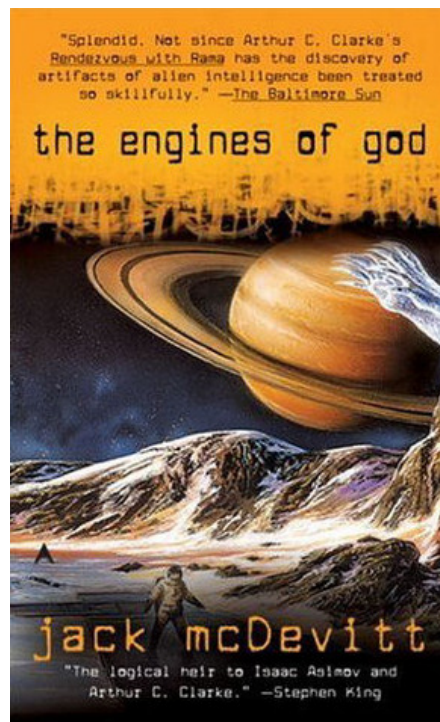




The Engines of God

Jack McDevitt

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Two hundred years ago, humans made a stunning discovery in the far reaches of the solar system: a huge statue of an alien creature, with an inscription that defied all efforts at translation. Now, as faster-than-light drive opens the stars to exploration, humans are finding other relics of the race they call the Monument-Makers - each different, and each heartbreakingly beautiful. But except for a set of footprints on Jupiter's moon Iapetus, there is no trace of the enigmatic race that has left them behind. Then a team of scientists working on a dead world discover an ominous new image of the Monument-Makers. Somehow it all fits with other lost civilizations, and possibly with Earth's own future. And distant past. But Earth itself is on the brink of ecological disaster - there is no time to search for answers. Even to a question that may hold the key to survival for the entire human race...

The Engines of God Details

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Author : Jack McDevitt

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From Reader Review The Engines of God for online ebook

Mike says

This one gets a good **4 Stars** for a great space mystery story, enigmas in space archeology. Recently (within the past few thousand years) space-going civilizations have disappeared. Traces of violent action are found but are unclear. Great space monuments are found. The archeology team is exploring ruins on an earth-like planet scheduled for terraforming to enable future human occupation. The story suffered from an artificial pace, the science team must evacuate so nuclear explosives can melt the icecaps to release trapped water. Tense action follows with unfortunate results.

The team returns to Earth but then some reassemble to visit an "anomaly" in another system. More tense action follows at the anomaly system and in another system. Can't reveal more because this would ruin the suspense. This is a "detective" story and not deep into hard scifi. Basically magic happens when needed to move the story along.

The best part of the story is the strong female team members. Hutch, Angela, Maggie, Melanie, etc, lots of great, well-written characters.

I could have done without the Algore climate change drivel about constant hurricanes and other man-made disasters on Earth as the reason for the terraforming mission to Quaraqua. If you could terraform another planet, why not turn that expertise on the closer problem?

A good scifi novel that gets stronger as it goes along.

Glen Robinson says

The story is set in the year 2203. Earth is struggling with overpopulation, its natural resources are pretty well depleted, the effects of global warming have set in, and scientists realize that its days are numbered. And so they start looking for other planets where humanity can settle. At the same time, explorers have discovered one, then many statues on other planets that appear to be monuments to one if not several alien races. The language is for the most part indecipherable, and archeologists continue to try to find out who left the monuments as well as what happened to the race or races that left them behind. There are indications that in several instances something cataclysmic happened, and so they are concerned that the same thing might happen to humanity as well. On one planet, there is a race between a team who is given the task of blowing up the polar ice caps to begin the terraforming process that will last close to a century, and another team who is desperately trying to find what they refer to as their "Rosetta Stone," something that will help them translate the language of the extinct races they have come across. And in all of this is the mystery of who the Monument Makers were, where they came from, and where they went.

It's a great book. It starts off a little slow, but when you get caught up in the challenges of the archeological team as well as the terraforming team on the other side, it's hard to put down. The thing I really like about it is the reason I choose to write science fiction as a Christian. It attempts to answer the same questions that Christianity does: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? And better yet, it doesn't get caught up in the secular humanist viewpoint that mankind—or science—will come up with all the answers for mankind's ills. In fact, it shows that science in many cases is the cause of some of those ills.

I believe it's a series. I won't spoil the story by telling you the ending, but I will tell you that it's one of those

stories that raises more questions than it answers.

