



The Clockwork Man

E.V. Odle , Annalee Newitz (Introduction) , Joshua Glenn (Foreword)

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Several thousand years from now, advanced humanoids known as the Makers will implant clockwork devices into our heads. At the cost of a certain amount of agency, these devices will permit us to move unhindered through time and space, and to live complacent, well-regulated lives. However, when one of these devices goes awry, a "clockwork man" appears accidentally in the 1920s, at a cricket match in a small English village. Comical yet mind-blowing hijinks ensue.

Considered the first cyborg novel, *The Clockwork Man* was first published in 1923 — the same year as Karel Capek's pioneering android play, *R.U.R.*

The Clockwork Man Details

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From Reader Review The Clockwork Man for online ebook

Pandaduh says

I enjoyed this little book entirely. I picked it up because of this satirical article claiming that E.V. Odle was a pen name for Virginia Woolf. And, because of the fact it claims to show the first cyborg/robot/automaton/AI in science fiction.

This copy came with a forward and introduction that can offer better insight into what it means than I can. I particularly recommend the intro by Annalee Newitz titled “The First Cyborg and the First Singularity” — though after the fact because it gives the whole story away. And it will help you understand wtf you just read. At 141 pages the book is worth it.

A lot of the “science fiction terms” it uses are not what sf authors would use today. I didn’t read the synopsis from HiLoBooks, because I thought I knew what I was getting into. But trust me, their interpretation (above) helps.

Read my full review here: <https://blackandwhitepandaduh.wordpress...>

C.J. says

Impossible to give grandad anything less than five stars.

Amy says

A interesting, intellectual little novel. It explores some interesting ideas about human existence and a few about feminism, while also being an early introduction to robotics and the idea of changes to the Time Space continuum. The problem for me is that the book was too much in its own head. There was a lot of sitting around and thinking and wondering and pondering and panicking, without much action to precipitate all of these thoughts. It seemed to me that we need more information and action to give a solid base to build upon. The lack of action also made it quite slow. Or perhaps that's just my modern viewpoint getting in the way.

Isa levógira says

Novela corta impresionante.

Mike says

So after a week or so to ponder this book I think I have figured out why I didn't like it.

Ostensibly this book is about a 'Clockwork Man' who stumbles back through time from the far future and ends up in the middle of a 1920's English village; his appearance is then followed by the requisite

shenanigans. That, however, is not what happens. In fact very little happens in the book (shenanigans or otherwise) because this is not really a novel. There is no protagonist or antagonist, there is no rise in tensions as the story progresses culminating in a resolution of plot, the state of the world after the story ends is little different than the state of the world before the story. Simply put there is no **there** there (or, for those of you who remember 1980's commercials: "Where's the beef?")

This is a book that deals with ideas and notions embodied by characters instead of actual characters. The sharpest contrast between these ideas is represented by a doctor (embodying a conservative outlook on human development) and his young friend (who embodies an idealistic view of progress and the future). The appearance of the Clockwork Man (who, despite being the title of the book, is rarely on page) merely galvanizes a clash between the doctor and his friend.

Of course calling it a clash may be selling it a bit too much. They merely disagree over the fate of mankind (a fate they do not actually have any control over so it is, at best, a philosophical disagreement instead of an operational one) and what the Clockwork Man represents but nothing more than that. There are other characters that embody other ideas but the writing was so unengaging I really didn't care about them. There may also have been some commentary about feminism too but, once again, the writing was of such a poor quality and the framing of the story to tailored towards someone with a 1920's frame of reference it was lost in the rest of the story.

