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FICTION REVIEW

Mindscan

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Robert J. Sawyer. *Mindscan*. New York: Tor, 2005. Hardcover, 383 pages. \$24.95 U.S.; \$34.95 CAN. ISBN 0-765-31107-0. [Reviewed in Advance Uncorrected Proof]

What might it mean to be human — and how might it feel to be human — when individual minds can be instantiated in separate bodies? Once a fairly popular SF trope, found typically in stories and novels about human cloning, the question has lately been asked with renewed energy by scientists and writers alike. In *Mindscan*, his new standalone novel, Robert Sawyer adds an exciting crowd pleaser to the growing library of SF novels that explore this intriguing idea. Richly informed by current interdisciplinary research in the burgeoning field of consciousness studies, and alive with provocative speculation of its own, *Mindscan* is a heady brew of hard SF, blended with enough comedy, romance, and adventure to appeal to a wider audience, as well.

The novel opens in 2018, when Canadian teenager Jake Sullivan witnesses the stroke that reduces his father to a persistent vegetative state, a stroke brought on by a congenital brain disease called Katerinsky's syndrome. The condition is hereditary, and Jake is at risk. Cut to the year 2045: Jake, now middle-aged, elects to cheat Katerinsky's via the newly developed Mindscan technique, having his consciousness copied into a near-indestructible android body, while his biological body (and original consciousness) takes up residence in High Eden, a kind of retirement paradise established on the far side of the moon by the Immortex corporation, creators of the Mindscan process. Premise in place, the novel then kicks into high gear: Jake (the "new Jake") falls in love with Karen Bessarian, an octogenarian who has undergone the same process; Jake (the "original" Jake), finding himself on the moon, has second thoughts about his new status. Karen's son, meanwhile, sues the "new" version of his mother in probate court upon the death of his "original" mother, and from there, things get complicated, suspenseful, and eventually violent

That, at least, is the Michael Crichton-ish chassis for this vehicle. But Sawyer, no mere manufacturer of thrillers, locates the serious fun of his novel in its bundle of scientific ideas. Whether discussing such neurological issues as the role of sleep in consolidating memory, or playing with concepts of quantum entanglement, or inventing nanogel brain surgeries, *Mindscan* is a Hard SF reader's delight. At the same time, Sawyer is nobody's starry-eyed idealist about the wonderful world of science. He can be quite sobering, for instance, about the potential horrors that could ensue if consciousness studies were to become an actively experimental science, and he is mordantly funny about the potential lack of appeal of cyborg sex: "I wanted it to be sexy," a character complains, "but it was just plastic and Teflon rubbing together, silicon chips and synthetic lubricants." Sawyer has worked with some of these ideas before — most notably in last year's "Shed Skin," the *Analog* story which was the starting point for this novel, and to some extent in his two earlier novels, *The Terminal Experiment* (1995) and *Factoring Humanity* (1998) — but *Mindscan* is both deeper and wider than these predecessors.

Especially wider. Pulling out all the pop fiction stops, Sawyer also serves up an excellent courtroom drama, a bittersweet comedy, tons of adventure — even a simple trip to the moon, in Sawyer's hands, is made to seem exciting again — and plenty of touches that are just plain fun. It's a kick, for instance, that Karen Bessarian is the famous author of the DinoWorld series (a nod to Sawyer's own *Quintaglio Ascension*), and it's an even bigger hoot when she is offered a \$100 million advance for her next novel. (O brave new world, that has such treats for writers in it!) All this, plus the thriller, plus the romance, are shoehorned with surprising ease into a book that is already stuffed with long discussions of the work of science superstar Roger Penrose, micro-lectures on opposing language theorists John Searles and Daniel Dennett, and extended asides on Julian Jaynes's seminal *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*.

For readers who can't get enough of the hard stuff, *Mindscan* includes an annotated bibliography of books on consciousness, and also puts in a plug for that valuable publication, *The Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Even more readers, though, will find themselves going back to their bookstores for more helpings of Robert Sawyer.