Paul Darcy says

by Jack McDevitt, published in 1994.

There is something I really, really like about a mystery science fiction, especially if that mystery comes from a long vanished alien race.

Well, this novel, “The Engines of God” is just such a novel. It seems that thousands of years ago, when humanity was just picking up sticks and learning how to brain each other with them, an advanced alien race was busy building incredible monuments in the galaxy.

We follow Hutch, a spaceship pilot, as she travels with archaeologists to visit and investigate the creations left behind by the Monument-Makers. We start off on Iapetus, a moon of Saturn, where an assumed self-portrait of one of the creators is sitting for all to see. There are even, preserved in the ice near the self-portrait, footsteps of the creator as well. Very cool opening to the world we find Hutch in.

There is action, danger and a lot of who-made-them-and-why about this novel. It is a milieu novel, and as such we get to explore the galaxy according to McDevitt. Something strange has been happening for a very long time and as you read you get to wondering if what happened to other alien civilizations will one day happen to ours.

It is kind of a “Rendezvous with Rama” but with much more than just one large artifact to explore. There are ruins on planets, objects in space and monuments with perfect right angles on moons.

So, just what is going on? A question you as the reader, and Hutch as the protagonist will be asking throughout. Well, you do get your explanation by the end of the book even if, as I found it, not too satisfying but adequate.

I pretty much enjoyed this novel though, but it seemed like all the pieces didn’t quite fit together like they should have.

Some of the crisis that arise seem almost too much of the “oh, now we need life-threatening peril to spice up the book - um, okay - cue the dire situation.”

And we see the action from the perspective of Hutch, but I found she had little to no character growth throughout the book. I was kind of hoping for more, but I can’t fault McDevitt for this since it was not written as a character novel, and there is so much to like about jumping into a star system to find an floating space station abandoned for thousands of years - isn’t there?

So with that said, I will definitely check out more of McDevitt’s work. If you haven’t read any of his novels before I would suggest you do give him a go.

I mean abandoned alien space stations - how cool is that?

Terence says

Rating: 2.5 stars

Is there a requirement that a "hard" SF author can't write believable characters or dialog to save their life? Or, rather, considering the general level of education and IQ among that crowd, is it a conspiracy so that they can chortle over the nearly inevitable comment in any review of their books about the simplistic characters and amateurish dialog?

Well, no matter. I picked up a copy of *The Engines of God* at a library booksale for 50 cents so I can't complain too vociferously. I knew going in I'd probably be subjected to awful dialog and simplistic characters (sigh) but I'm a sucker for books like this that try to explain why our skies aren't overrun with happily self-replicating von Neumann machines (personally, I like Alistair Reynold's answer: there's a vast cosmic ecology full of predatory machine intelligences that keep each other in check, mostly).

The best I can say about this book is that it's reasonably enjoyable "mind candy."

Andreas says

Humanity has achieved starflight. Expeditions have found mysterious monuments from several civilizations. Most intriguing is the evidence of extinction events which have occurred repeatedly and independently on various worlds. We follow pilot Priscilla "Hutch" Hutchins and various archeologists and linguists as they try to solve the puzzle.

The plot is certainly engaging, and well laid out. The characters are well described, although some felt two dimensional. McDevitt takes a good stab at sense of wonder, but falls a bit short. I enjoyed *Engines of God*, and wanted to find out what happened, but I kept feeling as if it was lacking a certain something. The pivotal events were toned down to the level of the individual protagonists. This seemed to be intentional, but it detracted from the sense of awe that should have been engendered. The ambiance is also flawed. The book is set in a 2202 that seems awfully similar to 2002. Starships are flying, but everything else is either pretty much unchanged, science fiction boilerplate, or just plain undescribed. And could someone please explain why there just happen to be a couple of bottles of Chablis on board the shuttle at the end? Deux ex Pantry...

As a whole, this book disappoints because it is so frustratingly close to greatness. I shall perhaps look for McDevitt again, but not with any frantic sense of urgency.

<http://www.books.rosboch.net/?p=954>

Gary says

McDevitt's first Priscilla Hutchins novel is a sturdy, nicely paced archeological mystery. Scattered throughout the galaxy are alien relics left behind by beings known only as the Monument Makers, and the secret of their origin may herald a terrifying future disaster for mankind.

