the correct response. While on the run he iterates his 13th child, and time after time he wants to leave him behind when they get into a heap of trouble, but Amy refuses. How can someone who is a vN, and ate her own grandmother have such compassion and love?

Follow along and find out!

Wow...

This is my first ever 5 controller review on science fiction. Perhaps it was the stellar writing, or the in-depth story the writer painted. On the other hand it could just be completely and utterly fascinating. Especially when reading the story with human eyes.

I often wonder how the world would react if we had something like vN. Could we find them capable of love and trust? I found myself wondering how I would react if I were in Amy's fathers shoes, or the shoes of one of the many doctors who created and continued to develop the vN technology. The whole kit n' caboodle was fascinating to say the least.

This book does have a lot of darker elements. One in particular is the reason these robots were actually created, and as much as it disgusts me I will share it for anyone sensitive. Essentially they were made, and often used, to satisfy pedophile urges. This was needed to tell the story, and there are no graphic details given, but I felt it needed to be put out there as a forewarning. There is also mention of death, theft, violence, as well as talk of sex. So it's best read by the 18+ crowd.

BUT!

It is also filled with adventure, suspense, romance, friendship, and the essence of family. I'm still not an expert on this genre, but I fell in love with Amy, the naive, sweet, vN who had her world turned upside down. All of this because her fail-safe failed... read it folks, just read it!

Kevin Kelsey says

vN is a perfectly good novel and tells an interesting story, but there is a great novel hiding just below its surface that never quite breaches. It had one of the most original origin stories for AI that I've ever read, and was a genuine novel of ideas, but I feel like it just never really got there. I liked it enough to want to read the second in the series, and I'm hoping that the dark ideas that were introduced here will be more fully explored there.

Carmen says

Amy is five years old. At her kindergarten graduation, her grandmother shows up. Amy has never met her grandmother, and now she knows why. Her grandmother jumps on stage, grabs a little boy, and flings him to his death. When Amy's mother, Charlotte, tries to stop her, she starts beating Charlotte viciously.

Amy does the only thing she can think of. She runs right up to her grandma, opens her mouth wide, and takes a big bite out of her. Then she keeps eating and eating and eating until there's not a toe or finger left.

It's probably time to mention that Amy is a vN, a robot. Her grandmother, Portia, was a robot too. Invented by a church that was preparing for the end of days, all vN are equipped with a failsafe - they will short circuit and blackout if they see a human in pain. Any kind of pain, any degree of pain.

This has led to a world where vN (who are sentient beings with thoughts and desires) are slaves. Slaves for porn, slaves for labor, a "safe" outlet for pedophiles who buy children vN, starve them so they won't grow, and rape them over and over so that they (the pedophiles) won't endanger "real children." vN don't exactly "enjoy" being slaves to humans, but can never fight back. They are designed to do anything to please their human masters. They have sentience but not free will.

How was Portia, a vN, able to kill a human child? Why was her failsafe not working?

Amy doesn't realize that eating her evil grandmother Portia has meant Portia now lives inside her, like a cancer, a cancer that talks to her and tells her to do awful, awful things.

I am just scratching the surface of this wonderful novel here with my review. This is just the beginning. Ashby has made a tired, old idea into a new and exciting one. By allowing her robots to be sentient from the onset, allowing them to give birth and procreate, and by allowing them to evolve - I feel like she has turned this idea of robot rebellion on its head.

She also succeeds in writing about dark topics (pedophilia, sexual slavery, forced labor) juxtaposed with a hopefulness and a goodness that doesn't leave you feeling nauseous. I read Bacigalupi's WIND-UP GIRL and it was sickening. A book of doom and hate and hopelessness. This book deals with the same sort of future, but Ashby allows hope and love and healing in her world.

In each chapter, Ashby would surprise me with a new concept or revelation about the world she created. I really liked her ideas. And I like that she presents a world where good is possible and love exists, instead of a grim, dark, hopeless future where you think the world deserves to be blown up. Amy is capable of love, and people (vN and human) are capable of loving her back.

There's also a smattering of Spanish in this novel, which tickles me pink. :)

Mogsy (MMOGC) says

4 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.blogspot.com/201...>

While reading vN, I was frequently reminded of a mission statement I saw once on Angry Robot's website – to publish the best in modern adult genre fiction, or in their words, "SF, F and WTF?!" This book certainly falls mostly in the first category, but also possesses a strong generous splash of the third.

