

BUSINESS EYE

Of men and machines

WRITTEN BY

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This week's solid pretence at offering something profound and interesting for you to consider comes to you from the Hay Literary Festival in Wales, an annual cultural oasis that promotes thought, inspiration and tented communal exasperation at the state of the world we have somehow managed to mess up.

In a world where there are more entrants in the Tory party leadership elections to choose the next prime minister than

contestants on Love Island, you do sometimes think that we might just be part of someone else's bad dream, a heady mix of the Matrix, the Truman Show and Ian McEwan's new book *Machines Like Me*.

Listening to the great, number one best-selling author and winner of the Booker Prize talk in person about the underlying meaning and tensions within his text was awe-inspiring and unexpected.

He had me at 'hello'.

As I listened to this soft-spoken man now in his 70s talk about the serendipitous accidental nature of every moment, it contrasted starkly in my head with the competing idea that we are all just part of one evolving, predictable chemical reaction with inevitable outcomes.

It's either the case that everything is pre-determined or, alternatively, that what is now has been made real by choices and options which could so easily have been different.

Machines Like Me paints a

world in which our past turned out differently.

To start with, we lost the Falklands War and Professor Alan Turing chose prison for being gay rather than hormones and suicide and is still with us. Both were eminently possible.

The book concerns itself with the obsession the human race has with creating a better version of life in the form of intelligent robots.

The arrival of AI, colossal processing power and new battery technologies ushers in the era of a machine which could be capable of thought and emotion.

The test for humanity is the ability to write a novel, embodying as it does the emotional conflicts and constructs with which the human mind juggles beyond pure data manipulation and predictive capacity.

If robots were conscious, what would it mean for us? We are slow, we forget things, we repeat the forgotten errors of

previous generations, an example of which is the sledgehammer we have just taken to one of the most potent icons for peace, hope and collaboration we have managed to create; the European Union.

Our processing power degrades with age while machines upgrade and get faster. We forget things but the cloud doesn't. Machines become optimised over time but we become obese. Machines keep going while we need rest, sleep and get ill.

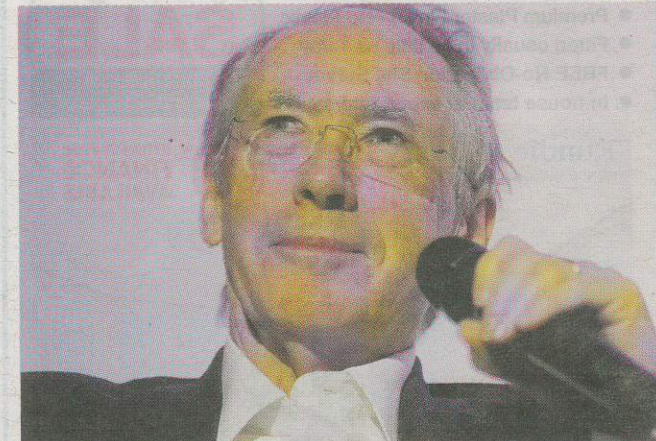
When we die, a lot of what and who we are is lost with us, but when a machine fails its memory is just rebooted from the cloud.

Machines are like leaves from a tree, they fall and return with every season, while we are like the tree, we fall only once.

What happens when the machine you have bought to be your servant develops feelings for your girlfriend?

In the presence of consciousness, you would find yourself up against a faster

PICTURE BY TIM P. WHITBY/GETTY IMAGES FOR BFI



Author Ian McEwan

mind with better memory and a full grasp on chat up and soothing banter to make her feel great.

It may be that the only way we will be able to sustain life on the planet beyond global warming will be in the guise of conscious machines who think, feel and self-repair.

I'm not sure I would put

much faith in Trump, Putin and Farage being able to pull us together in the face of such an existential moment for our species.

We may need to create a superior, more powerful species than ourselves to be able leave a lasting, positive legacy beyond our own seemingly inevitable self-destruction.