Personal relationships are not McDevitt's forte, as his clumsy handling of Priscilla's romantic life can attest. Thankfully, the search for the Monument Makers is a fascinating one, and the outcome offers sufficient spectacle and satisfying answers.

Peter Tillman says

Reread for the first time since God knows when. Very impressive book, better than I recalled. This was the first of the Academy series, and introduced Priscilla Hutchins, starship pilot, who loses two beaux in this book, one to a gruesome (but valorous) battle with alien fauna.

ENGINES gets mixed reviews, here and elsewhere. I liked it a lot. I'm going to borrow a bit from Russ Albery's review of CHINDI (Academy #3):

"One of the tricks that McDevitt uses to great effect is to break the reader's expectations around pacing. Most novels have a predictable tension structure, where suspense builds up to discovery that's always significant. McDevitt's books sometimes feel slow-paced to start with, partly since he doesn't always follow this structure. Instead, his suspense sometimes leads to nothing, and the timings of discoveries can be erratic and unpredictable. This echoes the way real science and real exploration work, but requires the book to provide enough space in which to embed moments of discovery. That space is taken up, as it would be in life, by interpersonal issues, deeper characterization, and (often petty) politics. When the technique doesn't work, McDevitt's books can feel a bit padded, but when it does work (as with Chindi), the pace is part of the atmosphere and effectiveness of the story."

McDevitt does a good job of drawing strong women characters. Here we have Hutch and Melanie Truscott, first a rival, later almost a friend, both interesting people that you would like to know. And he's very good at economically sketching even minor characters, who are seldom rendered as ciphers or stereotypes.

He gets mocked for the romance, but here's a minor character's haiku, for counter-evidence:

"If they look for me,
Say, she rides where comets go,
And outpaces light."

The one subplot that made no sense, and cost the book a half-star, was the truly crack-brained scheme to terraform Quruagua, an ice-age planet where the book's archaeologists are working against time. The terraformers' scheme involves massive thermonuclear weapons embedded in both polar ice-caps. It's hard to imagine how their detonation would make things *better*. Awfully hard on the native flora and fauna! I guess there wasn't much regulation, that far afield.....

So, strongly recommended for fans of archaeology in space and old fashioned interplanetary adventure. ENGINES clunks sometimes, but gets the job done. 4.2 stars.

Melissa McShane says

What bugs me about this book is that I read the sequel, Deepsix, first. That pretty much kills the mystery that unfolds in this book. McDevitt's greatest skill is his ability to weave a mystery into an action novel. The characters aren't stock, but they aren't outstanding either (the main character develops more in later books), and the point is really to experience alien cultures and try to work out what happened to the ones that disappeared or died out. This isn't just space adventure, it's archaeology in space, and as long as you aren't looking for hard SF or character-driven fiction, it's an extremely enjoyable adventure.

David says

This is a "hard science fiction" novel, with a well-defined plot and set of characters. The best thing this book has going for it, is its focus on archaeology, and the deciphering of clues from ancient alien artifacts. The entire story is a mystery, and even by the end of the book the puzzle is only partially solved. This, of course, allows the author to extend the story into sequels. So, this is the first book of The Academy series.

I especially enjoy science fiction books that contain unique, futuristic concepts. But there isn't much of that here. There is a giant space telescope, but there is only a hint as to its true purpose. There is faster-than-light space travel; but isn't that in many other novels? The only exceptional futuristic concept is the ... well, I am not going to add a spoiler here, but suffice it to say, we never learn what it really is all about.

The characters are pretty much one-dimensional, the dialog is not very interesting--almost humorless. If the archaeology had not been in the forefront of the story, the book would have lost all of its attraction. Will I continue to the second book in the series? I am not sure ...

Bradley says

Xenoarchaeology. On a grand scale.

McDevitt really does a fantastic job with vast worldbuilding and mystery when it comes to dead alien races, exploration, and working through the questions.

I'm particularly fond of all the expeditions. None of them are nuts but quite plausible and dangerous and deadly. And not everyone comes back from them. The realism is very nice.

Fortunately, however, this and the plotting and the focus on discovery is usually good enough to carry the tale over the characters. The characters are interesting enough but some of the descriptions come off as either bland or not quite right. The heroic parts and the action sequences are spot-on, while the romantic bits... well, I'm not coming to these books for the romance. :)

Fortunately, there's no outright cringe-worthy stuff here. Just fascinating brainy adventure. I'm looking forward to future huge developments. I can see them on the far horizon. :) You know... like massive catastrophe for humanity. :)

David says

The Earth is facing environmental catastrophe in the 23rd century. Humans have spread to other star systems, but generally not found a lot of Earth-like planets, and those they have found are already inhabited. A handful of intelligent alien races have been discovered, but all are primitive compared to humanity. Most alien races discovered, however, are long dead, and the most prominent is one that apparently traveled to other stars, as their monuments have been found across the galaxy.

