Robert Luhn

Robert Luhn, the second prize winner in our international contest for this book, is an Albany, California-based writer and former senior editor of PC World magazine. He writes about the politics of technology. He also pens the syndicated "Green PC" column for Computer Currents and contributes to Omni, Whole Earth Review, San Francisco Focus, The Christian Science Monitor, Mother Jones and other discriminating periodicals.

Mr. Luhn has no distinguishing marks and is currently accepting marriage proposals or donations in small denominations.

I Sing the Writer Electric!
by
Robert Luhn

My name is Alton Drake and I am a writer. Or rather, I was a writer. What I'm doing now, what you're reading, is illegal as hell. The Creative Impulses and Author Restriction Act of 2023 made, "written expressions by humans", a capital offense. A misdemeanor probably would have been enough. But no matter. There was a time when humans wrote about everything there was to know, and worse, to imagine.

I was once famous, you know. A famous writer. I wrote novels, essays, even a little poetry, although one critic (banned now, by the Writers Defamation Act of 2005) called my verse, "alligator farts in a drained swamp". Of course, he was eventually executed for such twaddle, but I kind of miss the human voice. I'd go for any human voice amidst all this humming and clicking.

But that isn't likely. I am the supervisor and sole human employee of the Automated Novel Works, Southside. It's me and a couple hundred SyntheScribe 1000s. Rows and rows of shiny, white machines the size of bread boxes. I replace worn neural chips, run diagnostics on the syntax (sin tax?) processors and check the output trays for the day's novel. It's not much but at 87 what else am I good for?

Sometimes an error message pops up at one of the scenario workstations that actually calls on my dusty skills, like, "How do I resolve the internal conflicts of character #41 without compromising developments in subplot 319?" But the messages come less and less: "progress" in software has all but eliminated the guesswork, the flaws of modern-day art.

Of course, the first autowriters were laughably crude. But when IBM released its line of MuseMatePCs, the world capitula-

ted. And why not? Computers had made everything perfect, hadn't they? Perfect hamburgers. Perfect haircuts. Perfect servo-implanted, digitally-controlled breasts. Why not perfect art? Could we demand anything less?

The concept was appealing, the ads witty (especially IBM's Shakespeare-on-roller-skates being flattened by a chuckling mainframe) and the slogans irresistible. Who can forget, "I Sing the Writer Electric!", "PC-Freedom" and the catchphrase of a generation, "Write Without Thinking"? The writer within me shuddered, but the civil libertarian cheered.

Of course, I never really thought computers would put writers, or God forbid, even editors, out of work. Everyone felt a twinge when TV programmers and talk show hosts were finally automated in 2011. But weren't those senseless, degrading, even dangerous jobs?

Yes, said the goverment, but writing was even more hazardous. Only automation could make the process of creation "safe". I had to admit they had a point. How many screenwriters went mad writing (and rewriting) "Terminator VI: The College Years"? How many poor wretches fell into Kafkaesque stupors of drunkenness and buggery in their struggle to beat the blank page?

No, they're right, I thought. Maybe creation was too dangerous without controls or at least some help.

Of course, the first autowriters weren't much help at all. You needed a 4-terabyte system and a two-way biolink to a graduate English student just to generate ad copy!

Then the Yevtushenko-9000 series of poetry droids hit the streets. I didn't think much of their output, but that didn't stop the Pulitzer Committee from giving, "Naked Came the PC", the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. (Of course, with half the voting membership composed of IBM 9000s, it was hardly a surprise.) Then came the Rodin ASICs, which could even turn the factory ro-

bots into damn good sculptors. The jig was up.

Commentary was the first magazine to go all autowriter. (Although, to be honest, I couldn't see much of a difference.) Soon, I was competing more and more with silicon for writing jobs. After my fourth rejection from Harpers, an editor finally admitted,

"Alton, you're just too damn slow. It took you two days to finish that last piece on fetal tissue cookware. Hell, my PC, with its Buckley ROMs could do the job in 15 minutes and I don't get any bitching about rewrites. Face it, Alton, you're history."

That was the last time I talked to a human editor. Two weeks later, the Hearst autoeditors arrived and editors were cadging loans from writers. The revolution had swept us all out and we didn't even hear it coming.

The galling thing is that the autowriter revolution was a hit not only with the Fortune 500, but with the reading public. Auto-literature shot up the best-seller lists with machine-like regularity, ie, "The Agony and the Electricity", "The Good, the Bad and the Analog" and even "Bite My Baud", a saucy soft-core porn novel.

I was one of the lucky writers. I got a job tending the machines. The fact that I was, had been, a novelist, wasn't held against me.

But all good things come to an end, I guess. The syntho-novels haven't been selling as fast lately; even the New York Times is thinking of running Letters to the Editor from humans, again. But the pundits say our automated economy, already in hock to the Korean-Yugoslavian-Japanese cartel, would crumble without autowriters. Relying on analog intelligence could spell financial suicide.

But I'm not worried.The computerized readers are being installed tomorrow.