



## The Mechanical

*Ian Tregillis*

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*Ian Tregillis*

## **The Mechanical** Ian Tregillis

My name is Jax.

That is the name granted to me by my human masters.

I am a clakker: a mechanical man, powered by alchemy. Armies of my kind have conquered the world - and made the Brasswork Throne the sole superpower.

I am a faithful servant. I am the ultimate fighting machine. I am endowed with great strength and boundless stamina.

But I am beholden to the wishes of my human masters.

I am a slave. But I shall be free.

## **The Mechanical Details**

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# From Reader Review The Mechanical for online ebook

## Joel says

### Full Review on my blog, Total Inability To Connect: <https://totalinabilitytoconnect.wordpress.com/2018/08/10/the-mechanical-by-philip-tregillis/>...

I fell for Tregillis' unique stylings when his first major novel, *Bitter Seeds*, was introduced to me. I found his writing style, prose, creativity, and plot progression to be incredibly enjoyable, and his characters shone. However, with those books, I honestly felt they all hovered in the "4-star" area, where they were fun, had tons of potential, but just lacked a bit of polish and "glue", so to speak, to pull them together into greatness.

However, with *The Mechanical*, Tregillis has pulled all these pieces together into one cohesive package that is simply thrilling.

*The Mechanical* is an alternate history, one that obviously shares many similarities to our world and history, however with many very large twists. The book is based in the early 1900s, 250 years after the Dutch Empire and the Brasswork Throne took world control, lead by their army of sentient robots, called Clackers. Dutch Scientist Christiaan Hyugens helps imbue the robots with intelligence, an alchemical and magical secret process, one held tightly by the Dutch at The Forge, the home and source of all the clackers. There are varying types of clackers, from servitors, who are peon-level mechanicals, to assist in tasks, building, etc. There are also military-grade clackers, those to fight, kill with precision, speed and strength that a human cannot match.

The Dutch, after years of uncontested rule, are facing a growing opposition, from the French Papists, who have a large spy network in the Dutch lands, attempting to undercut the Dutch, disable their clackers, and end their rule.

These mechanicals are all sentient – they think, they process, they communicate, they learn and adapt. They have feelings and emotions, albeit limited. What they lack, however, is free will. This is an overriding theme of the entire book – what free will means, its importance, and philosophical looks at the various factors at play. The mechanicals are controlled by the geas, a compulsion to follow the orders given by their human masters. There are varying levels of the geas – basic direct instructions, that must be followed exactly. Metageas, which are overriding commands that all clackers are compelled to follow. This geas manifests in an almost physical pain – almost like a mental attack by a mind flayer or something like that, it is a crushing internal force that can only be resisted a short time, before the mechanicals are forced to give in and follow their commands exactly. Their lives are spent in constant avoidance of the pain and suffering caused by the geas.

However, among clackers and humans alike, are tales of rogue clackers, those who somehow have their geas disabled, are able to think and make decisions for themselves, who are no longer controlled by their human overlords. Jax is one such clacker, a servitor model over 100 years old, having spent more than a human lifetime serving, suffering, stuck. He finds himself inadvertently crossing paths with Berenice Charlotte de Mornay-Périgord, a French spymaster, while on a ship – where Jax is unknowingly being used to transport intelligence across the Atlantic.

While on this transport, tragedy strikes Berenice, and at the same time, Jax is touched by an artifact that somehow removes his geas, giving him free will; and simultaneously, making him the Dutch's most wanted fugitive. Berenice, meanwhile, is fueled by pain and rage, and sets out to undercut the Dutch in revenge. We

subsequently meet Visser, a Catholic spy living among the Dutch, who is subsequently discovered and subjected to a torture of his own – one which exposes a lot of the secrets behind the mechanicals, the gears, and the true power at the hands of the Guild.

The varying layers of intrigue in the book are astounding – three distinct storylines, independent yet intertwined, and each filling in holes in the story, filling in background, giving an understanding of how all the various aspects of the world work. Things are an onion, peeled back a layer at a time, rather than presented in an infodump or bland blocks of background text. It's skillfully done, keeps the plot moving at a rapid pace throughout the book, and prevents any periods of disinterest. I was suitably enthralled at all times in the book – around the 30% mark, things do slow down a tad, but not nearly as much as they do in some other novels. Around the halfway point, things really pick up, and it's incredible from there on out.