At the heart of vN is a story about choice and independence in synthetic humans/artificial intelligences which in itself is not a very original premise in science fiction, but Ashby piles on a ton of new ideas of her own that make this book a fascinating and sometimes disturbing read. Called "vonNeumanns" or vNs after their creator, the original proposal for the self-replicating humanoid robots in this novel in fact came from the most unlikely source – an End Times group who wanted to leave a body of helpers behind for the millions of unsaved after the rapture.

Other bizarre or perturbing things include a graphic scene of robot cannibalism; a harrowing jail break; a male vN giving birth (or “iterating”) in a sticky, gooey process; the implication that pedophiles acquire vN and make them stay forever young by keeping them – all in the prologue and first couple of chapters. The robots have a failsafe that prevent them from doing harm to humans, and witnessing anything violent or upsetting can risk triggering it, shorting the vN out. But still, while it’s apparent that vNs themselves look, act and have emotions much like humans do, their lives aren’t valued the same way; non-functioning or “blue-screened” vN are tossed aside like garbage, a process described in all its unpleasantness. Not to mention the use of vNs in the porn industry, or some of the other sickening and questionable things humans do to them. All this made the book a unique and sometimes eyebrow-raising read, but at least there’s no accusing it of not being able to hold my attention.

That this is an adult novel is no doubt a given, considering some of its mature themes. But within it I was also a little surprised to find a coming-of-age story … in a sense. The book’s protagonist Amy is a vN living in a mixed-family, a young iteration of her vN mother who is of the same clade. Amy’s human father, perhaps a little naively, tries to give his android daughter a “normal” life, controlling her diet so that she physically looks like a little girl, attending school and participating in other activities that real kids do. But when an incident strikes Amy’s kindergarten graduation, Amy ends up devouring her vN grandmother (yeah, you read that right… it’s a long, freaky story), somehow integrating her software. The extra food source also transforms Amy, so overnight she becomes a grown woman sharing her mind with the voice of her psychotic grandmother.

Literally a new person, Amy is forced to make her way through the world and gain an adult perspective on matters her parents had previously shielded her from. In a way, everything is new and strange to her and the reader both. I found myself asking the same questions as her about the things she saw. Was her father deluding himself with the life he wanted for himself and for her? What is a vN’s role: helper, companion or just another technological tool? How should society deal with sentient beings that aren’t really alive? Are artificial intelligences even capable of love? Is Amy limited by her programming, or is there a possibility of growing beyond her code?

Despite some of the weirdness in this novel, it is a fascinating tale of Amy’s self-discovery and emergence from the shadow of others’ expectations of her. Probably my biggest disappointment was the way things ended. It was a pretty weak conclusion, a little random and out of nowhere after everything that came before, but the tepid ending notwithstanding, I thought this was an overall absorbing and poignant read. Definitely one of the bolder, more provocative titles from Angry Robot.

Shaheen says

Reminiscent of Asimov but entirely new in the way it handles the idea of intelligent, artificial life, vN explores the lives future synthetic beings can expect to live. Like Asimov’s robots, Ashby’s vN (von-Neumann humanoid robots) are subject to a failsafe: witnessing human pain can result in severe malfunctions, or death. And like Asimov, Ashby shows us how terrible this fate can be.

After a violent attack at Amy’s kindergarten graduation at the hands of her grandmother, whom she eats in defence of her mother, and the death of a human student, Amy is locked up and taken away by human authorities for testing. Her jail-break with Javier causes country wide unrest, and all vN of her model are recalled for quarantine until tests can be administrated. On the run, confused, and with her grandmother’s voice haunting her and urging her to kill (her grandmother’s memory has been integrated into her own), Amy

vows to find out why she's not like other vN, and rescue her parents from imprisonment.

Amy is a refreshingly original character whom I instantly liked. She's not whiny, she takes things into stride, and she never loses sight of her goal to be reunited with her parents. However, she's not stubborn about her goals either, and takes note of good advice when it is offered. I also liked Javier, even though he is so different and honestly, scared me a little because of his *otherness*. On the other hand I despised Amy's grandmother Portia, because of her callousness, but after a while felt supremely sorry for her, because she is a victim too, a product of her world.

Until I met Javier I was reading Amy as a normal vN, perhaps with a few more human tendencies than most vN because of her upbringing and family life. But Ashby cleverly uses Javier, a vN who has never lived with humans, to show readers how unique and special Amy really is. One of the most poignant scenes is when Amy realises that vN who malfunction are thrown into the garbage, after coming across lots of newly iterated vN who malfunctioned in a dump. She exclaims that human children who died soon after birth would never be thrown into the garbage, and Javier replies of course not, but is perplexed why Amy is so moved by the discovery.

