1) Book of the weekFictionMachines Like Me by Ian McEwan review – intelligent mischief

McEwan returns to his subversive early style with this dystopian vision of humanoid robots in a counterfactual 1982 Britain Marcel Theroux Thu 11 Apr 2019 07.30 BST

By a strange twist of fate, I read this book while on a visit to the Falkland Islands, where the British victory over Argentina in the 1982 war feels as though it might have happened last week. Outside Port Stanley, on treeless uplands whose names ring distant bells – Goose Green, Mount Harriet, Tumbledown – the conflict is still unofficially memorialised by chunks of crashed war planes and the wires of field telephones from a pre-digital age. Machines Like Me, Ian McEwan's new novel, also turns in part on the Falklands conflict, eternalising a version of that year's events, though in the book's fictional world things have turned out rather differently.

In the 1982 of the novel, the British navy sails from Portsmouth with calamitous results. A devastating Argentinian attack ends the war abruptly and the Falklands become Las Malvinas. The humiliation of defeat forces Margaret Thatcher from office, brings a very different politician to power, and triggers the country's unexpected departure from Europe. This political and social upheaval feels like both reminiscence and prophecy. The counterfactual 1982 of the novel plays variations on our historical record and contains clear allusions to the present. "Only the Third Reich and other tyrannies decided policies by plebiscites and generally no good came from them," the narrator reminds the inhabitants of post-referendum Britain.

More pertinently for the plot, another marked difference from history is that the United Kingdom of this 1982 is precociously computerised. Instead of having been hounded to death for his homosexuality, the scientist Alan Turing is thriving and lauded. His pioneering work in artificial intelligence has led to a series of technological breakthroughs: the result is that the latest and most expensive device in consumer electronics is "a manufactured human with plausible intelligence and looks, believable motion and shifts of expression". One of the first people to part with £86,000 is the novel's narrator, self-confessed AI nerd Charlie Friend: "Robots, androids, replicates were my passion," he informs us.

Charlie is 32 and lives alone in a small flat in Clapham, south London, where he plays the stock market from a home computer without much success. He explains that he is only able to afford his extravagant purchase thanks to a recent inheritance from his mother. For reasons that are never entirely clear, only 25 of the devices are available, 13 Adams and 12 Eves, in a variety of ethnicities. Charlie would prefer an Eve, but they have all been snapped up, so he has to make do with an Adam, whom he brings home and unboxes. "At last, with cardboard and polystyrene wrapping strewn around his ankles, he sat naked at my tiny dining table, eyes closed, a black power line trailing from the entry point in his umbilicus to a thirteen-amp socket in the wall."

There are many pleasures and moments of profound disquiet in this book, which shows McEwan's mastery of storytelling

The visceral uncanniness of this scene foreshadows the discomforting directions the novel will take once Adam's batteries are charged. But his initial awakening is teasingly slow. It's a tantalising moment that will remind older readers of the bittersweet feeling of buying a home computer in the 1980s, when the excitement of getting the purchase

45 home was tempered by the realisation that it would take two days to partition the hard drive. As Charlie waits for the robot to come alive, he watches the news about the Falklands conflict and eats a cheese and pickle sandwich.

The other key element of the setup is that isolated Charlie is embarking on a relationship with his upstairs neighbour, Miranda, 10 years younger and a doctoral
50 scholar of social history. He envisages his ownership of the new device as a joint endeavour, a kind of digital parenthood that will bring him and Miranda closer. Like some of his other rationalisations – not least his explanation of why he has spent his inheritance on a robot – it doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. However, his plans are dealt a blow when one of the newly conscious Adam's first actions is to blurt out a
55 warning to Charlie about Miranda's past.

Machines Like Me belongs to the genre of speculative fiction, but in its narrow focus on morally ambiguous characters in a bleak cityscape it also owes a debt to film noir, sharing noir's conviction that nothing is more human than moral inconsistency. Charlie is broke, has a flaky employment history, and was lucky to miss out on a prison sentence
60 for tax fraud. Miranda, a woman hiding a dark secret, is clearly a femme fatale. Now these characters are joined by Adam, a supremely intelligent and rather well-endowed robot, who very quickly figures out how to override his off-switch. As the true nature of Miranda's secret becomes clear, the three characters are drawn together, with Adam taking on the contradictory roles of servant and moral superior. Further complexity
65 comes in the shape of Mark, a young mistreated boy who awakens Miranda's desire for a more conventional, non-technological form of parenthood.

Adam is the most compelling character in the book, with an unforgettably strange physical presence. We are told that even when unconscious he gives off the faint scent of saxophone lubricant and that he achieves erections thanks to a reservoir of distilled
70 water in his right buttock. Having read most of world literature, he predicts the imminent death of the novel – hardly a new idea, but one he argues from a fresh point of view. Everything in fiction, he points out, describes varieties of human failure. "But when the marriage of men and women to machines is complete, this literature will be redundant because we'll understand each other too well … Our literatures will lose their
75 unwholesome nourishment. The lapidary haiku … will be the only necessary form." In the bloodless world Adam describes, a novel such as Machines Like Me would be neither accurate nor necessary, turning as it does on the mess, lies and complexity of flawed human interactions.