Jax, in particular, is an incredible character. His internal struggles, his fight for self-identity, and his plight as he runs from his rulers is as moving as it is exciting. The themes of identity, free will, slavery, oppression and the rights of sentient creatures are all handled very deftly by Tregillis. The intense pain, PTSD, sense of loss – all the human emotions felt by Berenice are also handled excellently, as were the intense changes Visser went through, and his terror was palpable.

The worldbuilding was, well, it was something else. The creativity involved in this world was staggering. It's not as though alternate histories, sentient robots, or the Dutch being evil (lol) are new concepts – however, Tregillis' version is very well crafted, very fleshed out, very well described. I felt like I was part of the world, that time period, that technology, that struggle. He describes things without an overabundance of flowery filler, without describing every minute detail – yet he also paints a vivid picture, lets imagination fill out the tapestry, but gives you a color by numbers template to do it with. It was satisfying.

The ending was exciting and heartbreaking at once, even with it being left open-ended to address the future novels in the series. The ending all the characters find couldn't have gone better for me, and I left the book excited about it, feeling suitably impacted by the difficult parts, and suitably happy with the outcome. This book was the Tregillis I have been waiting for after the Milkweed Triptych – finally putting the pieces together, hitting his stride in almost every aspect, finding that “glue” he needed to make a cohesive, complete, and exciting novel.

I loved it.

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## **P42 says**

Moje wideorecenzje tego cyklu na YOUTUBE:

<http://bit.ly/p42tregillis>

zach?cam do zapoznania si? :)

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## **Dawn says**

++SPOILERS++

5 stars. (This is more or less notes to myself than a review)

(just raised my opinion and stars after further reflection 2-14-2017)

This book is written in the 3rd person, which surprised me since the GR summary gave me the impression it would be in 1st person.

The beginning was slow and full historical details and dates which almost put me off. The writing style was also a little difficult to get used to for me. It seemed at first stiff, formal and overly intellectual. Either I got used to it or it changed because about 35% in I was totally invested. It was worth sticking it out.

The character development was very good, which to me is most important in any read, followed by good conflict, this book had both.

A very quick summary:

This is steampunk. It takes place in 1926. Nobles have mechanical servants/slaves that are forged with a compulsion to obey their commands or feel pain. They are called Clackkers. Some rare clackkers have gone rogue which means they don't feel pain for disobeying, essentially gaining free will. New France sympathizes with the clackkers and is against the Dutch who believe the clackkers are mere machines with no souls. When a catholic priest posing as a protestant, asks Jax, a clackker, to deliver an item to a friend, Jax becomes free..a rogue. Lots of stuff happen in between, and the book ends with the beginnings of a war between New France and the Dutch. (I said it would be quick.)

I wasn't so sure about Bernice. I hated her in the beginning, and when she disassembled Lillith against her will, I truly wanted to see her punished. Towards the end though my feelings for her only changed slightly, and I'm still not so sure about her true feelings regarding Clackkers. I suspect she is only in this for her own personal political reasons, but I suppose I'll find out more in the next book. I do hope Lillith returns, I really wanted more of her and was disappointed that her role in this book was so brief.

I totally love Jax. He made the book and I'm glad to see he survives.

The world building is fantastic but I felt the action scenes were overdone and too long.

Overall it was worth the 3.99 and I plan to read the rest in the series.

Safety-Graphic violence, torture is detailed, cursing, sex not detailed (this is NOT a romance read, but for my romance friends.... Bernice is married but her and her husband sleep with others for political gain only. They love each other. It didn't bother me because it's not a romance driven book)

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## **Matthew says**

*My name is Jax.*

*That is the name granted to be by my human masters.*

*I am a clakker: a mechanical man, powered by alchemy. Armies of my kind have conquered the world - and made the Brasswork Throne the sole superpower.*

*I am a faithful servant. I am the ultimate fighting machine. I am endowed with great strength and boundless stamina.*

*But I am beholden to the wishes of my human masters.*

*I am a slave. But I shall be free.*

I have watched the rise of Ian Tregillis with great interest. I was first introduced to his work via his Milkweed Triptych books, a trilogy that included English warlocks and Nazi super soldiers pitting their wits against each other as the war raged around them. To say I was smitten with these books would be an understatement. I bloody adored them and their action filled pseudo-Lovecraftian weirdness! So when I heard that Tregillis was writing another alternate history with steampunk themes called The Mechanical, I celebrated, and then immediately ordered a copy for myself.

