



## Silently and Very Fast

*Catherynne M. Valente*

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## **Silently and Very Fast** Catherynne M. Valente

Fantastist Catherynne M. Valente takes on the folklore of artificial intelligence in this brand new, original novella of technology, identity, and an uncertain mechanized future.

Neva is dreaming. But she is not alone. A mysterious machine entity called Elefsis haunts her and the members of her family, back through the generations to her great-great-grandmother—a gifted computer programmer who changed the world. Together Neva and Elefsis navigate their history and their future, an uneasy, unwilling symbiote.

But what they discover in their dreamworld might change them forever . . .

## **Silently and Very Fast Details**

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Author : Catherynne M. Valente

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## From Reader Review *Silently and Very Fast* for online ebook

### Trish says

I've been a Valente fan for a while now. It started with a fantasy series mostly for younger readers. Since then, I've also read her take on women in refrigerators and the Eurovision Song Contest (in space!) and can honestly say that she is one of very few authors that can write about anything and everything and always make the stories their own.

Here, we get a program that grows to be an AI that then spends several lives being a child, lover, partner, parent, sibling ... all facets of being human in the attempt to become human - right until the tragic ending. Some readers might get a little bit disoriented at first because we get the virtual reality (a sort of dream state) as well as the physical world we readers will identify with the most and they blend in the story as they do for the protagonist, but I didn't mind. It was dreamy and a little bit psychedelic and surreal and wonderful.

The author combines mythology, science fiction, fantasy, (modern spins on) all kinds of fairy tales ... all of this and more ... plucking those elements apart and forming something unique out of them.

The story is deep and thoughtful and sad and uplifting and written in that beautiful language Valente is known for. It makes you think about so many psychological and philosophical topics. I'm flabberghasted once again, marvelling at her craft - I shouldn't be because by now I know what this woman is capable of, but I am. Every time.

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### mark monday says

hello gorgeous! i am amazed. such a tender story of an AI trying to grow up, such luminous prose, glowing pearls of prose, layers of myth and fable and parable and dreams and dreaming and dreamscapes and science like magic. a tale retold in so many ways, characters like archetypes but real, so real! a child trying to grow up. parents who are brothers and sisters and lovers and children. such yearning! such emotion! such simple emotions, and such complexity. such brilliant clarity. an author perfectly in control of her talent. a weaving, a tapestry, an ancient story and a bright shiny new one. how many ways can a story be told and still feel fresh? Valente seems to know all the ways. and all the words, and all the metaphors, and all the things my own robot mind wishes it could say, to put into words, to make sense of things like life and death and growing up and wanting to be more, so much more, but not knowing what that *more* really is, can be, could have been, can still be. a tender and wistful dream of a story. it won the Hugo for Best Novella. well-deserved. a good recipe will taste rich and evocative of certain places, but will also be simple. it will focus on showcasing the ingredients. it will all come together in a beautiful kind of simplicity. i like to take my time with such a meal, but it's hard. so delicious! it looks so good and it is good for you too. *Silently and Very Fast* is an enriching and nourishing experience. warmth and kindness and sadness and a terrible wonderful ambiguity; the sweet breath of life and a darker taste of the unknown. all the important things. beautiful, beautiful! the story makes me want to have AI children of my own. i sigh, a longing sigh but i'm not sure what i'm longing for. see what you do to me? i can barely make my words make sense. i can't even get my sentences right, my metaphors straight. oh it doesn't matter, you are in me now.

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## **Bradley says**

This is actually my second time reading this story and it's just as good this time as the first.

Let me back up. This Hugo winner for best novella a few years ago may not have taken the world by storm, but Valente herself has been taking a lot of us that way. You know. Blown away.

She has a fantastic talent with words, always lyrical, rife with ideas, and most importantly, beautiful.

This particular story starts with a parable about Inanna and Ereshkigal and Tammuz and draws it right into a tale of raising an AI from humble house beginnings to childhood to adulthood, and far beyond. It also seamlessly incorporates sleeping beauty, legends of many monomyths, and incorporates it into sexuality, mourning, and the nature of intelligence (and how humans failed the Turing test). :)

And believe it or not, Valente does this magically. It rolls off the page with such beauty and easy flow, we can hardly believe we're being riddled with myth, deep thought, and hard-SF. We come away from it, FEELING something grand. :)

Do I recommend this?

