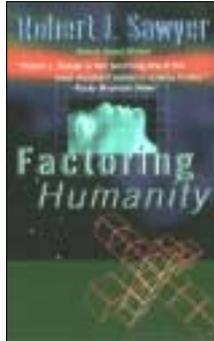


Factoring Humanity

Robert J. Sawyer

University of Toronto psychologist Heather Davis succeeds in decoding alien radio messages received from Alpha Centauri. But her private life is falling apart, as her grown daughter accuses Heather's husband of having abused her as a child. The two storylines intersect in a startling exploration of the nature of human memory.



TOR BOOKS, New York

US\$5.99 • Cdn\$7.99 • ISBN 0-812-57129-0

The following questions reveal much of the novel's plot; please don't look at them until after you've finished the book.

1. At the beginning of the novel, Kyle Graves is accused by his adult daughter Rebecca of having abused her and her sister as children. At what point did you decide whether Kyle was innocent or guilty? Heather is torn between her love for her husband and her love for her daughter. Kyle says he is innocent, but Becky says he is guilty. In such a case in your own family, who would you initially believe: your spouse, or your child?

2. Do you believe that real memories can be suppressed? Do you think that false memories can be implanted? At the end of the novel, Kyle seems to forgive his daughters' therapist. Would you forgive under such circumstances?

3. The artificial-intelligence program Cheetah is one of the most popular characters in the novel. In his

attempts to be human, Cheetah tries to master both humor and the ability to make moral judgments. Are these really the things that separate us from machines? Was Cheetah making real progress before he committed suicide? In the case that most vexed Cheetah — whether the pregnant, devoutly Catholic, comatose woman who had been raped should have her baby — what decision would you have made had you been the woman's parents? Sawyer didn't make up this case; it really happened. Is mixing fact and fiction in this way appropriate?

4. Heather Davies gets to surf the collective memories of all of humanity, plugging into several historical characters who interest her, including Abraham Lincoln, Jesus Christ, and John T. Scopes (of the famous 1925 evolution trial). If you had the same opportunity, whose minds would you explore? Heather and Kyle eventually access each other's minds. Would you want to access your own spouse's mind? Could your marriage survive that?

5. Some reviewers have noted superficial similarities between the novel *Factoring Humanity* and the movie *Contact*. The movie was released after Sawyer had finished writing *Factoring Humanity*, and the original novel *Contact* (which has a group of five scientists traveling in the alien machine, instead of just one) bears fewer resemblances to Sawyer's book than does the movie. Still, for those who have seen the movie *Contact*, or read Carl Sagan's novel upon which the movie was based, how close do you think the similarities are? Who is a more sympathetic and interesting protagonist, Sawyer's Heather Davis, or Sagan's Eleanor Arroway (played by Jodie Foster)?

6. Sawyer seems to believe that twentieth-century pop culture will endure into the twenty-first century. The book contains references to *I Love Lucy* and Salvador Dali (from the 1950s), the original *Star Trek* (from the 1960s), *Star Wars* (from the 1970s), *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (from the 1980s), and *Seinfeld* and mystery writer Mary Higgins Clark (from the 1990s). Will anyone

care about any of this in the years to come? Or is pop culture, by its very nature, utterly ephemeral? If not, what parts of 20th Century pop culture do you think will endure into the next century?

7. The alien radio message from Epsilon Indi, encoded on the Huneker disk, suggests that humanity should proceed with great caution in creating artificial intelligence. Do you agree? Or do you agree, as others have held (such as Christopher Dewdney, in his 1998 non-fiction book *Last Flesh*), that humanity's destiny is to create its own silicon-based successors?

8. Sawyer raises several privacy issues: quantum computers threaten the security of encrypted data; the therapist Lydia Gurdjieff discusses Becky's case (albeit without identifying her by name) with another "patient" (Becky's mother, masquerading as a patient); and access to the overmind makes it possible to plug into anyone's thoughts and feelings, even the privacy of the dead is eliminated — there is no such thing in the novel as taking a secret to your grave. Do these issues concern you? Are we doomed to lose our privacy in the years to come? How would it affect business relationships? How would it affect national security?

9. The novel's conclusion proposes that empathy — the ability to feel what others are feeling — is the most important human characteristic. Do you agree? In the book, the human race's empathic ability is related to the concept of the overmind. Is it plausible that we're all linked in a higher dimension? Do you find that idea soothing or frightening?

10. As a science-fiction writer, Rob Sawyer has created many non-human characters. But it's often been said that for male writers the most alien characters of all are women. The lead character in *Factoring Humanity* is a woman, Heather Davis. Given that the theme of the novel is seeing other people's points of view, how good a job does Sawyer do at portraying a female character? How believable is Heather as a scientist? A spouse? A mother?

This document on the web: www.sfwriter.com/rgfh.pdf