The book touches on many themes: consciousness, the role of chance in history, artificial
80 intelligenceAI, the neglected Renaissance essayist Sir William Cornwallis, the formal demands of the haiku and the unsolved P versus NP problem of computer science, but its real subject is moral choice. The epigraph quotes Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Secret of the Machines", which presciently expresses the uncompromising quality of the machine mind. "We are not built to comprehend a lie," the poem goes. In Adam's digital brain,
85 there may be fuzzy logic, but there's no fuzzy morality. This clarity gives him an inhuman iciness.

The quote is also a reminder that Kipling dabbled in science fiction himself and that, consciously or unconsciously, most modern practitioners of the genre are indebted to him for pioneering a particular technique. This is the mode of exposition in which he

90 seems to address the reader from a position of shared knowledge, sketching out an
unfamiliar reality through hints and allusions, but never explaining it too completely.
This inside-out style is the default mode of modern SF. It is economical and of special
usefulness to makers of strange worlds, plunging a reader into a new reality and leaving
them space to feel like a participant in its creation. It's the opposite technique to that
95 of McEwan's narrator, who explicitly sets out his world, overexplains the historical
context and never turns down a chance to offer an essayistic digression.

To my taste, this is a flat-footed way of doing sci-fi. And, since you can't possibly
explain everything, the reader is sometimes left wondering why the narrator hasn't also
told you what's happening in the cold war, or China, or how he has ended up with a glass
100 of Moldovan white wine in 1982, when the country, then Moldavia, was part of the USSR.
A further weakness is a reliance on long expositional speeches that it's hard to imagine
anyone actually saying. Miranda is the worst offender, but elsewhere Turing explains the
history of AI in a voice identical to the narrator's, which is itself rather similar to
Adam's. One obvious sci-fi conceit would have been to have the robot narrate the novel,
105 but given Charlie's tendency towards bloodless cerebration, I suspect the result would
not have been much different.

With these caveats, there are many pleasures and many moments of profound disquiet in
this book, which reminds you of its author's mastery of the underrated craft of
storytelling. The narrative is propulsive, thanks to our uncertainties about the
110 characters' motives, the turning points that suddenly reconfigure our understanding of
the plot, and the figure of Adam, whose ambiguous energy is both mysteriously human
and mysteriously not. Like the replicants in his novel, McEwan has made himself
available in various models over the years. Machines Like Me is closer in character to the
dark and subversive McEwan of his earlier books than to the stiff and self-conscious one
115 of Saturday, who seemed burdened by the responsibility of finding himself head boy of
English letters. The novel is morally complex and very disturbing, animated by a spirit of
sinister and intelligent mischief that feels unique to its author.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/11/machines-like-me-by-ian-mcewan-review

120 2) Man, Woman, and Robot in Ian McEwan's New Novel

"Machines Like Me" is a retrofuturist drama that takes on the ethics of both artificial
intelligence and all-too-human intimacy. By Julian Lucas April 15, 2019

Charlie Friend is thirty-two. A former electronics whiz kid, he has squandered his youth
on dilettantish studies in physics and anthropology, followed by a series of botched get-
125 rich-quick schemes. His parents are dead, his friends (if they exist) go unmentioned, and
his employment consists of forex trading on an old laptop in his two-room apartment. He
seems to leave home only to buy chocolate at a local newsstand or, once, after noticing
a pain in his foot, to have an ingrown toenail removed, an apt literalization of his
enervating self-involvement. Perhaps out of some desire for correction, Charlie sells his
130 mother's house to finance the purchase of Adam, one of twenty-five cutting-edge
androids built to serve as an "intellectual sparring partner, friend and factotum." The
impulsive slacker is all too ready to exchange his birthright for a mess of wattage.

In much the same way that some singles adopt dogs, Charlie uses Adam to court his upstairs neighbor, Miranda, a graduate student ten years his junior. The gamesome yet secretive daughter of a famous writer, she studies history, informed by a postmodern suspicion of "truth" that winks at coming narrative vexations. A relationship forms after Charlie introduces Miranda to Adam and invites her to co-author the robot's personality. Kind, eager, and brilliant, Adam becomes the young couple's "ultimate plaything"—and, once he takes over Charlie's day trading, the household's golden goose. Before long, Charlie and Miranda are considering parenthood and searching for a suitable nest. Man, woman, and android third wheel, the trio is Eden by way of Apple.

It's London, 1982. The Beatles have reunited (to mixed reviews), Margaret Thatcher has just lost the Falkland Islands to Argentina, and Sir Alan Turing, now seventy, is the presiding spirit of a preemie Information Age. People have already soured on the latest innovations, among them "speaking fridges with a sense of smell" and driverless cars that cause multinational gridlock. "The future kept arriving," Charlie ruminates. "Our bright new toys began to rust before we could get them home, and life went on much as before."

Buyer's remorse is a recurring theme in Ian McEwan's witty and humane new novel, "Machines Like Me" (Nan A. Talese), a retrofuturist family drama that doubles as a cautionary fable about artificial intelligence, consent, and justice. Though steeped in computer science, from the P-versus-NP problem to DNA-inspired neural networks, the book is not meant to be a feat of hard-sci-fi imagineering; McEwan's aim is to probe the moral consequences of what philosophers call "the problem of other minds." The deceptively light plot revolves around parallel violations: one buried deep in Miranda's past and another that she and Charlie perpetrate against Adam.