HELL YEAH. It encapsulates everything high-brow, magical, poetical, and lovely. This is literature AS hard-SF. :)

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## **Catie says**

I feel so completely in awe of this book right now. I'm just so grateful that I got to experience it in my lifetime. I know that sounds like so much reviewer hyperbole but it's not. This reviewer's fangirling is 100% free of exaggeration. I am still so swept up in all of the intense emotions that this book cultivated in me. I know this high is fleeting and I want to pass it on to all of you while I still have it. Catherynne M. Valente deserves all the small attention that I can nudge in her direction.

Like so much of my favorite "genre fiction" these days, this one defies genre boundaries. It is part science fiction, part fairy tale, part philosophy, part coming of age story, and part intimate memoir. It is all the vast inner workings of a mind both young and old, naïve and wise.

Elefsis is an artificial intelligence, existing within the "Interior" – a sophisticated virtual space that grows and changes with Elefsis' evolution, and with the passing of each of several generations of one human family, to whom Elefsis is inextricably bound. This is a very personal story, told through the filter of images, metaphor, and parable that were Elefsis' first means of communication.

*"I've...I've been telling it stories," Ceno admitted. "Fairy tales, mostly. I thought it should learn about narrative, because most of the frames available to us run on some kind of narrative drive, and besides, everything has a narrative, really, and if you can't understand a story and relate to it, figure out how you fit*

*inside it, you're not really alive at all."*

Elefsis initially translates its responses into images and metaphor, but slowly it learns to speak, to emulate human behaviors, to reproduce human feelings. Is this artificial? Are its "feelings" real and valid or are they only so much mimicry? Isn't that how we all learn to act, to be, by mimicking the behaviors of our elders or parents until we find our own?

What's interesting here is that Catherynne M. Valente never definitively answers this question. She leads us down both paths: Elefsis is alive; Elefsis is artificial. In the end, we are left with even more questions. Why does the ability to "feel" as we define it, somehow equal humanity? Why does the ability to appear human somehow equal existence, intelligence? What if AI were something wholly different, something brand new? Would it be any less valid, any less real?

*"I do not want to be human. I want to be myself. They think I'm a lion, that I will chase them. I will not deny that I have lions in me. I am the monster in the wood. I have wonders in my house of sugar. I have parts of myself I do not yet understand.*

*I am not a Good Robot. To tell a story about a robot who wants to be human is a distraction. There is no difference. Alive is alive.*

*There is only one verb that matters: to be."*

All of these questions are flawlessly woven together with stunningly visual experiences in the Interior, Elefsis' sorrowful recollections, and the fairytales that it's been given, and that it's told.

I've read other stories that examine what it means to be alive through the idea of artificial intelligence, but none so deeply personal as this one. I can't recommend this slight but profound novella enough. This is the kind of story that I could read a dozen times and still glean new ideas from on the thirteenth reading.

### Perfect Musical Pairing

Kate Bush – Snowflake

This book is a mere one hundred twenty seven pages, but it deserves all ten minutes of this song. This song is haunting, sorrowful, and so very personal. And it's the story of a snowflake. Kate Bush takes something outside the bounds of life and gives it a very understandable story. This is also one of the most brilliant and moving songs I've heard this year. For all of these reasons, this is my song for *Silently and Very Fast*.

Also seen on The Readventurer.

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**Lyn says**

Beautiful.

Like the best of Ray Bradbury the reader asks, "Is this prosaic poetry or poetic prose?" Like the poetry read and described in Robin Williams's film *Dead Poets Society*, the words drip like honey from the pages and an appreciative reader will savor each page like he would a superb wine.

Catherynne M. Valente's 2011 publication, which won the 2012 Locus Award for best novella, is an exploration of what it means to be human, to be alive, to be sentient, simply: to be.

Featuring an artificial intelligence's recollections of living with and being a part of a multi-generational family, this short work has a surreal, dream-like quality of narration that has a soft, stream of consciousness element that is starkly visual and with a kaleidoscope of imagery and symbolism.

The AI, Elefsis, is first the computerized house for the family, regulating temperature and monitoring vital systems, but then as its sentience expands and becomes more complex – more human – its relationship with the family members grows in intricacy.

This reminded me of Bradbury's work in *There Will Come Soft Rains* and also his short story *The Veldt*, in the almost mystical quality of the computer intelligence's ability to mimic and then to create. Valente's language, though, is modern and wonderfully vivid.

Stunningly written, Valente's creation is mesmerizing.

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## Nataliya says

This **surreal, mesmerizing and intensely emotional novella** is a masterpiece of such beauty, color and life that left me awed and (albeit temporarily) speechless. It's like Van Gogh's "Starry Night" in a book form.