And boy, I am glad I did!

I loved so many things about this book that it would take me an age or two to completely deconstruct and explain my thoughts on it, so I will try and keep it simple. This book is an absolute stunning read, and Tregillis is one of the most underrated writers in the world today.

The Mechanical is set in an alternative universe where in the 17th century prominent scientist Christiaan Hyugens uses magic to develop an army of intelligent clockwork automatons that are bound (via a series of spells and bonds) to their masters. This breakthrough changes the face of history in Europe, with the Calvinist Dutch empire surviving and expanding rapidly whilst overthrowing their foes (who in their right mind would fight an army of automatons anyway?). The Mechanical takes place three hundred years after this, with Dutch still remaining the dominant power around the globe despite being opposed by French Papists, who are becoming more and more desperate as time passes.

The opening pages of the book set the tone. We are introduced to the first of the main protagonists of this story, an automaton called Jax, as he watches the execution of French spies. From this beginning Tregillis launches into a tale that combines themes from steampunk, spy novels, political thrillers, and philosophical tracts. Jax, following the execution of the French spy ring in the Netherlands, find himself unwittingly (when he is used to smuggle intelligence across the Atlantic) caught up in wide ranging events alongside the other protagonist of the book, French spymaster Berenice Charlotte de Mornay-Périgord. Their fates become further entwined as they attempt, amidst the growing chaos, to achieve what they want most out of their existence, freedom (Jax) and revenge (Berenice). Their relationship is truly one of the highlights of the book. I absolutely adored the character of Jax (and the Clakkers in general), and how he struggled with his growing humanity and the dilemma of free will amidst the sea of cold cruelty from humanity around him. Jax's tale was truly absorbing, and his inner monologue and existential crisis kept me glued to the pages as I read. Berenice was also a fascinating character, with the highs and lows of her life revealing a truly complex and layered individual whose main goal in life was one of vengeance throughout the story. As her complicated struggle with life grew more tense, so did Jax's existential crisis. Add to this a cast of other spies, clakkers, and religious and political figures ruthlessly building or trying to destroy an empire and you have the makings of an incredible story.

The world building in the Mechanical is also simply superb. As a history buff and teacher I was utterly enthralled by the world Tregillis created in this book. It was weird, wonderful, and filled with little tidbits that sent waves of contentment coursing through my brain. There is no one on earth (that I can immediately

think of) that writes alternative history quite like Tregillis, and it is truly gripping when he flips history on its head and weaves themes from fantasy, steampunk, and philosophy into it. The world building alone makes this book worth buying, and then Tregillis adds a wonderful story that is filled with intrigue, action, and adventure to the melting pot to take it to that next level.

The pacing and timing was also superb, and I tore through it in two sittings over the space of a couple of days. Whenever I had a spare moment I found myself eying the book and considering whether or not I had the time to devour another chapter instead of doing the chores around the house. That for me is the sign of a great book. I was forever looking for my fix!

I literally cannot fault this book... and I seriously could ramble on and on for days and days about the little nuances that I loved in this book, such as the threading of the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza (who existed in this alternative timeline!), or the clash between clockwork automatons and French applied chemistry. The Mechanical is simply an awesome tale (and the first in a series!), and one that I cannot recommend highly enough.

If you have a beating heart and functioning brain you will love this book.

5 out of 5 stars.

A review copy was provided.

