Thank you very much, Allister! You’ve given me a lot to think about, and I really appreciate it.

Regarding the “point” of the book, there are two. (I have sometimes considered that this may be one too many, but didn’t really have it in me to break the novel in half.)

1. The novel is a theodicy; an attempt to grapple with the problem of evil. The idea arose in the months after my daughter suffered a disabling brain injury. I found myself in the unusual position of - despite coming from a fully nonreligious, Dawkins-reading background - attempting to explain why a loving God would still construct a universe with such suffering.

The book tries to present a multifaceted answer. Firstly, God wants it this way to serve his own ends (of which, ironically, he himself is not even fully aware). But more importantly, while he looks omnipotent to us, the reality is that he’s budget-constrained, easily distracted…as Russ101 says in the prologue, he’s got a lot going on.

This is where the novel breaks with traditional theodicies (I think – I must admit I haven’t read any). By “banal-ifying” the divine – dragging God down to our world of instant coffee and petty office politics – my goal is to present an unusual theological theory that makes sense to my community of science-brained nonbelievers.

Aside from being the reason why Steve’s world is so similar to ours, my goal forces the novel to walk a fine line between apology and blasphemy. I guess you picked up on a bit of that in Chapter 10 (thanks; I’ll dial it back), but in my mind the riskiest bit is probably the direct Deuteronomy 20 reference in Old Testament Diplomacy. This is probably the closest I come to breaking the fourth wall - but hey, I haven’t seen any other contemporary thinkers try to seriously address why “save alive nothing that breathes” would be in the divinely inspired Word of God, and why that God might be a decent guy regardless.

So, yes, while I am trying to “write something wildly entertaining and zany but with a sharp satirical edge”, I’m also trying to accomplish something deeper – and if that didn’t come across in the draft, I would love your suggestions!

2. The novel is also about realpolitik - for whatever reason, I had it on my mind while writing. Again and again throughout the book, characters start out with noble idealism, only to have their naïveté shattered by the harsh realities of power dynamics. This culminates in the most idealistic conflict-avoiders (Xavier’s Anarchists) ending up under the absolute control of the most natural manipulative political operator (Allen). I wanted to show the realities of pragmatic power politics as not just universal, but hyper-universal, infecting not just all human societies, but even the Gods themselves.

Given all that, do you have any thoughts about how I can better accomplish my goals without becoming preachy or losing entertainment value?

I was thinking about your comment regarding how we never see people being “good”. It’s a tricky question, eh? What does it mean to be good in a world where the people are literally designed by the Gods to be violent?

Of the three second-generation human characters, I consider two of them to be “good”: Filbert and Xavier.

Xavier spends a large portion of the book being, by far, the most powerful human in the world. His dad is killed, his country is invaded, and he briefly ponders using his powers to wipe out his adversaries and essentially dominate the world. Instead, though, he works very hard and leverages every asset he has – the ASIC, his inherited leadership position and his personal connection to the Gods – to break the cycle of violence. After Xavier fully steps into his leadership role, you’ll notice that there’s never any violence in The Anarchy again (I think). That’s pretty good!

Filbert, being a bit more of a struggling everyman, has to break the cycle of violence twice (sorry Filbert). I originally had his story a bit more fleshed out, but most of his arc was truncated in the Great Viewpoint Character Reduction of March 2025. Being so close to power, he’s close to the violence, but a generally unwilling participant. Ultimately, it takes an almost-Buddhist ego-death experience to make him finally see the light and sail into the sunset.

Of course, Filbert doesn’t end up with any power. Realpolitik, you know. But my goal with his character is to show how ordinary people (without nanoscale manufacturing facilities) can still choose to step away from it all and find love/meaning outside of the power struggle.

Anyway, all this “goodness” stuff was a lot less fun to write than the torture scenes, etc., so I take your point that the moral balance of the manuscript is probably somewhat unbalanced! Definitely open to suggestions.

Thanks, Allister! Chloe is fortunate enough to have a wonderful and extremely dedicated mother, so she’s doing much better than her original prognosis. She smiles a lot these days, and occasionally even chortles. She’s very cute.

Not to interrupt your pondering, but I thought I’d add a bit more on the penal colony backstory: The picture I have in my mind is that Elba is another breeding experiment. The architects of that society populated it with a bunch of “criminally ambitious” males (including Murdoch and Allen), put FEDSEC in charge, and have spent the millennia since creating docile descendants from their DNA. Steve and Gabe are products of their work – intelligent but non-threatening academics.

Most of the original seed population has long since been “deleted”, but Murdoch and Allen, having made themselves essential very early on, live on in perpetual torpor.

After a hundred thousand years, the outside world has largely forgotten about Elba, and vice versa. History has become myth, the truth remains only in Mum’s old book and in the increasingly fuzzy memories of Murdoch and Allen. I suspect that even FEDSEC barely knows why they’re doing what they’re doing anymore. So when Sirius disappears, it genuinely takes the entire society by surprise. The Dyson story rises organically, the people really do want to make contact (and can barely remember why they’re not allowed to go to space), the government really does allow the construction of an interstellar radio, and Murdoch and Allen capitalize on the moment of opportunity to – you got it - dupe Steve into helping them escape.

I don’t think Murdoch and Allen fully understand the phenomenon either, but they’re pretty sure it’s their own people causing it.

I didn’t really want to clutter the main narrative with all these details, but they’re sitting here on the shelf if you can find good spots to slot them in! While The Book of Steve is intended to be a “novel of ideas,” it still needs to convincingly wear sci-fi clothing so I’m very much interested in making it work within the genre.