

## **SPECULATIVE FICTION REVIEW** by Stephanie Young

TITLE            *Wake*  
AUTHOR         Robert J. Sawyer  
PUBLISHER      Analog (Ace)  
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What if the World Wide Web gained consciousness? How could it happen and what might be the result? This is the essence of the new series *WWW*: and the first book in the trilogy *Wake*. As the title suggests the first book deals with the awakening of the Web. Woven around this process are three other stories.

The first, and key one in my opinion, is that of Caitlin Decter. She is fifteen years old and has been blind since birth. The cause of her blindness is a condition that causes her retinas sending a scrambled signal to the optic nerve so her visual cortex cannot interpret them. This leads to a Japanese scientist implanting her with a device that intercepts the signal, unscrambles it using a processor that Caitlin calls her "eyepod" and send it via Bluetooth to her optic nerve. At first, the process fails but because she is hooked the web via a wi-fi connection she sees "something".

The second story is set in China where an outbreak of human communicable bird flu has broken out in a couple of remote villages. In order to stop it from spreading, the Chinese government orders extreme measures and to prevent another Tiananmen Square PR nightmare, they execute a lockdown of all communication to the outside world; telephones, television and the Web. This sudden loss of a large part of "itself" triggers the self-awareness of the web. As a few resourceful hackers break through and the web is whole again, it strengthens this awareness.

The third story is about Hugo, a chimpanzee/bonobo hybrid who is adept at sign language. After researchers set-up a webcam meeting with Hobo and another chimpanzee so they can sign with each other, Hugo paints a portrait of one of his handlers. While animal art has been around for a while, it has always been abstract. This is the first time this level of ability has been shown. Tension occurs when this news gets back to the zoo who actually owns Hobo and they want him back to sterilize him. The excuse is the purity of the species, but there is more to it than that.

As you might guess, the something Caitlin is seeing is the newly formed consciousness of the web and eventually it sees the world through her eyes and the relationship develops. If I say anymore, the story will be ruined so I will leave that to you to find out.

The only two negatives I have about the book is the mystic nature of the Web's awakening, I would have liked more details, and the story of Hugo. It is very peripheral so far to the main story but I am hopeful it will become more integral in the next book.

This is the third trilogy from Sawyer and it may end up being his best. The first, the Quintaglio Ascension series was an excellent series dealing with sentient dinosaurs being the dominant species. The second was the acclaimed Neanderthal Parallax about a rift that connects a parallel earth where Neanderthals evolved into a highly advanced society, in some ways more advance than our own. The storytelling style is consistent with these and the many stand-alone novels he has written.

Sawyer does a superior job taking familiar concepts and making us look at them in a different way that challenges the reader to think what *would* it be like if this happened or we dealt with these issues in this manner. Often times he points out the vulnerabilities and dangers of the dogmas and rigid thinking of a society. I have no doubt the other two books in this series will do the same.

The other thing that Sawyer does well is to incorporate current developments in science or related fields into his stories. While the fictional search engine Jagster does not exist (at least I could not find it), the references to the A.I. work by Doug Lenat is real and provides a key element in the story. In some ways, much of Sawyer's work is not science fiction in the sense of space and aliens and the like but it is science and fiction with a psychological bent. Sawyer has dubbed the term PsiFi to describe some of his stories. Whatever you call them they are always entertaining, they keep you wondering where he is going and they satisfy immensely. My only regret is that I have to wait for the next two.

Note: This review is based on a serialization of the novel that ran in Analog magazine from November 2008 through March 2009. The hardcover form Ace is due out in April 2009.

**Rating** 🍪🍪🍪🍪🍪