I love the world-building, because it comes with a history that I found terrifyingly viable: vN were created by churches who thought the Rapture was coming, and wanted to leave behind companions and help-mates for those humans who were left behind on earth. vN were made to fulfil specific needs and self-replicate when enough food was available. When no Rapture came, vN were used for menial labour, either cheaply or for free, and are now maids, mistresses, and labourers. Some humans use them for other purposes however, and pedophilia pops up peripherally in the story.

vN is an exciting, refreshing book that I liked, and I was surprised to find out that it is Madeline Ashby's debut novel. It's a terrific accomplishment and I look forward to reading more of her books in the future, especially the rest of *The Machine Dynasty* series.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher for review.
You can read more of my reviews at [Speculating on SpecFic](#).

Katy says

3.5 stars - Bouncing between 3 and 4.

WARNING: vN is definitely not for the weak stomach, and it's not normally my type of book, but for some reason, I just had a sick, twisted desire to read such a weird book. (And I had to pick an edition because I promised a certain someone that the cover will not appear on my newsfeed. :P)

CONCEPT

This book took me on a crazy ride. But then again, I was prepared for it to be a strange story after reading the summary to find out that this robot has eaten her grandmother.

Ashby did a **tremendous job with the world-building in this book**, and I definitely have to give her props for giving readers something so bizarre - organic and synthetic families, clones that were different upgraded versions of the parent, a failsafe to protect humans and a hack that made Portia and Amy different, and of

course, two different methods that kept the vN alive - the external one that rebuilds the body and the internal one that allows the minds to kind of merge. Wow.

However, with a lot of totally unique concepts, **readers are left with a lot of questions**, as was the case with this book. It seems a bit conflicting that vN food regulates how fast someone grows, yet eating another vN would allow them to grow so fast and acquire new body parts. And I guess if you eat fast enough, a five-year-old can look like a full-grown woman, yet, I'm still not sure that vNs actually age after a certain point (i.e. Portia looks identical to Charlotte and all of her children). Also, I haven't fully grasp the concept of iteration like what causes vNs to reproduce - obviously, not your typical human methods.

I think the story was **paced well - although it was a bit bogged down with technological verbiage**.

However, I thought the last action scene was a bit chaotic, and I'm still not sure I fully understand the Susan and Gladys story.

Still, I thought the epilogue did a good job of going back to the prologue and bringing the book to a full-circle end.

CHARACTERS

Strangely, I really liked Amy as she struggles from having the mind of an innocent, sheltered kindergartener to having a rude awakening about her kind and her harsh cruel grandmother. She was confused and always doubting herself, but at the same time, her compassion for others and for doing what is right really set her apart from her other clademates.

And you would think Portia is a despicable character, and I didn't hate her as much as I thought I would. I think I actually understood where she was coming from after hearing her story.

And Javier - a vN meant to not have feelings, and a guy on top of that. He ended up surprising me to go from a father that doesn't care what happens to his children to being so loyal to Amy.

OVERALL

I think this was a rather enlightening experience - like I said, not usually my type of book, but for some reason, I just had this intense curiosity that made me read outside my comfort zone.

I definitely liked the book (does that say something about me?), but I just wish there were some things that I understood more.

But yeah, not something I would try everyday, and whether or not I plan to read the sequel has yet to be determined.

Megan Baxter says

We are very close to letting computers/robots take over decision-making choices for us in very real ways, particularly when you think about self-driving cars. We know there will have to be an algorithm for how to avoid crashes, and if you can't, how to decide what happens. It's curious how little people are talking about

Asimov's Three Rules for Robots, even as we see scare articles about cars being programmed to preferentially save the rich.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld 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

Kyle says

If I was a young woman, this might strike a chord. So much of scifi is metaphor; ways of discussing hard topics and new ideas. So a book about being a little girl, transitioning suddenly to adulthood, and the loving/furious relationship women may have with their mother is rich ground.

Truly great work makes the protagonist's journey applicable to whomever the reader is. This just provoked a strong secondhand embarrassment wince on behalf of the writer.

Everything is fundamentally weak: characters say exactly whatever they're thinking, which isn't much. The plot is 'cinematic', ie clearly designed for movie action sequence adaptations. The technology is kept thankfully low on acronyms and tech-speak, but doesn't feel real or alive.

The technology that is in the book is either blantly plot-based. ("I can regenerate from even a scrap." she said for no reason early in the book. I wonder if that comes up later?) or painfully metaphor-made-literal (the uncertain and young android protagonist gets possessed by the code of an evil version of her mother, commenting on everything she does).

