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What Time is It

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What Time Is It grabs fans of science fiction—especially works that recognize modern technology's geometric progression—and transports them to a world where "self-aware machines" (SAMs) serve humanity.

Jack Farrell is a computer programmer for Virtuon, "one of more than a thousand virtual companies formed worldwide in the past year aimed at developing products using quantum-based computer technology." Farrell writes software for his computer, Sarah, which scours the Grid (the worldwide optical Internet) for information that could be useful in developing products for Virtuon. Much of Jack's efforts focus on the SC-4244 chip, developed by one the world's technology titans, North Korea. This chip, called both the Einstein Chip and Devil Chip, happens to reside in a wrist computer given to Jack by a representative of North Korea in appreciation for Jack's work. The problem? That wrist computer has been declared illegal in the U.S. because the government suspects it incorporates economic spyware.

Jack naively believes he has disabled the malware, but the wrist computer is communicating with its masters and it wants—it is self-aware, remember—to attack the U.S. banking computer network and cause an economic collapse.

By happenstance, Jack rents an apartment from Fred Halliday, a Nobel Prize winner. Another apartment dweller in the same building is Julia McKelvy, a doctoral student working on a computer that uses a stew of human DNA. The three eventually band together to foil the North Koreans.

What Time Is It is set in a world where people work only ten years or so before retiring. In this environment, machines not only communicate with people but also possess "all the legal rights of a small animal." The machines are moody and able to gauge the ethics of action. When Fred asks a protégé if a machine was programmed to commit suicide, he is told, "He programmed that machine so that she could make that choice. Sarah chose to stop fighting to preserve the information Jack might need." And here some readers may encounter a slight disconnect. The author's SAMs express emotion: Sarah is petulant, his pick-up truck is fussy, and the North Korean computer is malevolent. Since readers are never instructed directly, they may wonder why a self-aware machine would develop emotions other than those necessary for self-preservation.

That question leads to another interesting concept, the idea that self-aware computing power is measured in HuBE: "Human Brain Equivalents." Part of the plot hinges on these two elements, to which is added an intriguing discussion of violence relating to intelligence.

This entertaining novel uses short chapters to move the story forward nicely, and the author's computer expertise will impress readers, especially those who have read casually about the quest for artificial intelligence. For readers who are already persuaded that computers may change human evolution in unforeseen ways, What Time Is It will aggravate their worries.

GARY PRESLEY (May 18, 2010)

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