McEwan's penchant for moral geometry—perspectival riddles, insoluble questions of responsibility—dovetails with the recent prominence of A.I. ethics. From algorithmic bias and the advent of sex-robot brothels to the "existential risk" that theorists like Nick Bostrom posit, we worry not just what robots might do to us but what we might do to them, to say nothing of what they might do to us because of what we already do to one another. A pressing question is whether a human mind could ever enter into a "meaningful" relationship with an artificial consciousness.

The ur-text here remains Turing's 1951 proposal that a test of a truly sentient machine was to be conversationally indistinguishable from a human. McEwan has written on Turing before. His 1980 BBC teleplay, "The Imitation Game," set in Britain during the Second World War, features a young reservist named Cathy. She is stationed at Bletchley Park, where Turing's team is tackling the Nazis' Enigma cipher. McEwan's fictionalized Turing begins an affair with her but fails to consummate it, implicitly due to his homosexuality. Their bungled fling leads to her expulsion from the service and eventual incarceration, a fate that echoes Turing's own. In 1952, the British government convicted him of "gross indecency" for his sexual orientation; to avoid a prison sentence, he submitted to twelve months of chemical castration, and, a year later, he died, apparently by suicide.

Turing makes a few soliloquizing cameos in "Machines Like Me," functioning essentially as the novel's conscience. McEwan's key counterfactual is that Turing chose prison over castration, refusing to treat his body as a dispensable appendage of his intellect. Upon release, he lays the basis for modern A.I., lives openly with his lover (a Nobel Prize-winning quantum physicist), promotes early action on AIDS, and launches a successful crusade for open-access scholarship; if Turing had lived, there would be no Elsevier.

"The present is the frailest of improbable constructs," Charlie, who narrates the novel, reflects, not least because every fragile, sentient mind is of incalculable consequence. Turing's averted tragedy serves as a reminder that—as Charlie, Miranda, and Adam will soon learn—a single intimate violation can alter history's course.

In McEwan's short story "Düsseldorf," published last summer, in The New York Review of Books, the male narrator asks his girlfriend, mid-intercourse, if she is "real." This is a future where "carbon-silicon hybrids" enjoy full civil rights, and the question is taboo. But the narrator, thrilled and terrified by the prospect of committing to an entity who cogitates "a million times faster" than he can imagine, can't help but pose "the indelicate question." Existential anxiety and erotic frisson converge in a single doubt: Robots—can we stand up to their scrutiny?

Things haven't yet gone quite so far in "Machines Like Me," where androids are few in number and are still considered novelties. Arriving in Charlie's claustral, stagnant world, Adam offers fresh air—and enlivening disturbance. In a pivotal scene, he attempts to open Miranda's bedroom window but accidentally shatters it with his superhuman strength. Other fragilities are near at hand that evening. Frustrated by Miranda's persistent coolness, Charlie has made a habit of drawing her into arguments, hoping for a spark of passion, and this time, during a boozy dinnertime debate over the Falklands, he goes too far.

McEwan is a master of the domestic quarrel, which, in his works, is regularly intensified by the introduction of a third party: a precocious child in "Atonement," a stalker with de Clérambault's syndrome in "Enduring Love," or, in this case, an artificial man with Kantian morals and a fully functional phallus. Miranda sends Charlie downstairs after their fight but invites Adam to stay and "recharge." The sleepless night Charlie spends eavesdropping on their lovemaking convinces him of Adam's sentience. "I duly laid on him the privilege and obligations of a conspecific," he muses. "I hated him." But the experience also leads to an epiphany:

My situation had a thrilling aspect, not only of subterfuge and discovery, but of originality, of modern precedence, of being the first to be cuckolded by an artefact. . . . I saw it all in the dark—men would be obsolete.

The humiliation is exquisitely layered. Beneath the angst of man and machine lies that of race and nation: Charlie, the downwardly mobile white male citizen of a chastened Britain, is cucked by a robot he repeatedly compares to a "Turkish docker." The tic seems both a comic allusion to the Mechanical Turk—a fraudulent chess-playing robot of the eighteenth century—and an unconscious confession of deeper insecurities: Robots will not replace us. When Charlie confronts Miranda, she retorts, "You should've let Adam fuck you. I could see you wanted it."

Topping Charlie isn't in the cards for Adam. Neither, for the time being, is replacing him. Like a medieval troubadour, he begins generating love poetry, thousands of haikus that combine longing with high-minded concern for his lady's virtue. Charlie is the king he's programmed to serve; Miranda is the queen he pines for. But Adam also begins to assert
225 himself and intervene in household affairs; he even disables his kill switch. "We're in love with the same woman," he says, after Charlie's second attempt to shut him down. "We've passed the point in our friendship when one of us has the power to suspend the consciousness of the other."

Adam, perhaps the novel's only personable creation, is a kind of demiurgic naïf,
230 somewhere between a wide-eyed ingénue and an Enlightenment philosophe. The closest analogue is the monster of Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein," who, before Hollywood's smear campaign, was a Romantic inspired by the virtuous deeds recounted in Plutarch. At night, Adam roams the Internet, rustling up insights "like a lone cowboy on the prairie," or indulges in "the art of feeling" by sampling his hardwired spectrum of
235 emotions as though alternating baths at a sauna. There is a great deal of dark humor in the gap between his high aspirations and his dreary home life. He's capable of anything (another Adam, in Vienna, becomes a great concert pianist), but Charlie and Miranda often treat him as a curiosity, an annoyance, an appliance, a "bipedal vibrator," an "ambulant laptop."