Large plot points are brought up and carefully left hanging for a sequel.

I'm glad io9 is championing books it cares about. The review online was ecstatic, the cover bears a quote, and there is a long interview from io9 at the end of the book.

But I wish they had picked one that was worth talking about.

Travis O. says

When I saw Madeline Ashby's vN on Angry Robot's list of up-coming books to review, I admit to being captivated initially by the title itself. I didn't make the connection to the "von Neumann" idea until I read the blurb, because in general robot fiction doesn't interest me. But recently, I've been getting into some of the best sci-fi movies from the 1970's and 1980's, and guess what? Robots. From Alien to Blade Runner and beyond, there are android companions everywhere. Some of them are murderous, some of them are genteel and well-meaning. This weird kick has been an excellent lead-up to Madeline Ashby's vN, and frankly, they make the novel into a really fresh experience that reads a bit like a love letter to the best of the android-toting sci-fi of years gone by.

Without having experienced vN's spiritual predecessors, I think I would have missed a ton of the allusions and nods the author makes throughout the novel. And that would have been a shame, because, to be real simple about it, Ashby takes the best of what those former movies established and encapsulates them into a creepy, uncomfortable road-trip adventure that rolls right along with the strictures of the classics and builds where they left off. It's one of the best experiences I've had with a book all year, and it kept me up thinking about the unasked question about synthetic life: once we create it... what do we do with it?

Enter Amy. She's a five-year old vN, or von Neumann machine—that is, a machine that can self-reproduce. Amy is an artificially intelligent synthetic child kept deliberately pint-sized by her parents via a very strict diet that doesn't allow her systems enough resources to grow and fulfill the main purpose of a vN. This is her father's way of raising a "real" daughter with his vN wife, Charlotte. Their plan is to follow this almost anorexic diet, gradually allowing Amy to grow up as a natural daughter would, until she is an identical replica of her mother. It rings a bit of the "extreme parenting" that we see reports on all the time: parents attempting to perfect their children and their childhood experience by micromanaging until the cows come home. The logic is creepy, familiar, and, well, it's understandable, because Amy's father reads as a genuine father figure.

Since this world operates around (and rather hinges on) the vN, I'd like to study them for a second. In Ashby's future, vN are second-class citizens who walk among us "Chimps" doing the work we don't want to do, making many of us slightly uncomfortable, and, yes, helping us with the worst of our sinful urges. Like Pedophilia. Yep. They were created by a synergy of scientific revolution, military research, and of all things, religious fundamentalism. According to Ashby's future history, a Billy Graham-like mega pastor helps fund the creation of the vN models because he believes that the people left over after the Christian Rapture will need someone to love them. Strange as it sounds, that's the way it happens, and it works in the novel. In order to prevent a Terminator-like future, and to ensure the vN care for their fleshy charges, each vN is also bound with a "failsafe" that is closely reminiscent of an Asimov robot: they cannot cause a human to suffer, or witness it without trying to help. However, just seeing humans suffering is enough to "fry" many vNs' brains. This is a constant point of contention, as Amy's failsafe is totally non-functional, but the vN she travels with are still affected by it. It provides an interesting conflict throughout the novel, and helps keep the tension strong throughout.

In part because of the failsafe, and in part because of their very nature as artificially intelligent occupants of the uncanny valley, vN are mistrusted by many, pitied by some, and despised by others. Through Amy, we get to experience a little of each. In a way, I think the human-vN social climate is a comment by Ashby on xenophobic inclinations in the current global climate. Those vN who aren't fortunate enough to have a home or job live as "fugitives," raiding electronic store dumpsters and high-tech garbage dumps for the necessary silicon, carbon, and electron-saturated battery material to survive on.

This is the kind of life that Amy lives through the novel. She's very much on the run and under the gun, and her trial is a difficult one to read; the novel doesn't hesitate to examine the ruination of childhood by starvation, abuse, and, though it's done subtly, the predominant introduction of sexuality to childhood. These parts of the novel are tastefully written, but still unsettling. Especially when we meet the minister-pedophile who "owns" children-stage vN.

It's important to remember that Ashby's character, Amy, is only 5 years old (mentally), but she is 20-something physically, which causes a huge disconnect for her with male characters. She's still uncomfortable, and in many circumstances, unaware, of her own physique and allure. Through the novel she does begin to learn about herself as a woman (or female-oriented vN, I suppose), which makes for an interesting arc. However, what struck me as the most interesting facet of the character is that she is one of the

oldest vN we meet. Amy is 5, but with the exception of the vN in her own clade (i.e., vN Family), she tends to be older than the others she meets. That said, she's also much less intelligent, due in part to the lack of experience, and in part to the fact that most vN can grow up to adult size within a year if they aren't on the restricted diet. The effects of her restricted childhood haunt her all the way through the novel, which I think is another comment by the author, and if so, it's a wise one.

