



## Manual Automata

**Benyakir B. Horowitz**

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*Manual Automata puts a human face on the seemingly inevitable transformation of humans into cyberhumans.*

Benyakir B. Horowitz's dystopian fantasy novel *Manual Automata* ventures into the not-too-distant future to explore the question we all know is coming: What happens when humans have the power to become living, breathing cyborgs?

In a future America, Jules Winters is a have-not, a member of a dumbed-down worker class whose only purpose is to make the lives of Betters richer and more comfortable. While Jules's dullness, resentment, and whining are understandable, they aren't particularly engaging.

One day he crosses paths with April, the spoiled daughter of Betters parents. For no discernible reason, she offers to make him her equal if only he will marry her. He accepts but quickly comes to resent his new, pampered life. Here begins Jules's search for meaningful existence by any technology-fueled means necessary.

The plot is set up in an overly long manner, fattened with lengthy, unproductive dialogue and repetitive quarrels between the unlikely and unlikable husband and wife at its center. Jules's digression-filled ruminations are delivered in a word salad that makes it difficult to find, or follow, the thread of the story. One hopes the incoherence stems from the fact that Jules has recently been diagnosed with a terminal brain disease known as "hat rot."

Halfway through the book, the story gets a breath of fresh air. Seizing on new technology, Jules undergoes an operation to become a robot. Upon awakening, he sorts through his memory banks and for the first time realizes that he is narrating a story, an understanding that causes complete sentences and organized paragraphs to emerge.

In exploring his new self, Jules even manages to crack a joke or two, explaining that he is, quite literally, a man of parts unknown. As a robot, Jules is more coherent, easier to relate to, and far more likable than he was as a human, an ironic touch that promises to broaden the book's scope.

With the new coherence, the narrative becomes more compelling. Though it's still overreliant on too-long conversations, the pace picks up. The story becomes a dystopian heroic with a 1930s feel, with likable everyman Jules battling rich masters on behalf of the downtrodden masses. Before the campaign gets far, however, Jules becomes obsessed with the next step. If a robotic mind has made him a better being, what heights could he achieve with a bionic body?

Science-fiction fans may be disappointed by the lack of science here. Other than references to enhanced versions of familiar gadgets like drones and self-driving cars, Jules's world has an almost retro feel. Buses still run, factories still operate, and Jules's transformation is accomplished through old-school operations. Despite the lack of science, Jules becomes an increasingly warm and endearing character. His reflections as he undergoes further augmentation are well imagined and form the most successful part of the book.

The story weakens with the return of April and another change in plot direction, laid out in a welter of anesthesia-induced dreams, hallucinations, and holograms that again bury the plot thread. An explanatory fifty-plus-page conversation between April and Jules, whose relationship has not kept pace with Jules's transformation, doesn't sufficiently explain or reinvigorate the story, and the conclusion falls on rather flat ground.

*Manual Automata* puts a human face on the seemingly inevitable transformation of humans into cyberhumans. It will be of most interest to those curious about the development of robots, AI, and the effect that both will have on human society.

SUSAN WAGGONER (April 19, 2018)

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