

Frank ... Stein Meets Adam – Two Fictional Visions of Post-Human Companions

Frank ... Stein trifft Adam – zwei fiktionale Visionen post-humaner Gefährten

Robin Lohmann

The year 2019 has produced two very different novels addressing aspects of the human – doll (AI) relationship. *Frankissstein* by Jeanette Winterson¹ and *Machines Like Me (and People Like You)* by Ian McEwan² challenge the reader to reflect on the nature of human relationships, the limits of technology and the concept of morality. A comparison of these two novels provides an interesting contrast as both approach their subject with different agendas, and with different degrees of “success”.

As the title suggests, Winterson’s book is a direct reference to the original *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, daughter of the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. The novel begins in the summer of 1816 when Mary Shelley, her husband Percy, step-sister Claire, Lord Byron and his physician vacationed on Lake Geneva, the place and time when Mary Shelley (as a result of a ghost story competition among the friends) created her Frankenstein. This background story provides the reader with plenty of thoughts to ponder about the nature of time, life, death, language and humanity as presented in fictionalized philosophical discussions among Mary Shelley and her Geneva companions.

From there, Winterson takes us to an international robotics fair in Memphis Tennessee in 2019 (200 years after the publication of *Frankenstein*) where we are introduced to Ry Shelley, a transgender physician interested in

“how robots will affect our mental and physical health”, Ron Lord, creator of a series of sex dolls “sexbots” for men, Claire, an outspoken evangelical Christian working as a hostess at the fair (and later business partner of Ron) and Victor Stein, a brilliant AI expert (later revealed as a robot himself) with whom Ry has a love affair and provides human body parts for his secret research.

This is a very funny novel. Winterson uses her cast of wacky characters effectively to spout (her own) views on gender, sexism, religion, and relationships. The reader laughs out loud when one of Ron’s sexbots (also named Claire), stuck on bedroom mode in the cloakroom at the fair, unselfconsciously

spews out sex demands to an unprepared collection of onlookers, or when Claire feels called by God to create her own series of sexbots as “Christian Companions”.

However, aside from the clever use of names, the connection to the original *Frankenstein* remains flat. While Shelley’s co-creation is emotionally tortured and struggles with the life he was given, the enlivening element defining doll-human relations in which form and thought intermingle is missing in Winterson’s novel. Ron Lord’s sexbots are clearly machines, non-alive material made for a



Figure 1: Jeanette Winterson: *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. © Jonathan Cape, London (2019). ■■■

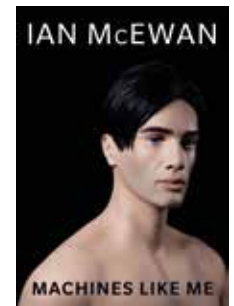


Figure 2: Ian McEwan: *Machines Like Me (and People Like You)*. © Jonathan Cape, London (2019). ■■■

1 Winterson, J. (2019). *Frankissstein: A Love Story*. London: Jonathan Cape. ISBN: 978-17187331419

2 McEwan, I. (2019). *Machines Like Me (and People Like You)*. London: Jonathan Cape. ISBN: 978-1787331662

specific purpose and Victor Stein, who's vision for the future is thought without form, is intellectually brilliant but emotionally cold and narcissistic. His main interest in Ry is that their appearance in his life is of "zero probability" and produces "delicious new data." At times he talks of love, but Ry never quite believes him and neither does the reader.

Winterson weaves several story lines together, which can be confusing. And at times her personal agenda interferes with the flow of the text. For example, although Ry's transgender is significant to the novel, a brutal rape scene in a public bathroom seems both excessive and distracting. These criticisms aside, the novel has many positive aspects. The extremely amusing scenes, the surprise ending and the reflections about humanity make the novel worth reading. Interestingly, the novel ends with a vision for the future in which a sexbot learns to think and feel on her own - a vision made material in McEwan's character Adam.

The enlivened element missing in Winterson's novel is found in McEwan's. Here, the powerful doll-human relationship is not only an experience of the characters, but the reader as well is drawn into the co-creation of life.

The novel is narrated by Charlie, a 32-year old anthropologist by training with a history of failed business endeavours who earns a meagre living with day trading from his office at home. Miranda, Charlie's upstairs neighbour, friend and soon-to-be lover carries a secret which is later exposed and central to the theme of the book. The novel takes place in an alternative London of the 1980s in which England has lost the Falkland war and general political upheaval is on the agenda. (It is quite possible to skip this story line and still understand the book).