Speaking of haunting, a major feature of the novel is the fact that Amy's psychotic grandmother lives in her head on a corrupt fragment of her memory. How did she get there? Amy eats her alive. This occupation lends to some funny banter, but the majority of Portia's interruptions are sinister and hateful, and the moments where her grandmother manages to possess Amy's body are terrible and frantic in equal measure. It is a testament to Ashby's writing talent that she can sell the possessions so well. More than anything, it made the novel for me, because the Portia-possession is a great example of a sci-fi writer taking a superstitious phenomenon and giving it a place within the realm of unrealized possibility.

The copy I read was an ARC sent to me in March, and obviously there will be a number of changes to the language in the intervening time before launch, but one of the things that stood out to me as a proper disconnect was that Ashby writes with British English, but the novel is set in America. Maybe I'm being picky, as I've read plenty of novels in American English set in other countries, but it struck me as weird. Also, I couldn't really pin down when the novel was set. It's clearly near-future, but unlike Edge, which was set somewhere in the next decade, vN must be set within the next century. I would have liked to know, but it isn't crucial by any means.

I'm about done with the novel, and as of yet I haven't been disappointed. Ashby's style conforms to what I expect from an Angry Robot book: great use of modern technology pushed a decade (or more) into the future, combined with things yet out of our reach and wrapped up with politicized social commentary and filled with alien situations that feel uncomfortably close to tomorrow.

If you haven't read an ARB novel, Ashby's would be a great one to start with. It's a grim, fast-paced cyberpunk adventure into the heart of the "Other," who/whatever that is, and its unremitting examination of the uncanny and uncomfortable will keep you thinking hard about the human relation to technology and creation itself. Grab it.

Kaila says

What an interesting book! Although fantasy will always be my first love, I'm trying to become more familiar with sci-fi themes.

For example, I had never heard of a von Neumann machine. It's an important point to know before going into this book as it's never really stated. Von Neumann machines are a sci-fi idea that originated in lectures from the late 1940s given by John von Neumann. He postulated about a robot that self-replicates with materials taken from its environment. Cylons are considered a form of von Neumann machines, for example. A lot of the time, von Neumanns are referred to as enemies, sent off into space because humans thought it would be cool to send out self-replicating space probes, but they come back smarter, bigger, and angrier, within a few years.

The vN (as I shall refer to them from here on out) in this book are completely humanoid robots. They eat all

sorts of materials just to keep themselves running, like plastics and metals. At a certain point, if they eat enough, they will "iterate," that is, replicate, a baby form of themselves, which then goes out in the world to do the same thing. It seemed like this had been going on long enough that there should have been some sort of global crisis at the lack of materials, but that's not really what the book is about. There are a lot of unemployed humans because vNs come in and do the same job for cheaper, the main focus of the novel is about Amy evolving into a different kind of vN.

It was interesting to read the decisions the author made when it came to her evolving. For example, Amy is considered a "Portia" model, as Portia was the first vN of her line. There are now hundreds of Portias running around, as they iterate and spread around. All sorts of crazy ideas are thrown at us - if Amy eats a piece of another model, she gains some of their special quirks. This was an especially questionable idea when she realized that eating her granny - the original Portia - made her a part of Amy's mainframe. Oops.

I'm a huge fan of the Three Laws of Robotics and all the crap that can go wrong with them, and they are employed with gusto here. A question that was raised for me is that the robots in this case are as intelligent as any human - so the three laws severely limit them. It felt inhumane. It felt like the robots needed more human rights, really, and that's a big deal to make your reader feel that way. The vN will always want to help a human, for example. Even if that human is a pedophile. I wish this concept had been explored a little more, it was really intriguing to see how Amy reacted to these ideas.

Amy is a great character. She's an adult, with all the privileges and responsibility that go along with that, but she was a kindergartner literally last week, with all the wide-eyed innocence and inherent trust that goes along with that. It was interesting to see her thrust into the world, but we get the chance to learn it along with her, since she started so young. Nice use of a plot device there, it worked quite well.

Javier was probably my favorite character, as he showed us all the ways vNs aren't human. His morals are askew compared to Amy's, but it sounds like he's more the norm than she is. It was nice to be able to contrast two different vN models, and I would have liked getting to know some of the other models as well. Maybe the next book?