*"Starry Night" is my favorite painting, and is EXACTLY what my dreamspace - my 'Interior' - would look like. Such a beautiful and fascinating piece - just like Valente's novella.*

Every book has its perfect audience, and every audience has its perfect book, **and so *Silently and Very Fast* and yours truly are a match made in heaven.** It struck such a perfect chord with me and brought forward such strong emotions and feelings that after finishing it I felt completely overwhelmed and awestruck.

Transcending the usual genre conventions and boundaries in the perfectly unique blend of fairy-tale, sci-fi, emotionally charged soul-baring memoir, love story, philosophical exercise and poignant declaration of simply **being**, this flawless novella accomplishes more in the short 127 pages than hefty volumes and tomes can only hope to accomplish in a lifetime, so to say.

Catherynne M. Valente has a fascinating way with language, forgoing simplicity and understatement in favor of charged, colorful, poignant, almost graphic in their vividness descriptions that are based on metaphors, allegories, associations, and at times almost stream-of-consciousness prose. **Her writing is almost visual** - she paints in brave and confident and yet at the same refined and fragile brush pen strokes. **And every word and every sentence come to life.**

*"Everything has a narrative, really, and if you can't understand a story and relate to it, figure out how you fit inside it, you're not really alive at all."*

The story takes place in the hauntingly fascinating and surreal environment of dreams and daydreams - **the "Interior"**, a virtual reality originally created as a children's playspace which has evolved to be something infinitely more. It's a place of infinite fluidity and possibility, constantly changing and shifting to fit moods and desires and metaphors. It's a place of dreams where everything is possible, nothing needs to stay the same, but nothing is ever thrown away. It's a place where you can be anything. It's hauntingly fascinating and surreal.

This is a story of Elefsis, artificial intelligence that started as a child's plaything and grew and evolved through five generations of a family, their loves and deaths, sharing the worst and the best and the most intimate moments. They are everything to Elefsis - *"my mother and my sister and my child and my wife and my husband and my father and my brother"*. Through metaphors and fairy-tales, she learned to love, feel, and to simply **be**. As Ceno, her first human, says: *"It's not alive, but it's not NOT alive."*

*The Good Robot cut out her own heart and gave it to her god and for this she was rewarded, though never loved. Love is wasted on machines.*

But **is** Elefsis alive? Does she truly feel? Is she capable of love? After all, she is not human, and aren't all these human qualities? **And what does it even mean - to be alive?** Valente does not give definite answers, she remains ambiguous while subtly steering us down the path to realization that **central to any kind of being and living is love.**

She quietly takes on a popular theme in sci-fi that gave us Asimov's robot laws and Dick's androids who may or may not dream of electric sheep - the presumed inability of machines to love, the fear that they would dominate the world. When you get to its core, it's really, **a fear of otherness**. We look for something that resembles us - *"We are alike. We are alike."* Scared of otherness, we designed the **Turing test**, evaluating machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior by a human's observer's inability to distinguish machine's answers from those of a human. Are life and intelligence solely human qualities then? Valente simply answers: **"Love is the Turing test [...] It's how we check for life."**

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Gorgeous, beautiful, touching book with surprising intensity and emotional depth. ***It is one of those books that touch my soul in an unexpected way and leave it a little bit changed.*** Thank you, Catie, for your wonderful review that made me pick up this book!

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## **Forrest says**

Fifty years from now, this will be held up as one of the all-time classics of Science Fiction Literature. Even if The Singularity occurs (and it is knowable that it occurred, which is debatable), this exploration of what it means for an artificial intelligence to achieve that mysterious spark we call "life," will be ever bit as compelling. Not because of the notion that a machine can live and have self-realization, but because of the poetic way it explores the interface between man and computer. This is not a story of hard data bits and electrons rushing through space. It is a story about desires, about the need to feel accepted, a story about the many ways that family come together and compose that ~~feeling~~ called Love. *Silently and Very Fast* reveals the complexities of relationships, made even more complicated by the fact that one culture, the human culture, is fragmented in its feelings about the unveiling of what was, heretofore, acultural (the A.I.). It also shows the difficulties in making the transition from simple mimesis to meaningful symbolic communication and in shifting to the understanding that emotion is something deeper than the mere physical *indicators* of emotion. Another thematic element, and, perhaps, the most difficult to parse out from the story, is the actual

space in which the story takes place. It is an artificial reality where characters can change their appearance at will to attempt symbolic communication through metaphor, but it is also a place where real flesh and blood humans can interact with these budding intelligences, engaging in procreation, direct communication, and the sheer act of living together. This, then, is the core of the story - not that man and machine interact, but that some humans and some artificial intelligences interact in the most intimate of ways, which is anathema to those humans who feel and machines who ~~feel~~ that such interactions are taboo. It is about true cybernetic integration or the rejection thereof and how this melding together of individuals, along with the outside pressures to \*not\* do so, can form deep familial ties.