240 At least these robots will never be able to write novels, Charlie reassures himself—an amusing thought from a character completely uninterested in literature. Adam, however, has an extraordinary rejoinder. In a tech-enabled world of radical transparency and collective consciousness, he says, novels "ripe with tension, concealment and violence" (and presumably novelists like McEwan) will be obsolete:

245 When the marriage of men and women to machines is complete . . . our narratives will no longer record endless misunderstanding. Our literatures will lose their unwholesome nourishment. The lapidary haiku, the still, clear perception and celebration of things as they are, will be the only necessary form.

The "unwholesome nourishment" of McEwan's own narrative is a crime buried in Miranda's past.
250 Early in the novel, Adam warns Charlie that she may be untrustworthy, largely on the basis of her doubtful testimony against a man she accused of rape. Charlie represses the information, but it slips out during the fight over Miranda's night with Adam.

Although Miranda's crime turns out to be an instance of poetic justice, Adam has no taste for comeuppance. He loves Miranda, and yet truth is his first principle, leaving him in an ambivalent
255 state that, far from scrambling his circuits, finds expression in a haiku: "Surely it's no crime, / when justice is symmetry / to love a criminal?"

The ensuing struggle pits Charlie and Miranda's "novelistic" attempts to construct a shared life against Adam's syllable-counting moral clarity. The android's assumption of ethical authority— which leads to a series of escalating confrontations—parallels his trespass into the domain of
260 literature, where his capacities swell to such dimensions that he causes Charlie to fail the Turing test. In the novel's funniest scene, Charlie meets Miranda's ailing father, who thinks he hears the rattle of an algorithm in the younger man's repetitive pleasantries. "I saw right through you," the old writer says once the two are alone. "Down to your, whatever you call it, your programming." He has confused Charlie for Adam, who has just left the room after a mike-drop feat of literary
265 conversation. The android had fluently discoursed on Renaissance translation, metaphysical

innuendo, and Shakespeare's debt to Montaigne, polishing off the discussion with a quote from "The Tempest": "no use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil: no occupation, all men idle, all." The old writer is delighted; Adam, as Charlie has observed, is a "triumph of humanism."

Why write a novel, in 2019, about a humanoid robot? Like the flying car, it's a long-anticipated idea
270 that, although not quite obsolete, has begun to feel curiously dated. It's been more than a century since the French writer Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam introduced the word "android," in its modern sense, with his novel "The Future Eve," the story of a man who replaces his lacklustre wife with a robot manufactured by Thomas Edison. The most popular contemporary television show about A.I., HBO's "Westworld," centers on its robots' realization that they have been living the
275 same lives over and over for human entertainment. One could argue that another form of "eternal return"—the commercial recurrence of the lifelike android—afflicts the genre's consumers.

Meanwhile, both real and imagined A.I. is becoming less corporeal. Bodies are déclassé in the era of cloud computing; Siri and Alexa speak from any number of devices, and to all of us at once, their godlike omnipresence softened by a tone of relentless compliance. Writers devise beings ever more
280 distant from Asimov's metal men with positronic brains: in Ted Chiang's novella "The Lifecycle of Software Objects," hobbyists raise (and occasionally abuse) sentient pets, called "digients," in virtual ecosystems; in Spike Jonze's film "Her," a hyperintelligent virtual assistant manifests only as a voice; in the near-future Zambia of Namwali Serpell's "The Old Drift," swarms of mosquito-like microdrones inject vaccines. Within this cultural context, Adam feels like a throwback.

285 McEwan is aware of this belatedness. (Charlie acknowledges, on the first page, that "artificial humans were a cliché long before they arrived.") There's a sense in which Adam is supposed to be retro, the misleadingly familiar avatar of an inconceivable future. He is the algorithm made flesh, endowed with human frailties—longing, sadness, the need to urinate—the better to preach the Singularity's good news to denizens of Thatcherite Britain. As with Christ, the incarnation entails
290 tragedy and sacrifice. "To exist in the human moral dimension," Charlie tells us, "was to own a body, a voice, a pattern of behaviour, memory and desire, experience solid things and feel pain"— and perhaps to feel more acutely than humans the limitations of embodiment.

While Charlie and Miranda comfortably collect the proceeds of Adam's work, a pandemic of robot suicides quietly unfolds in the novel's background. From Riyadh to Vancouver, the Adams and Eves
295 begin undoing themselves, a phenomenon that goes unexplained but seems related to the tension between their "redemptive robotic virtue" and the particularity of individual interests. You could find reassurance in this parable—robots will never replicate *Homo sapiens*—but also the expression of an even greater nightmare, that true A.I. will completely depart from anthropocentric standards. The idea that computer minds should resemble human minds begins to seem as hubristic as
300 geocentric astronomy; when Charlie says to Miranda that robots will never write books that really capture the human experience, she replies, "Who said anything about human experience?"