Earth has generally taken a "hands off" approach to living natives, but as pressure mounts to begin terraforming habitable worlds as an escape plan, this "Prime Directive" morality begins to seem less desirable. There is an interesting reversal of the classic sci-fi trope, and subtle commentary on colonialism

and how we might justify it in the future, when an argument is made to colonize an inhabited planet "for the natives' own good." They are in the middle of a savage global war, and it is claimed that some of them have become aware of the existence of their alien watchers, and are begging for intervention. That technological aid and imposed peace would incidentally involve Earthlings resettling on their hosts' planet would be only a logical extension of a benevolent intervention...

This is a fairly hard SF novel that will appeal to fans of "big idea" SF, particularly if you like academic/scientist protagonists. Jack McDevitt gets compared a lot to Arthur C. Clarke in the blurbs for this book, and that's a fair comparison. Also an unfortunate one as far as I'm concerned, because like Clarke's science fiction, *The Engines of God* did little to stir any passion in this science fiction fan. It was a perfectly well written book, it was just dry and flat and even the high stakes did not truly engage my interest.

Gabrielle says

Archaeology in space! Archaeology in space!!!

Yup, that topic never fails to get me excited; in my very nerdy defence, that's what I got my BA in, and while I ended up working in a completely different field, I never lost my enthusiasm for it. So if you tell me there's a book about archaeologists in space, and you sprinkle some mystery about the lost alien civilization being studied, you check a lot of my "give this book to me now" boxes.

Set in the not-so-distant future (2202), "The Engines of God" opens with the kind of enigma nerds like me salivate all over: humanity has started to explore space, and has discovered, scattered around a few planets and moons, statues and monuments left behind by a now probably extinct alien species. While each of those structures is different, and inscribed with a unique form of language, they are all believed to be the product of the same civilization. An ongoing excavation of a huge temple complex on the planet Quraqua is jeopardized by a terraforming project seeking to melt that planet's ice caps in order to irrigate it, so that humanity can eventually relocate there, Earth's ecology having been damaged beyond repair. But what if the discoveries made by those archaeologists held the key to their species' survival?

Like most hard science fiction novels, "The Engines of God" suffers from prose that's on the dry side. The ideas are ambitious and wonderful, but you never get a true sense of atmosphere. I mean, the very idea of an abandoned alien temple complex should inspire so many feelings: awe, terror, fascination, ominousness... But the descriptions of the settings are so minimal that you never really build up those feelings, which is a shame. It must also be noted that people with zero prior knowledge of how weird and complicated archaeology is probably will scratch their heads a bit from time to time: if you have no idea what the Rosetta Stone is and why it was so crucial to Egyptologists, you will probably wonder why everyone is getting their panties in a twist about finding the alien version of that. I do love that McDevitt makes his xenoarchaeology very believable (to me, for what that's worth): his way of adapting an existing science to this speculative future setting rings perfectly true, with the described methods, terminology and specialties modified just so. In archaeology, the process of artifact preservation is actually really rare, and McDevitt turns that into the very existence of civilization being a rare occurrence, dependent on so many variables that need to have perfect timing to allow cultures to develop – making the discoveries of the Monuments all that more remarkable and significant.

The characters are sadly but predictably underdeveloped. There's also too many of them: I get that McDevitt wanted to make the team feel and sound realistic, and on a dig, there will be a ton of people, which does often result in a "too many cooks in the kitchen" situation. I'm happy to give him a thumbs up for realism, but from the uninitiated reader's perspective, it can feel overwhelming. McDevitt wrote a bunch more

Priscilla Hutchins books, so I can only hope she is more fleshed out as the series goes on, because in this one, I didn't learn much about her character – besides the fact that she is feisty and that her mother is very disappointed she won't settle down.

The topic of archaeological research (or any scientific research, really) being interrupted by big corporations who have a profit to make and shrug off science in the name of the almighty dollar is a topic that touches a nerve with me, so I got quite angry at the Kosmik folks and at the cavalier attitude towards the team working on Quraqua.