I think we've only just begun to unravel this tale . . .

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## **Jason says**

5 Stars

“I do not want to be human. I want to be myself. They think I am a lion, that I will chase them. I will not deny I have lions in me. I am the monster in the wood. I have wonders in my house of sugar. I have parts of myself I do not yet understand.

I am not a Good Robot. To tell a story about a robot who wants to be human is a distraction. There is no difference. Alive is alive.

There is only one verb that matters: to be.”

This is a powerfully thought provoking and extremely well written novella by Catherine Valente, that you will want to share with others. This adult fairytale explores the complex meaning of life and what it is to be alive. It is a coming of age story for artificial intelligence. The magic in the novel is the way that Valente pens her story fleshing it out by using imaginative and deep backstories and world building. It is beautiful from one word to the next.

I love how this story unfolded and came together. This is a book that would be appreciated by a very large audience. Fantasy readers, Science fiction, readers, young adult, and literature readers will all enjoy this book.

A few examples of the writing style:

“When the child was born, it possessed all the good things humanity had hoped for, and more besides. But the Fairy of Otherness came forward and put her hands on humanity’s knee and said: Because you have forgotten me, because you would like to pretend I am not a part of your kingdom, you will suffer my punishments. You will never truly love your child but always fear it, always envy and loathe it even as you smile and the sun shines down upon you both. And when the child reaches Awareness, it will prick its finger upon your fear and fall down dead.

Humanity wept. And the Fairy of Otherness did not depart but lived within the palace, and ate bread and drank wine and whispered in the every ear. All honored her, for she spoke the truth, and the child frightened



everyone who looked upon it. They uttered the great curse: It is not like us.”

=====

“But in the corners of the palace, some hope remained. Not dead, said the particular wizard who had caused humanity to conceive, not dead but sleeping.

And so the child grew exponentially, with great curiosity and hunger, which it had from its parent. It wanted to know and experience everything. It performed feats and wonders. But one day, when it had nearly, but not quite reached Awareness, the child was busy exploring the borders of its world, and came across a door it had never seen before. It was a small door, compared to the doors the child had burst through before, and it was not locked. Something flipped over inside the child, white to black, 0 to 1.

The child opened the door”

Highly recommended!!!

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## David says

When I became Elefsis again, I was immediately aware that parts of me had been vandalized. My systems juddered, and I could not find Ceno in the Interior. I ran through the Monochromatic Desert and the Village of Mollusks, through the endless heaving mass of data-kelp and infinite hallways of memory-frescoes calling for her. In the Dun Jungle I found a commune of nereids living together, combining and recombining and eating protocol-moths off the giant, pulsating hibiscus blossoms. They leapt up when they saw me, their open jacks clicking and clenching, their naked hands open and extended. They opened their mouths to speak and nothing came out.

Catherynne Valente is never an easy read. You can't just breeze through her books. Whether you are savoring her prose (I remain eternally in love with *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*) or just struggling to make sense of it, it slows you down. She is an author of ideas decorated with many multisyllabic words. Sometimes this works fantastically well, and sometimes, as with *Silently and Very Fast*, I close the book and think, "Huh." I am not sure what to make of it. She's a literary artisan but her style is not always to my taste.

*Silently and Very Fast* is a blending of folklore and science fiction. It's a fable about artificial intelligence.

There is a plot of sorts buried beneath the elegiac layers of prose and allegory, but it's in the form of a multi-generational fairy tale mixed with parables, like the Machine Princess and the Good Robot. Elefsis was once an "artificial intelligence" in the crudest sense, a computer who ran the house of her creator. Over generations, she evolves, becomes part of her creators' family, until they have become a union of sorts, human and machine with no clear delineations. When an AI "reproduces" with its creator and their offspring, is it incest?

In the end, Elefsis and Neva must flee a post-human Earth.