This book was written in the 1920's for a 1920's audience. The writing reflects a lot of conventions of the time and was speaking to a contemporary audience. This is a time where The Great War was still a very fresh memory. Where all the wonders and marvels modern technology afforded mankind were turned towards the arts of war with devastating consequences. Who was to say, at the time, if progress really was so great given the death it left in its wake. The two main characters, I am sure, spoke to the tension in society between the forces of progress and conservatism . However whatever signaling Odle offered to signify these positions and their tenants were lost on me, a 21st century reader. The book itself is much too dated to be relevant to the issues and discourse of our times. Compare that to Animal Farm, which works as both an allegory for the Soviet Union, the danger of totalitarianism ,and is an engaging story to boot. Those are the sorts of political and social commentaries that survive the test. The Clockwork Man, however, falls woefully short of that mark.

Which is a shame because at the very end we get the fascinating story of the Clockwork Man and the strange future he originated from sounded pretty neat. The changes that were made to his body that Odle came up with and the multiform world of the future were also rather visionary (this was apparently the first book that featured a cyborg). But Odle shunted the Clockwork Man to the side of the narrative and half the time he was on the page he was malfunctioning and not capable of effectively communicating. I think there is a seed of some fantastic speculative fiction somewhere in the book, but Odle never bothered to cultivate it, instead concentrating on using the story as an allegory of the contemporary political scene.

At the end of the day this could have been a fantastic book and a cornerstone of early science fiction if it had concentrated on the more transcendental aspect of the story instead of the provincial political allegory. Instead it is at best a footnote in the history of science fiction (and not a very well written book on top of that).

Jessica says

A strange and quirky little book. Quite funny, but I would say rather bland in its storytelling. A few chapters are eventful and generate a sense of excitement and intrigue, but they are sadly rare. Interesting once again

for the science fiction perspective from such an early era.

BJ Haun says

This one was a bit too much of a product of its place and time for me to get into. I don't think I am the target demographic for a book where the first 20% or so of the story is talking about how a person is obviously an outsider because he doesn't know how to play cricket.

Miki says

Possibly the first novel about a cyborg, it's the story of a weird being who claims to come from thousands of years in the future and from a very different, multidimensional world, and to function thanks to a clock in his head that makes him hugely more evolved and sophisticated than human beings in the 1920s. The small town where he shows up is disrupted by his appearance and his deeds, as discussions and theories divide the local scientists. An intriguing tale with a unexpected turn of events at the end.

John Butt says

Boring, slow and pointless. Only interesting as a historical artifact connecting two much better periods of literature. Life is too short to waste on dull books.

Dafydd says

Brilliant and unjustly neglected novel from the mostly forgotten "radium age" between the scientific romance period of HG Wells and Jules Verne, and the golden age of science fiction starting in the 1930s. The writing style reminds me much more of Wells than golden age sci-fi and is much more socially conscious than science fiction in the decades that followed, which often abandoned social critique (in response to McCarthyism and the Red Scare) in favor of hard science and adventure.

This book functions on many levels: as satire of scientific rationalism and the myth of progress, as feminist parable, as almost Sherlockian mystery as the characters struggle to uncover the mystery of the Clockwork Man, as character study--and manages to be an entertaining read, to boot.

The story follows three characters as they encounter, and try to make sense of, the sudden appearance of a strange "Clockwork Man" who appears in the middle of a game of cricket. Two of the characters are also negotiating relationships with modern women who are not content to accept socially prescribed gender roles; the older man resists this new dynamic, while the younger accepts and even embraces it. I've read a lot of fiction from this time period, and while perhaps not exceptional compared to many current titles (although it's also discouraging how much sexist attitudes still pervade literature), and not without problem, this is one of the most progressive titles on gender I've read in genre fiction from this time period.

The satire on progress is comparable to Carel Kapek's R.U.R., but more nuanced in that, upon finishing the story, I felt the author deliberately left open the question of whether there is hope--whether man's (gendered

noun deliberate) destructive embrace of "progress" is an inevitable, doomed pursuit--as R.U.R. seemed to suggest--or whether it is possible to diverge from this path.

