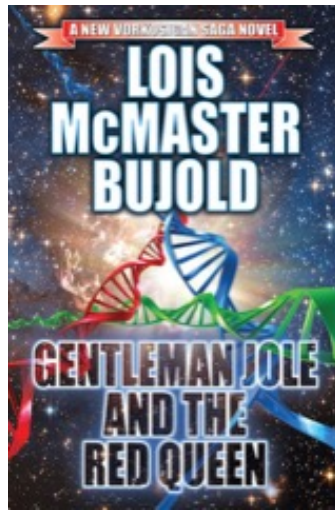




The *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen* Reader's Group Discussion Guide

by Conor Small



Welcome to the Reader's Group Guide for Lois McMaster Bujold's latest Vorkosigan Saga installment *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen*. The series takes place in the far future where mankind can travel faster than light and has spread throughout several star systems including Barrayar, the Beta System, and Cetaganda. The Vorkosigan Saga centers, for the most part, on the Vorkosigan family and their immediate relations, so each installment almost always features some, though not all, of this cast. *Gentleman Jole and the Red Queen* can be read as a free-standing volume, but nevertheless features a number of the series' best-loved characters including Vicereine Cordelia Naismith Vorkosigan, and, in a supporting role, her son Miles Vorkosigan. The novel opens on the Vicereine's return to her planet Sergyar (one of Barrayar's colonies) three years after her husband Viceroy Aral Vorkosigan passed away; her longtime friend and ally Oliver Jole, now Admiral of Sergyar Fleet, meets and welcomes her home.

1. In the series' previous installments, Jole was Aral Vorkosigan's *aide-de-camp* and only a very minor character. Miles, and by extension readers, saw him in passing and knew little

about him. Do you like his shift to a lead character in *Gentleman Jole*? Did your opinion of him change from that of previous books? Do his recollections and details of past events add to the story?

2. In the first chapter of *Gentleman Jole*, Cordelia reveals to the admiral that she and Aral had frozen sperm and egg samples for safekeeping years ago, just in case either spouse passed away suddenly. Now, as she heals from the loss of Aral, Cordelia has decided to utilize those genetic materials with the advanced *in vitro* biotechnology on Sergyar to have more children (specifically daughters) and to retire from her role as Vicereine. Why did Cordelia wait to have more children? And how will this decision affect the rest of the Vorkosigan family? Have you ever lost a close relative in your own family? How did people react? Does that reflect Cordelia's decision?
3. Jole and Cordelia also reveal to readers that Aral and Jole had an intimate relationship in the past, one that Cordelia became part of when Jole came to Sergyar as admiral. So, after sharing her own decisions, she surprises the admiral with more news: along with her eggs are "enucleated ova" (14), leftover genetic material that, although it carries her DNA, can be used for another same-sex couple's offspring. Along with Sergyar's biotechnology, Aral and Jole can use the ova to, in effect, have children. What opportunities then open up to Jole? Seeing as he's never had much of a personal life outside the structured Barrayaran military, why might he hesitate to pursue them? What would a life outside the military look like for him?
4. This story, Bujold said on a Baen podcast, is not an action or adventure story like many of the previous Vorkosigan books. Instead, it is a "biology-based story." With that in mind, Cordelia is 76 years old and Jole is nearly 50, so both are at the midpoint in their lives (Cordelia having an extended lifetime because of her Betan genetics). They now have opportunities to retire from the military and to start different kinds of lifestyles. With that kind of mature conflict replacing the blaster battles and villains of previous books, what genre would you say *Gentleman Jole* is? Is it a different kind of Vorkosigan book altogether? What would you do in the face of such opportunities?
5. After catching up with Jole, Cordelia and the admiral spend increasing amounts of time together and, on a weekend sailing trip, begin a romantic relationship. Complications ensue, including a disagreement about the publicity of their relationship: Jole wants to stay discreet,

while Cordelia scoffs and carries on without subterfuge. Considering both their Imperial roles and Barrayaran pasts, which lover seems wiser? Miles does not know about his father and Jole's romantic involvement; should they enlighten him? If you were in Miles's position, how would you react?

6. Many supporting characters are younger, with huge ambitions and careers that are just starting: Lieutenant Kaya Vorinnis, the Cetagandan cultural attaché Mikos ghem Soren, Cordelia's press officer Blaise Gatti, and even citizens of Sergyar's capital Kareenburg. All have doubtlessly grown up hearing stories about Aral, Cordelia, and Miles Vorkosigan. Jole as well, given his proximity as Aral's *aide-de-camp* and close ties to the family, is treated with the same reverence as those three. How do these leaders affect the up-and-comers? Why might some decisions, like Jole and Cordelia's relationship or their efforts for children, astonish or outrage those younger generations? Do you have a mentor figure? Have they ever made decisions that seemed difficult and/or unsavory?
7. The title of the novel refers to Admiral Jole's and Vicereine Vorkosigan's nicknames: Jole's for his prole background and apparent lack of private life, Cordelia's for her political reputation, as an allusion to the *Alice in Wonderland* character who famously decapitated her enemies, the color of her hair, and a nod to biologist Matt Ridley's theory of The Red Queen (regarding evolution and sex). These monikers carry associations about each character's history and temperament, and make them seem larger-than-life. How do these titles fit in with the book's other patterns and features? Are the nicknames fitting or accurate? Do they reflect your opinion about both characters? Have you ever been given a nickname? Was it fitting or unfair? Did it tell you something about how people thought of you?