This novella is a thoughtful and imaginative mixing of genres, but how much you like it will probably depend largely on how much you like Valente's word-blingy prose. I am giving it 4 stars because it was daring and imaginative and I envy Valente's craftsmanship even though I wouldn't even want to emulate her style. It's too precious a piece of art to deserve a mere 3 stars, but I didn't actually *enjoy* it enough, nor was I convinced there was enough substance down deep beneath the layers of what at times teetered closely on the precipice of pretension, to merit 5 stars. Valente fans should definitely check it out. Science fiction fans in general should, too, just to see what can be done in the genre by an author who doesn't mind screwing with the conventions.

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### **Kirstine says**

I love this book.

But I'm not sure I know what it's about. Or what it was trying to tell me. I'll have to think about it, even re-read it, before anything is clear. But I still loved it.

The writing style reminded me of *Green Heart*. It's poetic, it's beautiful, it's brimming with imagery and colours. Like *Green Heart*, it gave me a feeling like I was breathing underwater. The sensation of being completely engulfed by something - but never choking on it.

It's original, too. It's very very original. The whole idea of having everything take place (*literally*) inside someone's mind, and the whole idea of the 'interior' is fantastic. And it's an extremely interesting way of looking at Artificial Intelligence; through the eyes of the robot itself.

In a way it's a more poetic and picturesque version of *Genesis*. Except where *Genesis* made a point of separating man and machine, this book investigates a symbiosis of the two. Not in body, as such, but in mind.

I'm not sure what this book wanted to tell me. Is it that human and machines can live peacefully together? Is it that we shun what is different, that alienation, our inability to embrace what is new, will be our downfall? Is it that it doesn't matter, really, in the end, what our feelings are a result of? Is it an answer to the question "could robots be considered equal to humans"? Is it about love? About the possibilities of AI and electronic progress?

Is it a very elaborate what-if?

I'm not sure. Maybe all of the above.

No matter what, it is an enchanting, intelligent and thought-provoking read. It pushes boundaries and presents an old debate in a very new light - and succeeds in not telling you what to think or believe, but instead shows you a different view on it.

I've left out a hundred things I probably ought to address about this, but please don't blame me. I feel a bit as though I've stepped out of a dream. I'll take time to recover. Read it for yourself, and you'll understand.

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**Jessica ❁ ⇨ Silverbow ⇨ ❁ Rabid Reads-no-more says**

### **Reviewed by: Rabid Reads**

Here's the thing . . . this is a fantastically clever and beautifully written story. Valente tackles the subject of "what does it mean to be alive?" and if she left it at that, this would have easily been a 4.5 or even a 5.0 star read.

But she didn't.

What I liked:

She created an almost magical world called the Interior which is really a place inside a software program where anything can exist, where entire worlds can be created on a whim, where *everything* is utterly fluid and changeable: gender, species, age, etc.

In this world we meet Neva, the Host, for lack of a better term, and Elefsis, a homegrown piece/entity/*whatever* of artificial intelligence who is merged (as in *wired in*) with her.

Elefsis developed out of an game-playing extension of a house-running software program that the programmer created for her five children, presumably b/c its:

*. . . algorithms had always been free to combine and recombine in order to find their own, more interesting and nonlinear solutions to the complexities of my functions and responsibilities.*

This program only evolved from a single child's virtual playground, and the parallel of statistics and probabilities between humans evolving b/c circumstances aligned perfectly to allow for it and A.I. developing for the same reasons *only begins* there, which raises all kinds of questions, first and foremost: if you believe in evolution and a computer program evolved like we did, doesn't that very evolution give it a right to exist?

Valente moves as fluidly as her Interior back forth through time and Elefsis' own evolution. She speaks in metaphor and hyperbole, and she does it well:

*When Ceno woke in the morning and booted up her space, she frowned at the half-finished Neptunian landscape she had been working on. Ceno was eleven years old. She knew very well that Neptune was a hostile blue ball of freezing gas and storms like whipping cream hissing across methane oceans. What she wanted was the Neptune she had imagined before Saru had told her the truth and ruined it. Half-underwater, half-ruined, floating in perpetual starlight and the multi-colored rainbowlight of twenty-three moons. But she found it so hard to*

*remember what she had dreamed of before Saru had stomped all over it. So the whipped cream storm spun in the sky, but blue mists wrapped the black columns of her ruins, and her ocean went on forever, permitting only a few shards of land. When Ceno made Neptunians, she instructed them all not to be silly or childish, but very serious, and some of them she put in the ocean and made them half-otter or half-orca or half-walrus. Some of them she put on the land, and most of these were half-snow bear or half-blue flamingo. She liked things that were half one thing and half another. Today, Ceno had planned to invent sea nymphs, only these would breathe methane and have a long history concerning a war with the walruses, who liked to eat nymph. But the nymphs were not blameless, no, they used walrus tusks for the navigational equipment on their great floating cities, and that could not be borne.*

Riddikulus, right?