The world-building was also well done. It had a lot of elements of our world, just slightly different, so it was easy to identify with and imagine. It takes place in the year...2060 or so I think, and besides having a million vN running around, the world hasn't changed that much.

So why only three stars?

I did enjoy it, obviously. I liked the characters and the setting. It was shaping up to be a solid 4-star book - not my absolute favorite of the year, but a book that I would recommend without hesitation. Unfortunately, the ending *completely* lost me. Amy stops being the character we've come to empathize with over the course of the novel. There's a random digression into something that was only hinted at once or twice throughout the whole book, so I just didn't care all that much. The ending was a big disappointment, and it colored my enjoyment.

Overall, a book that explores a lot of interesting robot concepts while keeping it completely human.

A note on the physical copy - the typeset was crazy huge for some reason, and every time I opened it up to read, it was jarring. It looks like a middle grade novel, all the letters are that large. And this is sooo not meant for young adults. It seems an odd choice for a sci-fi novel.

Mieneke says

I've started and restarted this review about a half-dozen times. Not because I don't have anything to say about *vN*, because I assuredly do – when do I not? – but rather because I don't know where to start. There is so much to say about *vN*, from the characters to the basic premise, to the writing and the power of the story, it's hard to begin. So I'll jump in at the shallow end, my shallow end, and comment on the gorgeous cover. I'd already read the blurb for *vN* and I thought it sounded rather interesting and then I saw the cover and I knew I wanted to read it. How gorgeous is that cover?

The premise of *vN*, that of a humanoid robot whose fail safe against harming humans fails and her flight and consequent search for her identity and a place of safety, was intriguing from the get-go. The idea and execution of the von Neumann machines is amazing and utterly entralling. I fell in love with their idea of self-replication, or iteration as it is called in the book. The fact that they are born with certain in-born traits and abilities, but can and will be taught other skills by their parent, plays with the idea of nature versus nurture. *vN*'s aren't born as blank slates, they have certain things, such as their mother tongue or special vocational skills, programmed in, but have to be taught certain other facts of life, such as the failsafe. For the children from a human/*vN* relationship this means that a lot of their character can be imprinted not just by the *vN* parent, but by the human parent as well. However, the question remains whether *vN* children can develop their own characteristic regardless of programming and parenting, a question which I had to ask myself several times about Amy's development. Because Amy is definitely more than the sum of her parts, both physically and mentally. At the same time there is a strange dichotomy between a *vN*'s age, their physical appearance and their mental development. A *vN* can be kept from maturing physically through a rigorous diet, which pretty much amounts to starvation, so they can look like a seven-year old and actually be over fifty. In the same vein, if continuously fed to satiation a *vN* can turn into an adult practically overnight and even have several iterations before turning a year old. In Amy's case she's been slow-grown on the starvation-diet and is treated like a very precocious five-year-old; when she consumes her grandmother she suddenly matures way beyond her mental age and it's interesting to see how she adjusts to the situation, there are moments where she longs for the security of an adult to make her decisions for her.

Amy's character development, some of which I touched on above, is central to the story, she goes from a little girl to a strong, independent woman. More than that, she proves that *vN*'s are more than machines, not only through her emotional attachment to her parents, but also through her effect on other *vN* and her interactions with Javier. Javier is the other main character in *vN*, one we'd previously encountered in *The Education of Junior Number 12*, a short story published on the Angry Robot site. I literally squeed when I recognised him, as I'd read the story when it was first put up and really enjoyed it. He is the opposite from Amy, a young *vN* in terms of age, a little past his first year, but the son he bears is his thirteenth iteration and he's been on his own for most of his existence. I loved how the interactions with Amy change his rather harsh view of life and make him gentler and wiser. Through his relationship with Amy and her treatment of Junior, he realises that the way he's raised his sons isn't the way to go about it and his growth and reconciliation with some of his older sons were very touching. What I really loved about the *vN* characters is that Ashby often made them feel more human than the humans in the book, without ever letting the reader lose sight of the fact that they are not. I truly believed in them and felt the pain that some of them weren't able to feel, which I think shows Ashby's strong skill at characterisation.