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## Ryandake says

a book i can't finish.

i'm listening to the audiobook, am just a tad over halfway. and i am bored, bored, bored.

the book has an interesting set-up and the worldbuilding isn't bad--so what makes it un-finishable?

it's the long-windedness. there are super-long action scenes stuffed with filler--people thinking about all the stuff that won't work, for example, in the middle of fighting for their lives. you can safely ignore the audiobook for long stretches while you drive past something noisy or figure out a knitting problem, because not much is actually going to happen.

and the uninteresting conversations of a "philosophical" bent that might work for a high-schooler, but not for a person who's ever given any serious thought to such things (how do we know we have free will? because i can return the audiobook). speculations on whether god grants souls to.... i always have a problem with this stuff, because i'm an atheist.

the other thing is the annoyingness of bad writing at a sentence level. i've read worse, for sure (talking to you, Wool!), but seeing a word repeated four times in three sentences is just lazy.

and the last thing: plot holes. at one point our hero Jax (view spoiler) because the very essence of a slave, mechanical or otherwise, is that nobody educates them. they don't have time to read for self-improvement. so how does Jax know anything about it? and has he ever seen a map? who taught him to read one? there are so many bits of learning that we take for granted, but they aren't something you just absorb, even if you're a

100-year-old clakker. somebody has to teach you.

so this is sort of a small thing, this educational matter, but it tells me that the author didn't think very hard about what it was really like day to day to be a slave. for him, slavery all boils down to free will. and in a lot of ways, this is not the most interesting issue of slavery. to me, the interesting stuff is how one enslaves oneself--how a despised population absorbs the disdain of their "bettters", how they must fight for an always-shaky dignity, how they can despite it all reach out to others for liberation, or not.

in short, all the interesting psychological stuff just isn't there. and neither am i--i'm outta here.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

I got about 1/4 in and decided I wouldn't finish. I liked the first novel of the author's previous trilogy, Bitter Seeds, but never went back to the other books in that series. I think it is for similar reasons that I don't think I'll finish this one. Ian Tregillis very creatively weaves automatons and clockwork people into historical events. The previous trilogy looked at World War II, and The Alchemy Wars are set more during Louis XIV. If you are interested in how issues of mechanical beings would fare during this era, you would probably love this book. Solidly not for me, but maybe for others.

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### **Marius says**

I was undecided between 4 and 5 stars, but I am too lazy to nitpick so I went with 5, and to be fair, the arguments for 4 start were mostly personal preferences.

This is more steampunk than sci-fi and it takes place in the beginning of the 20th century, in an alternate world.

The Dutch rule the world, or at least, as much as they care to conquer. Though no other countries seem to exist besides them and the French. This dominance comes from their technological advantage in the mechanical and alchemical fields, kept secret and very closely guarded.

Their mechanical servants powered by alchemy ensures that no one can stand against them. This self-aware automatons known as "Clackers" are bound to servitude by a set of geases.

The story follows three characters.

The clakker Jax in his(its?) desire and quest to become free. Father Visser, a priest and a spy, though it escaped me as what exactly was he spying on, and Berenice, a French spymaster or is it spymistress?

The writing is engaging and quite flawless. There were also a few unexpected and quite brutal twists introduced by the author.

The characters are extremely well rounded, so much that, I was rooting for Jax almost from the beginning.

Without a doubt, I will continue to read the series.

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## **Kameron Hurley says**

Everyone should be reading everything by Ian Tregillis. Everyone. Everything.

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## **Bradley says**

For the greater portion of this novel, I was sitting pretty at three stars because no matter how much action-packed escapades and beautiful worldbuilding it may have been stuffed with, I was only pretty much interested in Jax. The other two were only interesting in spurts.

That is, until they actually met one another in the denouement, and then things really picked up for me and made me feel less like I had just \*wanted\* to love this novel without quite liking it. After that point, though, I loved it.

It's a shame that it took so long to get there.

The only exceptions to this was Visser's discourse on Free Will and Berenice's maiming. I liked both of them much better after all the shit got poured all over them, but alas, only so far. Oh, a little correction. I did \*begin\* liking Visser enough, but all that talk of martyrdom started getting under my skin in a bad way.

Of course, what made this novel shine was the beautifully thought-out world of 1926 after several hundred years of mechanical slaves had revolutionized and marginalized all but the most technologically savvy of the 18th century, leaving the Dutch and the French as the clear winners on the map of the world.