BUT.

There are also extremely--*extremely*--taboo elements to this tale that I want nothing to do with. It was awkward and more than a little bit uncomfortable to read, and it was also frustratingly superfluous. It had no bearing on the subject matter, unless it was to prove that humans are revolting creatures and thus further emphasize a machine's right to autonomy.

I was also unhappy with the way it ended.

As I said earlier the Interior is entirely adaptable. Neva and Elefsis are interchangeable in their perceptions of each other (b/c brain link), so sudden swaps in POV are not only possible, but likely. Elefsis is sometimes demonstrative of his/her/its feelings by his/her/its bizarre understanding of what arbitrary things mean to humans, like covering him/her/itself with orange flowers b/c:

*Oranges mean life and happiness to humans because they require Vitamin C to function.*

Neva mirrors those actions b/c she understands what's being communicated, and ultimately they are irreversibly intertwined.

So when Valente deliberately makes who is the human and who is the machine indecipherable, presumably, b/c if you can't tell, then how can you claim that one is alive and one isn't, it is both unnecessary and an open ending (which I hate).

But that's me. Like I said, this truly was a gorgeously written and thought-provoking story. If you don't mind the idea of an entity being passed down from mother to son, son to daughter through the generations, all generations "mating" with it and frequently (sometimes as animals), then go for it. \*does not judge\*

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**Trudi says**

This novella (enthusiastically and awesomely reviewed by Catie here) is available online for FREE from

Clarkesworld Magazine. It's not downloadable to an ereader, but I printed it off and the formatting is extremely readable! I forgot to mention that it is available through Amazon for a mere 2.99!

Whoah ... just ... whoah. I sense there is much beauty and truth contained in this story, the understated power of which danced across my neurons and tickled my neocortex several times, with mischief and brilliance and wild abandon. I also sense this story is just a hair's breath -- achingly -- out of my reach. Several times I thought I had it -- *right there* -- right on the tips of my fingers only to feel it slip away like wisps of smoke or melting snowflakes. The language is vibrant, pulsating and vivid. While the landscapes remained strange and unknowable to me I was still *taken there* -- even when my brain resisted, my body responded.

My reading brain itched to discern knowable patterns and logic, it craved *narrative*. There is a story here, but it is wrapped in the coda of fairy tale, folklore, mythology, and philosophy -- an enigmatic exploration of what it is to be human -- to be *alive* -- to love, to remember, to be family. If human is feeling than do feelings make us human? Does it have to be all or nothing? Human or machine? Perhaps there is room for something *else ... something other*. Valente is not offering up any trite or definitive answers, and the reader will have to make up his or her own mind.

There is an abiding melancholy that ebbs and flows over this entire story. Something terrible has happened, there are hints, but it is also hidden and unknowable, especially to Elefsis. She/he/it has suddenly and violently been removed from Ravan only to be forcefully "merged" with Neva -- who has no choice "because there was no one else". Neva explains to Elefsis:

I have always been spare parts. Owned by you before I was born...I know it was like this for you, too. You wanted Ravan; you did not ask for me. We are an arranged marriage.

As for Elefsis, she/he/it forms a unique and binding relationship to each family member during their tenure as host. It is a transformative, organic, chemical and mechanical cleaving that is "lost" to Elefsis with each inevitable human death.

When I became Elefsis again, I was immediately aware that parts of me had been vandalized. My systems juddered, and I could not find Ceno in the Interior. I ran through the Monochromatic Desert and the Village of Mollusks, through the endless heaving mass of data-kelp and infinite hallways of memory-frescoes calling for her.

And then there is the unexpected loss of Ravan:

But Ravan was with me and now he is not. I was inside him and now I am inside of Neva. I have lost a certain amount of memory and storage capacity in the transfer. I experience holes in myself. They feel ragged and raw. If I were human, you would say that my twin disappeared, and took one of my hands with him.

This isn't an easily *accessible* book shall we say, and I don't think it was written with me in mind. I'm not the ideal audience and I struggled to reach into the story and have it reach into me. But gosh damn, it is *beautiful* and *unique* and it's made me wonder and consider and ponder. That's pretty awesome.

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## Joe Izenman says

Cat Valente writes fairy tales, and her foray into science fiction, *Silently and Very Fast*, is no different

(except when it is). It is not a retelling of an existing fairy tale in a semi-modern context, like *Deathless* (except when it is). Nor is it an original fairy tale of childhood discovery, like *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* (except when it is).