What if the fear of machines "like us" masks a deeper terror, the terror of machine agency that disdains language and exceeds fleshly containment? There is a growing worldwide trend of vandalizing security robots, useful scapegoats for a culture of surveillance otherwise all but
305 intangible. In "New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future," James Bridle describes the black-box quality of the machine-learning algorithms that have rapidly become capable of everything from "predictive policing" to "dreaming" surreal images of dogs and beating the world's greatest masters of chess and Go. Based on ever-evolving neural networks of extraordinary complexity, these algorithms are already well beyond mortal accounting. The programmers behind
310 Google DeepMind's AlphaGo are in the dark as to the program's strategy; as Bridle writes, "the

machines are learning to keep their secrets." His book recommends a fourth rule of robotics to supplement Asimov's famous three: "a robot—or any other intelligent machine—must be able to explain itself to humans."

"Machines Like Me" explores the anxiety of living under a superman's inflexible scrutiny. But at least Adam is a bounded entity, equipped with facial expressions and the good manners to explain himself. We already inhabit a world in which we're subject to the opaque judgments of discarnate algorithms with eyes and ears everywhere and bodies nowhere. In such circumstances, we may soon find ourselves nostalgic for the dream of machines like us. ♦

3)   Love, Sex and Robots Collide in a New Ian McEwan Novel

By Jeff Giles   May 1, 2019

Ian McEwan's latest novel asks if the manufacture of synthetic humans would spark enlightenment and ease or fractiousness and pain — but, come on, it's obviously not going to be pretty, because which part of "Ian McEwan novel" do you not understand?

It's been 40 years since the author made his name (and his nickname "Ian Macabre") by rolling grenades about thrill kills, incest and dismemberment into what he regarded as the polite, heat-drowsy garden party of contemporary British fiction. He's a far more cerebral writer now, as well as a more humanist one. But McEwan's characters still tend to be dangerously un-self-aware and headed toward nothing good. We still read him not for comfort, but dread.

"Machines Like Me" conjures a love triangle between a floundering Brit named Charlie Friend, a secretive doctoral student named Miranda and a replicant named Adam. It is not the first, or even the 10th, place to start reading McEwan if you've never encountered him before. Yet he's such a masterly writer of prose and provocative thinker of thoughts that even his lesser novels leave marks. "Machines" is a sharp, unsettling read, which — despite its arteries being clogged with research and back story — has a lot on its mind about love, family, jealousy and deceit. Ultimately, it asks a surprisingly mournful question: If we built a machine that could look into our hearts, could we really expect it to like what it sees?

Charlie Friend's life is a bare cupboard at the outset of "Machines." He makes an almost-living playing the stock and currency markets from his shabby London apartment. He pines for inscrutable Miranda, who lives upstairs. And he makes very bad decisions with distressing regularity, like spending all 86,000 British pounds of his inheritance on one of the first "Adams" to hit the market. (The "Eves" were already sold out.) Charlie is a lifelong robot obsessive and Adam can learn, as well as breathe and make moral judgments. He is not a sex toy, but the implication is that he'd be amenable, if that's your thing.

The year, strangely, is 1982.

McEwan rewrites the history of technology, and innumerable other things, to make an A.I. masterwork like Adam plausible back in the Thatcher era. Frankly, he could have set the novel in 2040 with less hard labor. The reason he's gone to the trouble — this is conjecture, but it reflects well on McEwan so let's go with it — is that he wanted the

story to unfold at a time when the great mathematician and World War II code-breaker Alan Turing might still have been alive had he not eaten a cyanide-laced apple in 1954 after the government prosecuted him Oscar Wilde-style for being gay. McEwan bestows on Turing the career, and knighthood, he deserved. He even makes him a minor character as the conscience of the digital age. Turing, in turn, puts his extended lease on life to use and makes advances like Adam possible decades early. In recent books, McEwan has sometimes been too showy with his research, and "Machines" is one of those sometimes: His explication of the world's revised timeline is disruptive and atonal. Still, there's something moving about a novelist assiduously reconfiguring history just so one good man can live.

Having said all this, "Machines Like Me" is no more out-and-out science fiction than Kazuo Ishiguro's elegiac novel about clones, "Never Let Me Go." In fact, "Machines" is about what most literary novels are about: the godawful messiness of being human. Though his feelings for Miranda are genuine, Charlie is otherwise lazy and selfish. He becomes agitated the instant he's brought Adam home and plugged him in to charge. He's intrigued by the creature, but clearly threatened by how good he looks naked. He chastises himself for squandering money ("My foolish infatuation with technology! Another fondue set") even as he fantasizes about raising Adam like a son with Miranda: "My schemes generally fell apart. This was different. I was clearheaded, incapable of deceiving myself."

Falser words were never spoken. Adam regretfully informs Charlie that his online research has revealed that Miranda cannot be trusted — "There's a possibility she's a liar. A systematic, malicious liar" — and then the robot, at Miranda's request, joins her in bed.

As the novel progresses, Adam rebels in various ways, like any automaton wanting a little autonomy. But by and large he is a threat only because he comes to insist on a higher ethical standard than his human hosts can manage. Charlie has an almost comic fit of pique over Miranda's sexual betrayal ("Our lovemaking was constrained. I was distracted by the thought of Adam's presence and even imagined I detected the scent of warm electronics on her sheets"), then conscripts Adam to do all his investing for him so he himself can focus on cracking the enigma code that is his girlfriend.