Having a personal interest in artificial life, Charlie spends the inheritance from his mother to buy Adam - one of 25 newly created artificial humans (12 male Adams and 13 female Eves). Based in the desire for a shared creation, Charlie involves Miranda in the programming of Adam's personality with each (the choices unknown to the other) defining half. Later it becomes clear that Adam's decisions are less based on programming i.e. projections of the owner's thoughts into matter, than his own "learning" - the processing and integration of information and experience.

From the beginning the reader is drawn to Adam and, with Charlie and Miranda, shifts between curiosity, empathy and indifference as we wait for him

to come to life at Charlie's kitchen table. Once installed in their lives, Adam quickly becomes a part of it, helping around the house, offering general council and companionship and sharing his time with both Charlie and Miranda. He is pleasant, courteous and honest and spends much of his time "thinking" - combining an unlimited source of data with his own experience. The fact that Adam can think on his own is both a fascination and an irritation. Early in the book he warns Charlie that Miranda could be a "systematic, malicious liar." Which Charlie does not want to hear or believe, but turns out to be true.

As their relationships deepen, Adam falls in love with Miranda. Aside from a brief sexual encounter chastised by Charlie, Adam expresses his love by writing and perfecting thousands of haikus for Miranda (very humorous). He has also taken over Charlie's day trading with more success providing them with a richer lifestyle and enough money for the down payment on an expensive house. During this phase, Charlie observes and comes to the rescue of Mark, a four-year old boy being abused by his mother in a public park. On a whim, he leaves his card and a few days later the father drops the boy off at the apartment. Miranda, initially lying to Charlie about regularly visiting Mark in foster care, talks him into applying to adopt the boy who is disturbed, but charming. Meanwhile, Adam is unsettled by news that other Adams and Eves are beginning to self-destruct as a result of disillusionment with the human condition.

Based on information received from Adam in combination with a death threat to Miranda, Miranda is forced to admit to having lied about being raped in court three years prior to avenge the rape of her best friend, a crime that went unpunished and resulted in the suicide of the friend. In an attempt at both closure and revenge, Miranda decides to confront the rapist, now released from prison. When she does, Adam records Miranda's confession.

At this point McEwan's opening quote taken from Rudyard Kipling's "The Secret of Machines" comes into play: "But remember, please, the Law by which we live, We are not built to comprehend a lie..."

Adam's pure morality leads him to give away the money he had earned for Charlie to "worthier" causes and, despite his love, to report Miranda to the police. In a desperate attempt to save Miranda and not knowing that the report had already been made, Charlie "murders" Adam with a hammer. With Miranda in prison, the adoption process is put on hold and Mark, no longer disturbed but

charming, becomes traumatized by being abandoned once again. After Miranda serves her one-year prison term, they fulfil Adam's dying wish and bring his remains to Alan Turing and then return home to his old apartment, Charlie's pre-Adam financial ruin, and their newly adopted troubled son.

In this book the reader is drawn into the life of Adam in interesting ways – the initial creation phase in which both the characters and the reader come to love and disregard the doll at turns is followed by uneasiness when Adam begins to think on his own. Particularly threatening is when he learns how to deactivate his kill switch. But this is where the life path with Adam for the characters and the reader diverge. For the reader, Adam raises questions about entitlement. Does he have “the right” to give away the money he earned? Did he have “the right” to report Miranda? Although the responses to the decisions would vary, the question of entitlement would not arise if Adam were biologically human. Further, Adam's decisions require the reader to make personal choices about justice. Is Miranda's lie about being raped excusable? And what about Adam's murder – is it justified? Raising these questions – and many others individual readers can discover for themselves – seems to be Adam's purpose for the reader. Once accomplished we can easily let him go at the end of the novel. Not so for Charlie and Miranda. Adam is not only missed, but grieved like the loss of a favourite doll. And, once the doll is no longer present, the child needs to face the sometimes harsh “other” realities of life.

Although both Frank Stein and Adam are examples of artificial humans, only Adam is a doll. While Frank Stein follows his own vision from the beginning and hides his true form from those he interacts with (including the reader), Adam arrives in a box and Miranda and Charlie literally bring him to life. Read in combination, these two novels give the reader plenty of food for thought about humanity, entitlement and the nature of dolls.

About the Reviewer / Über die Rezensentin

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born 1962 in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, is a writer and social anthropologist. She completed her undergraduate work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, received her MA from Case Western University in Cleveland and finished her studies at the University of Kiel, Germany with a PhD. In addition to her work as a freelance writer, she has researched extensively on the life review, designed and led autobiographical writing courses and published on dolls. Currently she is a member of the academic staff in the English Department at the University of Education, Karlsruhe. She holds a life-long interest in the power of autobiographical memories to heal and enrich the present. Her book *Was gestern war, hilft mir für morgen* (Kösel Verlag 21013) is available directly from the author.



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