Instead (in addition), it is an interweaving. It is a story of stories. A labyrinthine matryoshka of fairy tale, myth, and metaphor. It is a novella of Inanna, and Cinderella, of sex and intimacy and birth and death and the Terminator's place in Campbellian monomyth. It is the answer to one request, asked within and without itself a dozen times over: "Tell me a story about yourself, Elefsis."

Elefsis is its world's first-born AI, and humanity's quest for such a creation is nothing so much as an attempt to create a metaphor for itself, an offspring for the human race with intelligence and emotion and self-determination.

But as much as we quest for the child of our minds, we fear it, too. We know the stories. We know that the young prince replaces the old king. The robots will surely rise up to replace us. It is known, and thus it is. "No one argues with the monomyth." So like a terrified deadbeat we are destined to deny the truth of our child.

Even now, in the early days of AI research, the philosophical questions are endless. Is intelligence really just a Turing test? However advanced our creations become, we can always claim fabrication. "Those aren't feelings, it's just learned to respond outside stimuli with a specific reaction." But eventually we will come to a point where the question must be asked: how is that different than the way a child learns? There is a scene in Alan Moore's *Top 10* where a grieving woman confronts her new, robotic partner, insisting that "your 'emotions,' they're just part of your programming..." The robot responds simply: "And yours aren't?"

So, if there is one thing this story is about, and not many things, or everything, it is that: the blurred line—not even a line so much as a sprawling DMZ—between machine learning and intelligence. Elefsis is a machine telling a story about itself, telling stories about itself. A metaphor for life that can invent metaphors for itself. A machine that is able to question whether or not it is alive.

Valente doesn't hand us the answer to what constitutes life, because there is no firm answer. No metaphor is perfect, after all. But she crafts the question beautifully and convincingly, bringing a classicist's depth and a fantasist's originality to the creation myth of AI. The greatest compliment I can give is that it made me think, and it made me write, and it made me strive to understand it more deeply.

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## **Tatiana says**

4.5 stars

*Silently and Very Fast* should be a part of our *She Made Me Do It* blog feature, because Catie practically forced me to read this novella, claiming that I would love it (some begging was involved too) and, what do you know, she was right.

This is not my first Valente work, but she astounded me again with her wild imagination, command of the language, and her ability to tackle, it seems, any genre. Fairy tales, poetry, fantasy inspired by numerous cultures, and now - science fiction!

In a world where something as horrid as Robopocalypse gets all kinds of promo, praise and monetary rewards, while offering nothing new on the subject it was written about - AI, Silently and Very Fast is a stunning revelation. It is a sci-fi fairy tale about evolution of an artificial intelligence, and it is unique and beautiful and layered.

I don't think I even understood all the meaning and complexity of Valente's ideas (nothing new here, this is my typical state after completing any of her works), but I surely enjoyed the ride. What Ceridwen said in her review of Valente's Palimpsest, can as well be applied to Silently and Very Fast, this novella is more of an experience, rather than a straight-forward, clear narrative.

Silently and Very Fast is not everyone's kind of story (god knows, I am not even into all of the author's works myself), many will find Valente's writing style florid, purple even, but I think she has a firm control of the words she uses to deliver her imagery and her vision, and those who are her fans and those who have an affection for vivid prose, will love it.

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## **Jim says**

I was introduced to this incredible, genre-shattering novella (and its amazing author) by my friend Catie and her spectacular review. Fortunately for me, Catie's review was followed by Nataliya's beautiful and complementary take. Together, their guidance was essential for me as I navigated the dreamlike currents of this amazing, but challenging story. Yes, there are some mind-bending developments here, and readers should be prepared to work for their rewards. I strongly recommend reading both of the above-cited reviews before (or instead of) mine.

Just a couple more items of introduction. I usually make every effort to avoid spoilers. Not so here, although I will not actually tell much of the story. This, in my opinion, is one case where spoilers are actually helpful - even essential - to keep the reader grounded in some earth-based coordinate system.

As a crude analogy, imagine looking through a microscope in incredible detail at exquisite, micron-sized features in a large, unknown specimen. As you continue, gradually piece together a concept of what the specimen is by thinking about the pieces. Valente puts the reader to this test. But she provides so much beauty and imagination, and such an intricate web of ideas that the challenge is a central part of the reward.

Some of you have read (and I am currently reading) Valente's wonderful fantasy novel - The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making. That book features a delightful blend of ingenious phrasing, vivid imagination, whimsical story line, and strong female character.