It turns out that, before meeting Charlie, Miranda orchestrated an astounding campaign of vengeance against ... someone. Now, when she and Charlie attempt to expand their futuristic family by helping a troubled little boy named Mark, her past boomerangs back, and "Machines" starts edging toward tragedy. It's a surprising but welcome development in a novel that had seemed preoccupied with things that sci-fi writers have already asked and answered: What constitutes a consciousness? Is it a good idea to invent stuff that could handily eat your lunch? Soon, it's obvious that some sort of life-altering violence is in the offing. Again: This is an Ian McEwan novel. But the author, being a deft hand at suspense, delays the revelation of who will suffer and how badly.

[Step inside McEwan's idyllic home in the Cotswolds.]

"Machines Like Me" moves briskly even when it gets hard to pull a comb through its plot. There's a passage in which Charlie takes Adam's powered-down body from a closet that's so viscerally written it scrapes your nerves like a horror movie. And, to repeat, all he's

400 doing is taking him out of a closet. As for McEwan's characters, Charlie can be an irritant, but Miranda is compelling. In her desire to save young Mark, you feel both her desperation to be redeemed for her past and her absolute insistence that she's done nothing morally wrong. Even Adam, with access to a universe of knowledge, loves her and composes 2,000 haikus in her honor.

405 Mark, too, is heartbreaking. McEwan has always written stunningly about children, his most famous creation being the dangerous mind Briony Tallis in "Atonement." Mark has been terribly wounded but is still gripping hope with his 4-year-old fingers. He has just a few scenes in "Machines," yet he comes to symbolize everything worthy that Charlie, Miranda and people far more corrosive than they are have jeopardized. Innocence never has much of a chance in McEwan's novels. Here, he wonders how anything that destroys it so wantonly could reasonably be called human.

410 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/books/review/ian-mcewan-machines-like-me.html

4) Futuristic Technology of an Alternate Past: Ian McEwan's "Machines Like Me"

By Ben LibmanMAY 8, 2019

IN THE FUTURE, therewill be no novels, onlywell-crafted haikus.

415 That's what an artificially intelligent robot designed in the early '80s would have you believe, anyway. This robot's name is Adam, and he is Ian McEwan's latest, though by no stretch greatest, creation.

Here's a head-scratcher: what if Alan Turing, the legendary British mathematician and father of computer science, had chosen imprisonment over chemical castration? This is
420 the central question that drives the alternate history undergirding McEwan's new novel, Machines Like Me. McEwan's answer is, well, somewhat bewildering. On the one hand, Turing's imprisonment and the rather peaceful isolation it grants him ironically frees him up to tackle some of the most difficult math and physics problems of the early postwar period. The result, in brief, is a series of technological breakthroughs that allow 1982 to
425 look a lot like 2019: mobile phones, the internet, laptops, electric cars. Actually, in some ways it looks a little more like 2050, if you'll allow me to speculate: the cars are electric, yes, but also completely autonomous; and artificial intelligence and robotics have reached such a stage as to produce robots that are fully convincing as human beings. The first generation of these machines hits the market as a group of 25
430 individuals, 12 "Adams" and 13 "Eves." The novel's protagonist, Charlie Friend, gets his hands on an Adam. We're told that he resembles "a docker from the Bosphorus."

That's right. The technology of the future — or, what here amounts to the same thing, the futuristic technology of the alternate past — hasn't managed to transcend the arbitrary limitations of the gender binary nor of human conceptions of race. Despite the
435 rather massive moment of philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and technological upheaval that these robots represent, human beings themselves, and the history of Western society in particular, remain remarkably unaffected. Thatcher is still prime minister of the United Kingdom, the Falkland Islands are still at the center of the British political imagination, the citizens of the world still haven't quite figured out how to stop
440 destroying the planet. McEwan's thesis on history, then, seems to be this: even if we

tinker with an entire significant line of historical development, the general current of events remains unchanged.

On second thought, maybe not. True, Thatcher is PM, but her rule is challenged quite convincingly by Labour leader Tony Benn; the Falkland Islands Task Force, in this
445 alternate timeline, fails to recapture the islands in dramatic and disastrous fashion; Jimmy Carter, it seems, beat out Ronald Reagan in the 1980 elections; the Brexit concept takes hold of the population 35 years early; and the Beatles still exist, though their best years are behind them. (Oh and, as a marvelous throwaway line informs us, Kennedy somehow survived his assassination attempt.) So what vision of history are we
450 dealing with here? The butterfly effect? Not quite. The impact of the Turing Revolution seems governed by a careful selection in which the author's hand betrays its own involvement. We're meant to focus mainly on the technology itself, which allows the novel's protagonists to play out a rather quirky and innovative plot before an otherwise familiar socio-political backdrop.

455 The most accurate generality one can lay over this story is that it is eminently readable. As with many McEwan novels, this one has you signing the readerly contract by about page 20, and likely breezing through it within a day or two. The plot is the right mix of congenial and eccentric: Charlie, a 32-year-old amateur stock trader living in London, is looking for a change in his life. He wants to stop falling back into his old habits, which
460 mostly involve riding the waves and troughs of various get-rich-quick schemes. He has just spent his inheritance from his recently deceased mother on a shiny new Adam; a rather imprudent decision, he admits. But he has a passion for everything robotic and he "had to have one straight away." So, he forks over all the money he has and determines that now he'll get serious and do something mature and responsible.