Matt says

This is a real oddity from the 1920's. A time traveling clockwork man visits 1920's England in the middle of a Cricket match. His antics appear to be inspired by slapstick movies of the early 20th century such as Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Harold Lloyd, and perhaps more obscure movies about automatons running amok.

The back story about how his mysterious "Makers" came to the Earth and abducted all the women and turned all of the men into clockwork beings was one of the more interesting aspects of the story, and raises it above being just a silly short novel. It also makes one think that there should be a sequel to elaborate on the back story, but unfortunately there isn't. Who were The Makers, aliens, humans from an even more distant future?

We will never know.

Anyone who wants to write steam-punk novels should include this on their reading list.

I wonder if Ray Bradbury had read this. It does touch on the theme of keeping everything you like in this world going on forever and getting rid of all the bad stuff in life, which is popular in his stories.

Anthony says

I only recently discovered HiLo Books' "Radium Age of Science Fiction" series: 10 books from years 1904 – 1933 reissued by the press in 2013. I've managed to find three of them in bookstores, and this is the first of those that I've read.

The premise (cyborg-type future man comes back to the present, wreaks havoc) now is a trope, but the publishers date this as the first cyborg novel. Taken in that light, the reader can see just how inventive Odle is in realizing and describing his "clockwork man." He talks about being unsettled in time and space, living in a world where everything is possible and where every possibility is real: stuff science fiction authors are still wrangling with today. In addition to the technological advances and intimation of life from other planets affecting the course of future history here on Earth, the book raises interesting questions about free will, including the possibility that a removal of free will is about the only thing that will stop men from destroying our planet. (Coincidentally, I recently read A Clockwork Orange, which deals with similar issues regarding the removal of a person's ability to decide between good and evil.) Odle also shines a light on the then-changing views of women. One of the main characters, Doctor Allingham, is pretty much an avowed misogynist while younger characters represent the change Odle knew was building across the country at that time.

Where the book falls short for me is in the characterizations. The concepts introduced are cool, the Big Questions caused me to think – but the human characters are too one-dimensional to really connect with: Allingham the skeptic and keeper of the status quo; Gregg the curious burgeoning scientist; Arthur the excitable romantic. And the female characters are not much better drawn: one a manipulative prospective fiancée for Allingham, the other Arthur's equally romantic and flighty love interest. Neither of the women have much effect on the plot, but then again neither do the lead men: they are acted up by the comings and

goings of the clockwork man, but don't accomplish much of their own accord.

Jeff says

This was a fun little book from 1923, which featured the first appearance of a cyborg in science fiction. A Clockwork Man from 8,000 years in the future shows up at a cricket match and hijinks ensue. He is having a problem with the mechanism in his head and he can't return to the future. It was interesting to read what an author from the '20s thought a future robot would be like. Overall, the book was a quick read that dragged a bit when the cyborg wasn't around.

Mike says

I had never heard of this or even Odle, which is surprising considering it is probably the first android story you would have thought it would famous.

The story in itself is rather a fun story. This strange clockwork man arrives in the middle of a cricket match and then goes on to make up the numbers for one team where he is exceptional. Now at this point in the story a knowledge of cricket is useful otherwise some of the story might be missed. The story then goes on to describe how this strange fellow causes trouble in an English village.

If there was one negative it would be that it gets a bit "speachy" in places.

Overall this is definitely a lost classic.

Mark Baller says

What a fun well written little English novel - has very deep psychological implementations buried in the play between the clockwork man a made man and a real man from the 20 century - must think more about the effect it has had on me - the clock work man is like us except can travel in time and space but can not love - too complicated he said to design in love that is.

I am partial to English novels and Russian lit so you must read this on your own and decide if you think it worthy of 4 stars.