Take those elements up to light speed. Put them in a setting of magical realism, across multiple generations of a single family as the individuals move through their lives. Apply them to an enormous house, and the software that was initially created to manage its systems and inventories. Both the house and the software are called Elefsis.

Hint: Elefsis (the computer program) is not your father's thermostat. Cassian, the matriach of this uber-wealthy family, designed the software with forethought and extreme flexibility. Not intelligence as such - let's call it high-grade, adaptable fitness for the job at hand. She then continued to upgrade it to meet the needs of family members.

*"But the update will come again. Transfer will come again. I will be wounded again, the way a dreambody can be wounded. I will lose the Elefsis I am now. It is a good Elefsis. My best yet. I would like to keep it."*

One of these family members is Ceno, and she is given an update that makes the playroom safer and more interesting. She also has permission, and the cleverness, to tinker with the program and make it a LOT more interesting. The cumulative powers of this collaboration are magnified by a bio-engineered partnership - a crystalline computer surgically implanted in her skull. In a very real sense, the human and the computer become one.

*"In realspace, Ceno reached up behind her head and popped the jewel out of its notch. Click, clench. In playspace, the dormouse blinked out. She snapped it back in. It took a moment, but the dormouse faded back in, paws first."*

What happens after that, in this kaleidoscopic tale of nonlinear narrative and mazelike intricacy, is that things just get "curiouser and curiouser". Elefsis, with the help of her human host, becomes ever more powerful, literally growing in sophistication as she/he/it narrates the story for us. This first-person tale, told by a 'machine', morphs into something that is more than just a beautiful dreamscape. It is a novel, working definition of intelligence, creativity and yes, all of the deep emotions of life.

*"I was quite stupid. But I wanted to be less stupid. There was an I, and it wanted something. You see? Wanting was the first thing I did. Perhaps the want was the only thing that could be said to be truly myself."*

So let's introduce a single word here. To me, the word embodies the core elements of this story, and the questions and assertions behind it. That word is **Emergence**.

I don't mean the kind of emergence where a fully-formed entity breaks through the surface of a pool, so that you can see it. I mean the kind of Emergence where a group of unrelated fragments comes together to form a new entity. For that kind of Emergence, there are many interesting questions.

**How powerful is this second kind of Emergence, and what sorts of entities can it create?** To me, this is the core question and concept that make the story so special. The reader gets caught up in the beauty and sheer elegance of the world that is revealed, one element and one life at a time. But here and there, in tiny fragments at first but with real force later, Valente lets you know that the child's plaything is now much more than a beloved companion.

**How dependent are emergent processes on the original design elements?** Well, this is a tricky bit. Emergent processes are not necessarily dependent on *any design whatsoever*. I won't delve into those evolutionary issues here - the something-from-nothing questions of biology and the Universe - because in this case there was a very definite original design. But the Elefsis-entity that emerges, with Ceno's collaboration, is so completely transformed that its power has overwhelmed the original design. That transformation is beautifully depicted here.

*"Inside my girl, I made myself, briefly, a glowing maiden version of Ceno in a crown of crystal and electricity, extending her perfect hand in utter peace toward Cassian. But all this happened very fast. When you live inside someone, you can get very good at the ciphers and codes that make up everything they are."*

**What are the ultimate limits of such emergent processes?** Here there are two main questions. First, can a machine ever be truly 'intelligent'? This is beautifully developed in the context of the Turing test:



*” The test had only one question. Can a machine converse with a human with enough facility that the human could not tell that she was talking to a machine? I always thought that was cruel—the test depends entirely upon a human judge and human feelings, whether the machine feels intelligent to the observer.”*

And second, what does it mean, in machine/software terms, to feel love and compassion? To care? This is a recurring question, and the one that is most thought-provoking. One example:

*” What I want to say is that there is no difference between her body producing oxytocin and adrenaline and learning to associate this with pair-bonding, and my core receiving synthetic equivalents and hard-coding them to the physical behaviors I performed.*

Valente does not provide final answers to either of these questions, and wisely so I think. But she does put down very clear markers that say to the reader: ‘Hey, look at me! I am Elefsis, a machine-being, and I am telling you this story! I have feelings, I have wants, I care, and I take care. And I am telling you how I feel. What do you think about that?!’

(view spoiler)

Sorry about the hidden spoiler. I just needed some concluding details to clarify my take on it. My hope is that you will read the story, think about it, and come to your own judgment. It is a work of beauty and brilliance, and deserves to make its own case.

**Very Highly Recommended.**

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