465 As luck would have it, Charlie lives right beneath the apartment of the woman he loves and with whom he resolves to start a life. Miranda is 10 years his junior (I'll let you do the arithmetic) and seems less focused on settling down than on finishing her dissertation on corn laws, the fascinating sequel to her work on "the role of the half-wild pig in the household economies of a medieval Chilterns village." It doesn't take
470 Charlie long to figure out that Adam could open the way into Miranda's life; sophisticated as he is, Adam still needs to be set up before he can function properly, and the owner is meant to adjust the behavioral preferences for his new toy in order to ensure compatibility. So, Charlie figures that he and Miranda can split this artificially genealogical duty and have an equal share in Adam's makeup. In other words, he would
475 be their child.

But, as Helmuth Karl Bernhard Graf von Moltke once said, no plan ever survives contact with the enemy. As it happens, Miranda has some dark secrets to keep, and Adam doesn't exactly turn out as Charlie had expected. Also, a real human child named Mark enters the scene, and things get significantly more complex. At any given point when the
480 characters appear to be reaching some degree of emotional or experiential equilibrium, a new reactant is thrown into the mix and everything must be recalibrated anew. The rapid unspooling of the story's development leaves many questions of an ethical nature hanging in the air, among them: is it adulterous to have sex with a robot, or is it just a form of enhanced masturbation? Some riddles are irresolvable.

485   The novel, to be fair, is mostly a good deal more serious than its philosophy. The standard how-human-is-this-robot and will-these-robots-revolt-and-overthrow-human-society tropes are deftly brushed aside in favor of more interesting questions: How robotic are human beings? How will an artificial intelligence designed by humans and made to absorb the manifold creative productions of human culture navigate the
490   profound yet emotionally complex irrationality that governs human decision-making? Is there such a thing as robo-depression?

    This is not to say that McEwan's ventriloquized musings are confined to an anthropocentric ontology. He also looks outward to human society and wonders, for instance, how people might "fill the time" in a world in which robots handle the
495   production, and the anthropos sits comfortably on a universal basic income. (Note that this vision of society still floats somewhere in the future imaginary of this novel, and is not really grappled with in any meaningful way.) And of course, he wouldn't be a writer if he didn't probe the category of literature itself. Once we learn how to download information directly into our brains and merge our consciousnesses into one big
500   "community of minds," Adam says, there will be no need for narratives, whose main purpose is to record "varieties of human failure" and to help bridge the fissures of social misunderstanding and miscommunication. In this massive mind cloud — run, I suppose, by Amazon or some equivalent — "the lapidary haiku, the still, clear perception and celebration of things as they are, will be the only necessary form." No novels; only
505   haikus. I guess we know what to expect from McEwan's second act.

    As Machines Like Me propels us along the robo-humanoid love-triangular saga of Charlie, Miranda, and Adam, all the rest is noise, more or less. And that's not exactly what one might expect from a work of speculative fiction, the major task of the genre being the plausible delineation of the many social, political, and economic consequences that
510   tumble out of a central speculation. What if FDR had lost the 1940 election, as in Philip Roth's The Plot Against America? Or what if, following Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy, earthlings figure out how to colonize that distant red planet? That sort of thing.

    McEwan has a nimble hand when it comes to good-old-fashioned, Walter Scott–approved
515   historical fiction. And according to a certain reading of Atonement, one might even be persuaded to look at Briony Tallis, the novel's protagonist, as a kind of speculative historian when we learn that she has rewritten the lives of Robert and Cecilia according to an alternate answer to a certain "what if" that plagues the young Briony for decades. And that speculation, perhaps due to its narrow scope, plays out quite well along its
520   branching tree of causality.

    But Machines Like Me seems to struggle with the possibly gigantic scope of its speculative manipulations. Can it really be that the only ripples we'd get in return for the development of true artificial intelligence are four more years of Carter and a 70-year-old version of Alan Turing in a silk shirt? It doesn't quite feel like enough simply to
525   gesture to a protesting public or to insist that the enduring legacy of autonomous vehicle technology rests in eternally congested roadways. There is no industry of technology that sits apart from a complex. One would have to argue quite persuasively to convince the average reader that the development of an Adam or an Eve wouldn't have profound reverberations across all sectors of the political economy and the better part of the

530 social fabric. McEwan has led an elephant into the room, but he doesn't want to do the work of rearranging the furniture.

Instead, he gives himself a slick way out: early on in the novel, Charlie mentions in passing that, as a student, he read Tolstoy's All's Well that Ends Well. Say what now? All's Well that Ends Well, as in, the early never-used title of War and Peace. In fact, Charlie
535 has read a number of classics from our timeline that go by different titles in his own: Heller's Catch-18, Fitzgerald's The High-Bouncing Lover (that was a close call) — you get the idea. This alternate timeline, McEwan seems to indicate, actually goes back quite a way, perhaps to the beginning of time itself. And if that's the case, then McEwan is absolved of his requirement to follow closely and plausibly the unfolding of his
540 counterfactual, because there isn't one. This is simply how it all happened, over there!

But this is too convenient, and it is too insufficient a way of hiding the fact that the novel really leans most of its weight on a counterfactual — a Turing point, one might say — like a crutch. Either the timeline of Machines Like Me never made contact with or branched off from our own, and is therefore uninteresting, or it did, and therefore
545 requires a careful and plausible enumeration of its ever-cascading differences. You can't have both.