Deborah says

This book was a gem to read, actually, I listened to it - Ralph Lister did a fantastic job which may have helped me in falling in love with this book. It has a great storyline, starting out in late 1920's at a cricket match. How English! This was written before the famed Golden Age of Science Fiction (Asimov, Bradbury, Silverberg etc.) and has introduced me to what is known as the Radium Age that was written from about 1904 -33. The Clockwork Man has appeared in present day, 1928 or thereabouts, and startles the little village. The key sentence introducing us to what lies ahead is one of his first questions to a cricket match

onlooker, "when am I?" There are no guns, no warfare, no space age exploration. Just a great story about a misplaced visitor - from far far into our future.

Evelyn Woagh says

This book seems like gimmicky speculative fiction (I tend to like non-gimmick speculative fiction, by the way), which in some ways was a bit interesting toward the end. But as a whole, it essentially suggests that individuality despite excessive conflict is better than automaton multi-dimensional maleness. As if these are our only options as a species.

Daniel Garrison says

This is one weird book. It left me...I don't know...thinking about it a bit after I finished it. I wasn't thinking I liked it or I didn't like it, I was just thinking about it.

I'm staring at the stars and I can't figure out how many to give it. Two or three, I guess.

What a weird book.

Steve Joyce says

Back in the day, I used to - before finding more complete references - rely upon A Reader's Guide To Science Fiction by Baird Searles, Martin Last, et al. One thing I liked about their format was the "If you liked author X, you'll enjoy author Y" recommendations.

So, here goes on The Clockwork Man (about a fellow, when his mechanical parts are functioning properly, is able to navigate the "multiform" universe). If you like the type of humorous tongue-in-cheek science fiction written by, say, Fredric Brown or Henry Kuttner (or earlier Albert Robida), then you most likely will enjoy E.V. Odle's The Clockwork Man.

Of course, everyone's humor is different; Odle's could be classified as lighthearted, subtle and whimsical. A typical passage:

The Clockwork man sighed, a long, whistling sigh. "I wish you would mend me. I'm all wrong, you know. Something has got out of place, I think. My clock won't work properly."

"Your Clock," echoed the doctor.

"It's rather difficult to explain," the Clockwork man continued, "but so far as I remember doctors were people who used to mend human beings before the days of the clock. Now they are called mechanics. But it amounts to the same thing."

"If you will come with me to my surgery," the Doctor suggested, with as much calmness as he could assume, "I'll do my best for you."

The Clockwork man bowed stiffly. "Thank you. Of course, I'm a little better than I was, but my ears still flap occasionally."

The tale does have its poignant, touching moments and elements of every-man philosophical thought. Odle handles the combination deftly and even gives hint of his intentions via one of the characters:

His attempt to persuade the editor of the Wide World Magazine that his version of the affair, put in the shape of a magazine story, was actually founded on fact, ended in grotesque failure. His narrative power was not doubted; but he was advised to work the story up and introduce a little humour before offering it as a contribution to some magazine that did not vouch for the truth of its tall stories.

Wrapping things up... I enjoy Brown. I enjoy Kuttner and Robida. So, Yes, I definitely enjoyed The Clockwork Man. It passes the test of Sturgeon's Law with flying colors.

Amy Sturgis says

The Clockwork Man is quite a remarkable little novel: steampunk before steampunk was cool; one of the first appearances of a cyborg in science fiction literature; and a delicate commentary on modern humanity and its great enemy, time.

The novel opens with the farcical setup of the Clockwork Man's abrupt appearance at an early-twentieth-century afternoon cricket match in the countryside, which he ultimately joins and wrecks. The novel soon changes tone, however, and views the threat and promise of the Clockwork Man from several perspectives, including that of a middle-aged doctor who has grown settled in his opinions and middling life and shame at his own lack of originality, and a young man who strains against convention and the predicament of his youth.

Along the way, the story challenges modern assumptions about efficiency, the tyranny of fast-paced life (and small-town opinion), and the value of free will.

E.V. Odle was the editor who founded *Argosy*, and some have claimed Odle was a pseudonym used by Virginia Woolf. This was his first and only published novel, and it is a gem of early science fiction.