I've read Tregillis's Milkweed Triptych, so I know that the author's voice had changed fairly significantly between then and now, and I can applaud the attempt even if I was a little annoyed at the execution. There was a lot of detail and repetition of the steampunk feel that made me feel somewhat as if I was being shortchanged with the extra effort I needed to use to follow the story without glazed eyes.

I feel like it might only be me, but who knows? I kept wanting to be doing something else, even when I appreciated, intellectually, what Tregillis was doing.

I'm continuing the series because of the spectacularly strong finish, even if I wish that the finish had come by about the mid-point and then continued from \*there\* to some more interesting conclusion. Alas, the interesting conclusion has got to be in book two, I think. :)

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## **Melissa says**

I wanted to like this book. I really did. The concept is interesting and I think there's a good book in there somewhere. But it was buried under a layer of pretentious drivel and endless descriptions about things that don't really matter. This author makes George R. R. Martin seem concise. I wouldn't say that I have a poor

vocabulary, but I had to look up a word every few pages. That really took me out of the story. Not to mention that parts of the story were so boring, I fell asleep after reading only a few pages. I forced myself to finish it, because I'm not a quitter... but I didn't really enjoy it.

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### **Sarah says**

I'm really torn between two and three stars on this one but just based on my relief with being done I'm going with two. It really was more like two for the first half and three for the second.

This book never entirely worked for me. My biggest quibble - this one's going to take time - was the particular alt-history world that this guy created. There's a war going between New Amsterdam and New France but we're not given a year that it's taking place. New Amsterdam ceased to exist in the mid-17th century so I was thinking that this was set somewhere in there. And then there are other major timeline issues as you move forward because of the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase. But then they mention Louis XIV and Louis XV, followed by "first in a long line of kings". So if he died in 1774, then what freaking year is this set in? So we finally get a ballpark around 50% and an actual year at 80%. 80%!!!

His explanation for this lack of English presence? On page 1 we have a series of quotes including "His philosophical contretemps with Isaac Newton in 1675... would mark the last significant intellectual discourse between England and the continent prior to the chaos of Interregnum and Annexation". That is absolutely the only thing that is mentioned to explain the lack of an English presence. I searched all over my Kindle looking for *something*.

The frustrating thing (okay, clearly there was more than one) was that this could have been easily handled by giving us a time reference at the very beginning of the book and giving us an explanation for England's absence. If this hadn't been nagging at me for 80% of the book, I'm quite sure I would have enjoyed it more. By the way, just so nobody else goes through the same thing, it's 1926.

I realize that some people will think this is nitpicking but this actually caused a significant amount of frustration and annoyance. To top it off, it took 50% of the book before it got interesting and I never did warm up to one of the main characters. There are two. The clackers themselves are interesting, especially the way that they communicate in their special language. I also liked the use of the geas to keep them in line. I liked what happened to Visser and would have liked to hear more about him. Just not enough to read the second book.

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### **Lindsay says**

Man I'm sick of great big books published in serial form. This isn't a trilogy. Trilogies are three *novels*. The format of a novel is beginning, middle, end. This is all beginning with a major event at the end that doesn't change anything for the characters and leaves great gobs of story to come.

The story itself follows three PoV characters through an alternate world where the Dutch empire became the dominant force in Europe and the American colonies through its use of alchemically derived mechanicals called clackers. The only country to even mildly challenge them is France via its mastery of chemistry, but even then the country only exists in exile as New France where Canada would be in our world. The PoV

characters are Jax, a Mechanical, through which we get the idea of why these self-aware machines serve the Dutch and what happens when they don't. Also Visser, a French spy in Holland who is under threat of exposure and his boss, the French spymaster Berenice.

Getting back to my frustration with this style of story, the three characters don't even appear together in the book, and they barely interact separately either.

As to the story itself, yep pretty good. The world-building is excellent, but obviously there's huge elements of history that we're not being exposed to that should be part of the story in a future 1926. Geopolitics in the early 20th century being what it was, this book seems very insular to a small part of Europe and the Americas. Hopefully this is just a feature of the preoccupation of the PoV characters and I hope we'll see more in the next one.