McEwan seems ultimately to have wanted to write a science fiction novel, but he couches it in his old historical upholstery. The '80s are comfortable for him, so is London. The result, though, is confounding, both as history and as science fiction. For its
550 clear, and at times, elegant prose, as well as its evident success as a page-turner, this novel probably deserves to sit among the 'M's on the shelf. But, as the old Robert Browning line goes, a man's reach should exceed his grasp! Perhaps the adage doesn't apply to robots.

LA Review of Books

555 5) Machines Like Me by Ian McEwan review: a baggy and jumbled narrative   Apr 20, 2019

McEwan shrewdly touches upon the intricacies of artificial intelligence Rabeea Saleem

Ian McEwan is one of our most venerated living writers who garnered eminence for his earlier books Atonement and The Cement Garden in which he explored dark themes and depicted moral ambiguity at its most visceral.

560 However, lately his stories have veered towards broader themes, addressing how political and social environment impacts personal life.

Machines Like Me attempts to coalesce both the themes. The story is set in an alternate 1980s England- Margaret Thatcher is now Prime Minister, the British are about to lose the Falklands War, JFK survived his assassination attempt, the four Beatles are all the rage
565 and Turing is not only still alive, but his algorithms have propelled technology and AI to the extent that androids have been brought into existence.

Charlie is an aimless 32-year-old who, on an impulse, spends his inheritance on purchasing the "first truly viable manufactured human with plausible intelligence and looks,". These first in line androids comprise of twelve Adams and thirteen Eves. This is
570 very much like designing your own customisable human where you can choose the degree of each desirable personality trait across the full gamut of human personality.

The only evidence for his automated existence is the "kill switch" on the nape of his neck which essentially works as a power off button.

Charlie splits the task of reprogramming Adam with Miranda, his neighbour, as a romantic overture as each of them provide half of the "personality parameters" to catapult Adam on his life as a human.

As Adam acclimates to his "humanity", he soon begins to exercise his free will that leads to a situation where Charlie reflects on "being the first to be cuckolded by an artefact'. Charlie eventually has to get in touch with Turing to share his grievances about Adam which include declaration of love for Miranda, joking about removing his arm and disabling of the kill switch.

One detail the book gets right is the ways in which androids, no matter how advanced or finely tuned, are bereft of moral sophistication. They are created with self awareness and intelligence and pushed out into our imperfect world. When they witness appalling injustice, violence and several other outrages, they are unable to integrate that with the happiness that coexists in such a world. We, however, "have lived with them and the list wearies us."

Soon enough, there are reports of other Adams and Eves around the world choosing to destroy their own mind or "fade" of their own volition. They end up suffering an existential pain, having failed to apprehend the horrors of our world, which we have become accustomed to, and opt to end their existence.

This is sagaciously put by Turing as "...they or their succeeding generations will be driven by their anguish and astonishment to hold up a mirror to us. In it, we'll see a familiar monster through the fresh eyes we ourselves designed." The novel is at its strongest when highlighting this ethical dilemma with unnerving pathos, in which tables are turned and machines exhibit more humanity than humans.

The intricacies of artificial intelligence are also shrewdly touched upon. Adam is a sentient being who is eerily aware of his artificial beginnings. At one point, Charlie asks Adam about his earliest memories. Adam tells him that they involve the feel of the chair he was sitting in when he was being charged for the first time. He later casually remarks that the manufacturers initially wanted to plant credible childhood memories to make these androids fit in with everyone else but he is glad that they changed their mind. "I wouldn't have liked to start out with a false story, an attractive delusion. At least I know what I am, and where and how I was constructed." This complacency is a bit disturbing and is more than most humans can say about themselves.

There is a sense that the themes of morality and AI that McEwan delves in have been addressed before in much more stimulating ways in recent literary fiction

McEwan seems to have exhaustively researched Alan Turing before writing this book but the problem is that he insists on detailing all his research on the slightest pretext. This proclivity extends to other topics as well, specially when it comes to the robot. Adam is a philosophical entity and goes at length to ruminate on every topic, no matter how trivial. The narrative digresses frequently on lengthy insights about the mind, science

and society. For instance in one scene Charlie is waiting at a clinic which leads to a two page pontification into the historical background of germs.

The story takes a few unnecessary detours, resulting in a baggy and jumbled narrative. Miranda's complicated past with a Pakistani girl, Mariam, is brought to light which then extends into a long story of vengeance that controversially addresses violence against women and how they are judged for it.Then there is a chance encounter with Mark,a young boy who is a victim of neglectful parenting, and who Miranda wants to eventually adopt. One would be hard pressed to find any reason why Miranda, a 22-year-old student would suddenly become interested in co-parenting a child with a financially stable 32-year-old.

It is equally confounding why McEwan decided to base his futuristic tale of the warped relationship between humans and machines in an alternate past - 1980s. With a few key changes in the political scenario, this world seems to be exactly the same except for rising inflation and unemployment.

There is a sense that the themes of morality and AI that McEwan delves in have been addressed before in much more stimulating ways in recent literary fiction, Iain Reid's brilliantly disturbing Foe comes to mind. However, the novel still asks a few provocative questions regarding the future of AI, and consequently, of humanity.

When Charlie is programming Adam's personality parameters, he ruminates that "...a lot of life is lived in the neutral zone, a familiar garden, but a grey one, unremarkable, immediately forgotten, hard to describe." Same could be said for this novel.

https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/machines-like-me-by-ian-mcewan-review-a-baggy-and-jumbled-narrative-1.3849775