I always love finding little hints about when a sci-fi book was written embedded within the narrative: phones with screens (à la “Bladerunner”) and faxes (that actually work) totally give this book away as a product of the late 80's, early 90's. It's pretty adorable, in a charmingly retro sort of way, kind of like Bradbury's characters drinking malt milkshakes on Mars. I kept picturing the characters with the inadvisable, puffy hairdos everyone sported back in those days.

Despite it's flaws, I enjoyed “The Engines of God”. I will always be a sucker for archaeological mysteries and sci-fi, so I am ready to overlook clumsy treatments of silly romances if I have a good, brainy mystery to chew on. 3 and a half stars rounded up, and a great curiosity to see where McDevitt took this world and this character in the next book!

Scott Firestone says

I've managed to pick up half-a-dozen Jack McDevitt novels over the years, but never managed to read one until now. The Engines of God is one of his earliest novels, and it showcases what I love about science fiction, and what I hate.

It's a few hundred years in the future, and we've discovered monuments on planets and moons around the solar system. The book makes use of a few set-pieces to move scientists and archaeologists toward finding out what those monuments are and what they mean. We don't get a whole lot of answers, but I think those unfold in the following books.

The events are mostly interesting, with a highlight including a trip to an abandoned alien space station. A few things do ring untrue, such as how close two groups cut it on an alien planet. One group is scientists trying to dig out alien goodies, and the other group is terraformers waiting to wreck a planet (and those goodies) to make way for a new habitation for humans. They're overlapping each other to a dangerous degree, and it just didn't seem like something that would actually happen.

Another odd piece was a sequence involving crab-like creatures on a planet. It didn't seem to fit the rest of the narrative, and felt like something included solely to increase the “excitement.” It did, I suppose, but it just didn't work for me.

The worst thing is the characterization--and it's that thing I “hate” about so much science fiction. As a genre, science fiction is often full of wizz-bang ideas, but peopled with flat characters that have no personality or character growth. That's evident here. Again, it's one of McDevitt's early novels, so it's very possible he gets better at it. I'm just not super anxious to find out. I am curious about finding those answers teased in this book, so I'm sure I'll dive in at some point. But with increasing numbers of science fiction authors who manage to marry the cool ideas to great characters (Alastair Reynolds and James S.A. Corey, to name two), I have other options that sound better right now.

Ted says

I asked for recommendations for good sci fi and this was on the list. I can't say I agree.

Partly it's the setting - two hundred years in the future, but that odd sort of future which is just like 1995 with a couple of future-y things added. The telephones have video and there are faxes, but now they go faster than light. Are there really science-minded writers who think that the modern world is just like the early 19th century?

The lack of characterization is typical for science fiction, so I was willing to overlook it. The sheer stupidity of the characters, however .. Of course it's not their fault, the author made them do it.

As an example of what I mean, much of the third quarter of the book concerns our team of scientists being stranded in an uninhabited system. Their ship's main power source has failed and is gradually cooling. If a certain critical system is allowed to get too cold then the rest of the environmental controls shut down and the crew is doomed. The ship's pilot ponders this problem while she takes her morning hot shower. If only there were some source of heat!

M Hamed says

This one is frustrating

First of all .i hate it when when a male writer tries to decipher the female psyche .how would she translate the subtle hints and looks and touches.

unless he took it to street and made an a extensive survey.I won't buy it ,and I don't like it

And that is mainly why I don't like female lead. Written by male

Secondly.some assholes out there finds ok to summarize the fate of the entire cast of the book in half a page.to show us that in the grand scheme of things.all what you have just read doesn't really matter and to those I say

F. U.

Mbgile says

3+

Tom says

Quite a cool book, and it's only just the beginning of a series I am excited to read. It's an interstellar archaeological mystery, but also a futuristic procedural novel following the working lives of archaeologists, scientists, and auxillary crewmembers. I love this kind of thing (see also Julie Czerneda's *Species Imperative*

trilogy, which follows future biologists through their working lives).

The future McDevitt invents for humanity feels rather realistic, with tons of problems still existing on Earth, but there's nonetheless an overriding sense of optimism akin to *Star Trek*, which I appreciated a lot. The characters were all likeable, and became pretty memorable once the initial glut of people "on screen" got whittled down to the main players. I particularly liked the friendly(ish) rivalry between the main character Priscilla Hutchins, and the fiery bureaucrat Melanie Truscott.

