



Runaway Robot

Books Reviewed:

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

This is a story with everything ? humour, excitement, and an intriguing plot that also raises highly relevant questions about where we are all heading. Ian McEwan does something of the same thing in his latest adult novel *Machines Like Me*. But Frank Cottrell-Boyce is also on the case here writing for a much younger audience. Do we treat robots as people or machines? Is it possible to have a genuine relationship with one? Can they ever turn on us?

In this story young Alfie, who has a prosthetic hand after a road accident, teams up with Eric, a massive walking robot who enquires 'Shall I be mother??' before pouring tea made within his own chest. But he also has a dismaying habit of taking everything said to him at face value. Asked to take a chair, this is what he will do, even if said chair was hitherto screwed onto the floor. He and Alfie live in an only slightly futuristic world where front doors welcome you home with a reading of your current heartbeat rate and kitchen cupboards offer serving suggestions based on what there is inside. In the streets self-driving buses quiz potential passengers before letting them on and at home DustUrchins keep things tidy while telling occupants the latest news.

Alfie has issues with his mechanical hand, and there is more heart-ache to come when he finally remembers how exactly his accident occurred. But by this time he has a gang of other children also with added-on limbs working on his side as Eric changes from being Your Obedient Servant into something far less tractable. A role is finally found for him making safe unexploded mines in Bosnia. The whole plot by now has spun cheerfully out of control, but this does not matter with an author of such wit and ease of writing. He tells readers in an afterword how there was once a real robot called Eric exhibited at an exhibition in London in 1928. But he could only answer fifty questions, unlike one of today's proof-reading robots which might well have noticed that on page 91 a crucial detail in one of Steven Lenton's consistently upbeat accompanying illustrations has got just slightly ahead of what was happening in the actual plot.

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