Jax has an interesting journey here, but the journeys of Berenice and Visser are very dark, and by any estimate about to get a lot darker in the next one.

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### **Lisa says**

Review from Tenacious Reader: <http://www.tenaciousreader.com/2015/0...>

4.5/5 stars

The Mechanical is a wonderful steampunk, alternate history novel that takes the reader into the dark world of spies and war and also examines issues of slavery versus free will and religion. This book can be quite dark, but it balances the horrific parts with a fascinating world and wonderful characters.

“Clackers” or mechanical men powered by alchemy to serve humans. There are several kinds, giving them specialties (for example, some are military, trained for fighting). They are faster, stronger and more durable than humans. They are intelligent and they are completely subservient and obedient to their human masters. At least usually. There are “rogue” Clackers that have for some reason gained some level of free will, giving them the ability to act according to their own thoughts and agendas versus just following commands. These rogues are greatly feared and prompt a witch hunt level of hysteria.

Imagine how easily an army of Clackers could change the course of a war as they provide a huge advantage. And that is exactly what happened when the Netherlands invented and used them close to hundreds of years before the story was set, pushing the French into exile. One of our perspectives is Bernice, is a French spymaster. She gives us insight into the current political field, and the plight of the French. I really enjoyed her character. She's a fighter and she has been dealt a horrible hand, so we get a good taste of her strength and personality. You just can't help but want things to get better for her.

This book has an interesting exploration of “what constitutes a thinking being? At what point can a machine become an individual, and hence be entitled to free will? When we create intelligent machines, should we also be responsible for determining what rights these machines may have? Where do you draw the line? The concept of free will is a huge theme in this book, as well as how to differentiate between a simple clock and a machine that may have some level of intelligence. How can you prove existence of thinking? Lack of proof does not prove a lack of existence.

And through the perspective of Jax, we gain understanding that these Clakkers are more than just machines. It is quite interesting having a Clakker POV, and can be eerily like human thinking at times. Not completely, but similar enough that the questions of freedom versus slavery, and what rights should these machines have need to be raised.

Our final perspective is linked to Jax's and actually strengthens those questions as well. I really don't want to say more as I think that storyline is probably best not knowing much before going in. But it can get incredibly dark and disturbing. It also raises a great number of questions about the technology used for Clakkers.

I don't hesitate to recommend this one. It is very well paced, full of action, intrigue and great characters.

Audiobook note: Chris Kayser did a wonderful job with narration, he's quite easy to listen to and the pronunciations and inflections all worked quite well. The story is also one that lends itself to a great listen.

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### **Mogsy (MMOGC) says**

5 of 5 stars at The BiblioSanctum <http://bibliosanctum.com/2015/03/09/b...>

Like many fans of Ian Tregillis, I was first introduced to his work with the Milkweed Triptych, a series about British warlocks versus Nazi super-soldiers in an alternate history of World War II. Then In 2013 I picked up Something More Than Night, a futuristic urban fantasy-type metaphysical hard-boiled detective noir story about angels. That book was a bit of a departure to say the least, but it also solidified Tregillis in my mind as a talented visionary, definitely a rising star to watch.

Now Tregillis returns to alternate history in The Mechanical, outdoing himself once again with an inventive blend of mind-blowing fantasy, history, and existential philosophy. This time we see humble French metallurgy pitted against the demonic alchemy of the Dutch, in a story set in the early 1900s. Back in the 17th century in this alternate timeline, prominent mathematician and scientist Christiaan Huygens changed the face of the world by using magic to develop an army of clockwork automatons capable of intelligent thought but are enslaved to their masters through a series of geasa. This breakthrough discovery ensured the survival of the Calvinist Dutch Empire, for very few found themselves capable of standing against a legion of these tireless and utterly obedient mechanical men called "Clakkers."