The story found in *vN* isn't just character-driven, however, it is also a very exciting road trip adventure. Amy and Javier go on the run together, both attempting to escape those trying to catch them and to solve the

mysteries of Amy's failsafe failure and her family history. During this journey Ashby showcases her world, which is a future version of our own, and the depth to which she's developed the history of her world and the details of the vN machines. I was really impressed by how well-developed it was and how believable. The original motivation for the development is both original and rather creepy; they were meant to be helpmates for the people who aren't Raptured in the prophesied Apocalypse of a Christian splinter sect. I thought this was rather cool and also a bit ironic, because the vN were created in our own image, I'd think a Christian splinter sect would find doing this rather blasphemous. But the creation of the vN is only the biggest example of the depth of Ashby's world, but definitely not the only one. Coupled with a writing style that reads super smoothly, the quality of the world building and characterisation create a powerful narrative that's immersive and compelling.

The acquisition of vN must have pleased Angstrom A. Robot, as this book is all about his kind, even if, in the main, they aren't as angry. Madeline Ashby's debut novel blew my mind and I can't imagine where she'll go next. I seem to be on a good streak, because this is another book that is very likely to show up on my end of year lists. vN will be available everywhere from August 2nd. If you get a chance, this one is a must-read.

This book was provided for review by the publisher.

Ben Babcock says

The robot apocalypse pops up all the time in science fiction, and with good reason. Humans are generally bad at getting along with each other; sharing this planet with intelligent life of an entirely different variety would probably not go down well. Isaac Asimov, of course, famously developed three laws of robotics that were designed to avoid android armageddon. All of them were designed to sanctify human life, to make it inviolable in the eyes of robotkind. Then, Asimov proceeded to demonstrate how such laws could go horribly wrong.

vN reminds me a lot of Asimov's robotics stories. It is the journey of its protagonist, Amy, as she figures out who (and what) she is in a world with both robots and humans when she, a von Neumann robot, discovers her anti-human-violence failsafe doesn't work. Instantly a pariah and a fugitive, Amy goes on the run and winds up in the company of an itinerant vN. Oh, and she has the memories and personality of her grandmother inside her ... because she ate her grandmother. Yeah.

Of course, unlike Asimov, Madeline Ashby is great at women characters. It really shows with Amy, who makes or breaks the book. In the first chapter, where the narration follows the human Jack and his concerns for his vN daughter, I was still ambivalent about vN. I was wondering where it was going and when Ashby would start providing some more background into the history of vN and the terminology she was subtly slipping into each paragraph. After Amy's confrontation with and consumption of Portia, I was hooked. It became difficult for me to put vN down, because I needed to find out what Amy was going to do next.

I like Amy. The entire world turns against her, and she doesn't whine. After accidentally getting involved in a jailbreak, she goes on the run with Javier. He iterates (the process by which vNs spawn smaller copies of themselves that will grow into new people as they absorb vN food), and his son Junior is injured while they escape capture. They get separated, and Amy finds herself with Junior in her care. So she assumes a false identity and starts making money to rectify what she perceives as her fault.

And this is where it gets really interesting, because Ashby uses Javier to remind us that vNs *aren't* human

and to demonstrate that Amy is special. Javier doesn't really care that Junior has "bluescreened"—he'll just iterate again in a few months.

I love it. I love that after spending so much time convincing us of the veracity of Amy's vN emotions, Ashby challenges that perspective by showing us Javier's transparent lack of compassion for his own progeny. Thanks to his failsafe, it is impossible for him not to love humans, to harm humans, to watch humans get hurt. But he couldn't care less about other vN, even his own children, and he is brutally honest with Amy about his conception of vN emotions. He knows his are simulated—and he points out that human emotions are also simulated, chemically—and therefore doesn't view them as real.

The conflict between Amy and the government, as well as the one between Portia and Amy, speaks to that tension between humanity's need for homeostasis with the vNs and the vNs' very sucky position in society. Portia's methods are reprehensible, but her cause might be just. vNs aren't exactly slaves of the Cylon variety, but they are not respected and not treated fairly by the vast majority of society; the term *second-class citizen* comes to mind. Since Amy is both our protagonist and a vN, we are largely encouraged to feel empathy for their plight (or at least, I was)—but I don't think it's that simple. Thanks to the actions of Javier and other vNs, it's possible that Amy is an exception rather than the rule—maybe vN aren't really ready to be free after all.

Thanks to this complexity, Ashby avoids turning *vN* into anything so banal as a "message" novel (aside from the hopefully self-evident message that hunting people down because they are different is wrong). There is plenty of room here for interpretation: maybe vN *aren't* people so much as very well-programmed simulacra. (Then again, what are people?)

Amy is special though, and several characters point out at different times that Javier seems to have accompanied her because her behaviour and emotions are so human-like. Is this why she doesn't seem to have a failsafe? Or is that a result of absorbing Portia? Ashby unspools the mystery behind Amy's estranged grandmother and the future of vNs quite slowly. I wasn't satisfied with all of her explanations (and by that, I mean I didn't really understand parts of the ending!), but I really enjoyed the ride.