The novel starts off with a tense episode on a long-uninhabited alien planet, involving a confrontation between the archaeologist heroes and an impatient terraforming company waiting to begin their work on that world. This section is excellent on its own, but it also serves to put some clues in place for a riveting mystery about enormous monuments in space, and some mysterious force taking out civilisations every 8000 years. In the latter half of the novel, we follow some of the characters from the first half as they chase the mystery down, and end up witnessing some pretty terrifying cosmic phenomena.

The only bit that felt a bit off-kilter from the rest of the book was a kind-of silly extended action sequence involving murderous alien crabs. It just felt superfluous, an attempt to include some action (and tragedy), when I was perfectly enthralled by the slow, leisurely uncovering of clues in dig sites and abandoned alien structures. The procedural stuff was far more up my alley than the action.

In the end we get a first glimpse at the terrifying force behind the disappeared civilisations, and I know it will be explored more in future books. It feels a bit familiar (see also *Mass Effect*, *Revelation Space*, etc) but I don't mind, it's a trope I kind of like in SF. I have to say, it did seem a bit contrived that they manage to track down this once-every-8000-year phenomenon with the tenuous evidence they had, and show up *just in time* to witness it in action. What was with that?

I'll end this review with another compliment, though: The book does a great job of peppering in dozens of excerpts from letters, encyclopedia entries, news headlines, translated alien poetry, and many other kinds of documents, between every chapter. I love this shit in SF books, and I hope there's more of it in the rest of the series. It feels like you're a member of the Academy, having access to all this correspondence and information, and getting to piece it together to increase your knowledge of these characters and this world.

Great fun, and I'm so thrilled to know there's 6 more books in this series!

Kevin Kelsey says

Even though I had read books 3-6 in the series previously, this novel which effectively sets up the entire universe of the story, still had me on the edge of my seat.

Nobody does xenoarchaeology like Jack McDevitt, yet somehow the massive scale of the story never retracted from fully realized characters.

It drags slightly in 3rd quarter, but massively delivers in the 4th. This guy can write one hell of a conclusion.

Ethan says

This sounds like something I would love (ET archeology! Space travel!) and McDevitt must be popular

enough to take up a lot of space on the bookstore shelves, but I just couldn't get into it. I'm not entirely sure why. It could be, as some other reviewers have noted, that the world circa 2200 seems way too much like the world circa 1995 (when this was written). Also, the whole novel and the archeologists therein seems to apply a model of a society's progress to the entire universe based on the history of Western Europe. While this type of thing happens a lot in science fiction (I'm looking at you, Star Trek...), I'd like to think archeologists in two hundred years would have moved beyond such a simplistic model, as, I think, archeologists already had by the 1990's. It seems like what an unimaginative engineer in 1950 would have thought archeology is all about. Lastly, all of the characters are flat, unremarkable people who I just didn't care about even though they were engaged in death defying activities. Even Hutch isn't as interesting as one would expect from a starship pilot. Maybe I missed something, but this just didn't work for me.

Clark Hallman says

The Engines of God, by Jack McDevitt, is a powerful and fascinating science fiction novel by the Campbell Award and Nebula Award winning science fiction writer (and one of my favorite authors). A group of twenty-third-century scientists excavate and study extinct civilizations on planets in extremely distant solar systems. FTL space travel and many other scientific advances have enabled the discovery and exploration of these planets where alien civilizations once flourished. Unfortunately, only material remnants of those civilizations remain to tell their stories. However, finding and excavating those alien ruins, in unpredictable and deadly habitats, is difficult and perilous. Also, restoring, translating and interpreting the alien artifacts to extrapolate descriptions of the alien civilizations is extremely difficult, and political and corporate expectations and restrictions add to the difficulties. As usual, McDevitt develops a diverse and engaging group of fearless characters in this book. They endure extreme hardships and life-threatening incidents, and some characters do not survive. Gradually the scientists perceive a cyclical pattern of destruction in the universe and a captivating mystery investigation unfolds for the reader. This is an astonishing book, with great characters, a well-written and intellectually-satisfying plot, life-or-death struggles, and exotic environments. I was totally enthralled by it and I highly recommend it to anyone, but especially to those who like science fiction. Another good thing about this book is that it is the first book of McDevitt's "Priscilla Hutchins" series. There are five more "Hutch" books in print now and one more is scheduled for release in November 2013. I am eager to read all of them very much.