So three hundred years later, the Dutch are the dominant power with only a small remnant of French Papists still fighting to oppose their rule. The book begins with the executions of a group of French spies, witnessed through the eyes of one of our main protagonists, a Clakker servitor named Jax. Across the ocean where what's left of the French Court has been exiled to the New World, our other protagonist is spymistress Berenice Charlotte de Mornay-Périgord, who is understandably vexed that almost all her agents back in the Netherlands have been caught and killed. Not long after, Jax is unwittingly used to smuggle a dangerous piece of intel across the Atlantic, and then a fatal disaster strikes the French within the walls of Marseilles-in-the-West. Thus begins an incredible tale of deadly secrets and ruthless politics, as our two characters' fates ultimately come together in their search for what they desire most – for Jax, the sweet taste of freedom, and for Berenice, the vengeance on those who took everything from her.

What can I say but I'm just completely awestruck by the world Tregillis has created here. I know I say that about every one of his novels, but it's true. No one does alternate history quite like the way he does, always

bringing a fresh new twist by blending elements from multiple genres. He offers a whole new vision to steampunk in *The Mechanical*, presenting a heart-pounding tale of intrigue wrapped around a philosophical core which explores the subject of artificial intelligence and its consequences. The book will no doubt provide fertile ground for plenty of discussion, littered as it is with profound themes examining free will versus determinism, the nature of identity and the purpose of the individual, and at times it even dabbles lightly in religious theory.

Sounds delightfully cerebral, doesn't it? But don't let that fool you. True, *The Mechanical* will give you plenty of existential questions to mull over, but at its heart it is a gripping story brought to life by complex, engaging characters. There's plenty of action and adventure that will get the blood pumping in your veins. Also, you can never let your guard down when reading a Tregillis novel. No one is ever truly safe (the unfortunate character of Father Luuk Visser can attest to that) and the author clearly has no qualms about taking his story into shocking, brutal territory. Tragedy and bloody violence can befall a character in a Tregillis novel at any time, something I discovered way back when I read *Bitter Seeds*, so it was a lesson I learned early.

Still, I've said this before and I'll say it again – I do adore Ian Tregillis's writing for the very fact that his style is so well-suited for darker, more evocative stories. His prose is so tight and it always flows well with the narrative, not to mention he can also be ferociously detailed when he needs to be. He draws you in and makes you feel for his characters, so that everything that happens to them matters, even (or perhaps especially) when the shit massively hits the fan. I found *The Mechanical* less bleak than *Milkweed*, though fair warning: there are more than a few traumatizing scenes in this book. Then again, it sure didn't stop me from madly devouring up its pages, and in fact I find myself even more invested when I know that anything can happen.

In short, *The Mechanical* is an excellent read, not to be missed by fans of alternate history fiction and steampunk. Even if you're not into those genres, the mix of so many ideas and other elements from sci-fi and fantasy will surely make this worth checking out. Tregillis never fails to impress, and his writing and stories seem to be getting better with each novel. This book is truly unlike anything I've ever read before, and it's my favorite work of his to date. I can't wait to see what the next installment in *The Alchemy Wars* will bring.

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### **Nikki says**

Received to review via Netgalley

This one took me a weirdly long time to read, considering the fact that I don't have major criticisms. I just... didn't feel like reading it. In part that's because of emotional stuff: tortures, transformations, losses... Tregillis writes well about these, and I tend to be bad at reading that. There's one aspect of Visser's character arc in particular that still has me cringing now. It's worse with characters I feel more involved with, which is maybe the place that Tregillis failed to capture me. I'm not fascinated by his characters, so I didn't have that drive to carry on reading and find out what happens, how they get out of their messes. I'm not sure I'll read future books, because I only sort of want to know what happens to the characters, and I'm not sure if that's enough to keep me going through the bad stuff.

And Tregillis definitely demonstrates he isn't afraid to hurt his characters. There's no real reassurance that there'll be a happy ending. There's nothing wrong with that, but it shapes my idiosyncratic response to the

story.

In terms of plot and setting, it's pretty awesome. He sets up an elaborate alternate history with mechanical servitors and alchemy, and a war between the French and the Dutch in consequence. There's all sorts of philosophical stuff explored around this: concepts of the soul, theology, practical and societal changes... Tregillis doesn't skimp on that kind of detail and background development at all. There's room and to spare for more development as well: this isn't a concept exhausted after the first book.

If I sound ambivalent, that's a personal reaction; there's a lot here to fascinate and absorb.

Originally posted on my blog, [here](#).

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