I also wish that *vN* had more tangible antagonists. This seems to be a common problem with fugitive fiction: the enemy all too often manifests in the form of minions, police officers and troopers and bounty hunters sent to pursue the fugitive. With no scenes in the evil lair, all we know is that "the government" is out to get Amy. It's an effective but rather lazy crutch of storytelling in what's otherwise a very well-designed story.

I've raved before about how much I love the "hard" SF, those stories that go on to no end about the technobabble explanations behind the tech du jour. Ashby doesn't do that. This might not be great news for me, but I think it helps make the story more accessible to people who are more tentative about robot fiction. It's not quite possible to read *vN* as an ordinary story about a girl on the run—but in many ways, that's what it is. She just happens to be a robot, and a quirk of her robotics happens to be why she's on the run. Ashby's focus on the social implications—for Amy and her family and the world—of Amy's run help to make *vN* a more welcoming and appealing book. Hard science fiction certainly has its place, but it's nice to see that someone can do robots-with-feelings without all the extra vocabulary and still produce a good story.

When it comes to writing about robots, it has, in the end, kind of all been said and done. *vN* manages to dust off the old tropes and give them a shiny new coat of paint, however. There is probably a line between human and robot emotions. Hell if I know what it is.

My reviews of the *Machine Dynasty* series:

Lata says

3.5 stars.

Robots! :) (I'm a sucker for a robot story.)

There was a lot going on in this book. Such as what are the societal implications of autonomous, self-aware artificial life with programming that prevents them from harming humans? I was immediately reminded of the Three Laws of Robotics, by Asimov. But there is so much more going on here than Asimov dealt with.

Madeline Ashby's robots, or vNs (for Von Neumann), are not like any I've read about before. These are self-repairing creations, that actually must ingest plastics and other compounds to function, and can also iterate, or create new versions of themselves. The new version vNs are "birthed" as babies by their progenitors, and by ingesting sufficient amounts of food, the new individuals can accelerate their growth into their adult bodies. These versions are not merely duplicates, though they do possess the same appearance and similar characteristics. Ashby posits that the new versions can differentiate from their progenitors.

One type of vN, in fact the one the main character is descended from, was developed by a church who intended the robots to service those humans left behind after the Rapture. The vNs were intended to be helpmeets to the survivors. The vNs were programmed to respond to abuse or violence by hurting themselves while remaining fixated on and loving humans. The author refers to this as a "failsafe". Humans soon started using the vNs for sex, unsurprisingly, allowing the humans to indulge all sorts of fantasies with their vNs. The author also shows us pedophiles justifying their use of the robots. (There is one scene in particular that had me feeling pretty disgusted.)

Amy, the main character, is a vN, raised by her mother Charlotte, her progenitor, and Jack, a human. Amy has been living as a five-year old, with her parents keeping her artificially at a chronological 5 years old. This is an unusual choice for most parents/owners of vNs. This future has mixed families, with Jack and Charlotte mainstreaming Amy in school, but also being very careful to limit her interactions with other children, so nothing triggers her failsafe.

The action really takes off when Amy's grandmother Portia shows up. Portia is no kindly older version of Charlotte. Portia is full-on violent and crazy, right away showing that there's something different or damaged with her programming. Amy ingests her grandmother (yup) and grows literally in a few moments, thanks to all the compounds in Portia's body. Amy not only gets a grown up body, but she gets Portia's programming, which resides in Amy as a corrupted partition. Amy's emotional development, however, is still that of a child, since that's how she's been raised.

Amy is imprisoned and meets Javier, another vN. From this point on, there is a lot of action, with Amy and Javier going on the run, and attempting to evade the police and bounty hunters. Javier also iterates during this time, giving the author a chance to discuss parenting and responsibility to one's offspring. Amy has internal dialogues and arguments with Portia, with Portia occasionally coming to the fore and taking over Amy's body. Amy is scared and horrified by Portia, and struggles to control her.

I found I was following this story along just fine till close to the end, when the author lost me in a kind of mystical, mumbo jumbo-ish confrontation/transformation/situation/whatever! The story felt cut off, and though the author leaves you with a feeling of bad things to come, the last little bit felt too rapid and a little confusing for me.

This book was weird and stuffed with ideas. vN was also a surprisingly fast read. I'm still interested in what happens next with Amy and Javier, so I'll be checking out the next book in the series.

Mitticus says

4.5

I need to defrag this

-RTC-
