Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie

Baron, N. S. (2023). Who Wrote This? How AI and the Lure of Efficiency Threaten Human Writing. Stanford University Press Tenen, D. Y. (2024). Literary Theory for Robots. How AI Learned to Write. Norton Shorts

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Résumé de l'article

Two recently published books present perspectives on the impact of generative Artificial Intelligence on writing. Baron's book attempts to discuss the question of how we might maintain distinctions between the writing done by humans versus that done by genAI, while Tenen's book takes a historical view of the use of technologies in writing and what that implies for writers currently.

Book Review

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Tenen, D. Y. (2024). Literary Theory for Robots. How AI Learned to Write. Norton Shorts.

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Two new books present perspectives on the impact of generative Artificial Intelligence (genAI) on writing and attempt to put the stunning developments since the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022 into a clearer focus. One is highly recommended, while the other is disappointing. I am one of the masses who enjoys reading Steven Pinker, Jared Diamond, and Yuval Noah Harari, so I expected to find Naomi S. Baron's *Who Wrote This?* a similarly engaging sweep about AI's impact on writing. The ominous sounding subtitle (*How AI and the Lure of Efficiency Threaten Human Writing*), however, should have alerted me to be wary. On the other hand, Dennis Yi Tenen's *Literary Theory for Robots* seemed to hold out little hope for me since I am neither an expert in English literature nor a robot afficionado. Its subtitle (*How AI Learned to Write*), however, appealed to me as a writing teacher and thankfully avoided references to potential dystopias. Baron's book presents a confusing hopscotch across time and topic, drawing in more trivia than seems possible, all told in a voice that is annoyingly over-friendly and chatty, like having a garrulous aunt explain genAI to you. In contrast, Tenen's approachable, professorial tone actually feels friendly and respectful both of the topic and reader. At about half the length of *Who Wrote This?*, his book is also a concise and insightful read.

 Who Wrote This? claims its focus is on the place where human writers and genAI meet, and "the contrast between human authorship and today's AI alternatives represents an historic human moment" that the book "takes on" (Prologue, "A Tale of Two Authors"). This means posing the questions: "What writing tasks should we share with AI? Which might we cede? How do we draw the

line?" (Prologue, "Is Writing Uniquely Human?" As if sensing this frame is limited, Baron expands to ponder a host of related issues: whether machines can take over human tasks, whether AI might develop into artificial general intelligence (AGI) and ultimately gain control over humans, whether decision making should be vested predominantly in humans or AI, and…well, a list of issues including environmental concerns, bias, privacy, etc. In short, there is no clear focus for taking on this moment.

To be sure, the issues touched on by Baron merit discussion and have proven challenging. The problem is that no insights are provided that might help us determine how we might address these issues and divvy up writing between AI and ourselves. Readers are presented with a dichotomy: either AI's abilities will captivate us and decrease our human writing skills and voice, or AI will enhance our writing and lead to machine-human collaboration. Thus, we are told we each need to decide for ourselves what we will cede or keep. Really? That is our response to this historic moment? We are each on our own?

The book is organized into four parts and an awkwardly named glossary. The various chapters present, in multiple sections, subsections, numbered items, and bullet points, a plethora of historical facts and anecdotes, questionably related digressions (if you think Jim Henson and the Muppets couldn't be integrated, you are mistaken), snippets and summaries of research done by Baron and others, and outtakes from the author's experiences with ChatGPT. Some of these descriptions are, to be sure, interesting and relevant, introducing points that have the potential to generate insights. For instance, in Chapter 12, Baron summarizes a number of studies about handwriting, discussing the notion of embodiment and what that might mean in the context of increasing use of computers (i.e., keyboarding) rather than handwriting. She presents some clear evidence of handwriting's benefits, followed by a long explication of her own research on students' perspectives about writing by hand or on a keyboard. But rather than digging deeper into the idea of writing and voice being integrally related to physicality, and what this physical embodiment might suggest about disembodied LLMs, she concludes with vague points about humans wanting to maintain control of writing, valuing voice, and yet believing that AI improves their writing. These "themes" are followed by three "takeaways", followed by two recommendations. Then we move on to a point about the impact of AI on writing jobs.

The juxtaposition of hyper-organized points with content that jumps abruptly between ideas leads to confusion rather than a sense of impressive breadth. At the sentence level, invocations to wait until the next chapter to see X, or remember that Y was mentioned back in a previous section, or we'll see Z again, feel less like helpful guidance and more like a lack of organization and annoying intrusions.

What is helpful, however, especially for those new to genAI, is a final section devoted to identifying and briefly defining key terms and acronyms used in AI and in the book. But in keeping with the idiosyncratic organization seen throughout, this section is titled "Main Characters" with subtitles invoking "Alphabet Soup" and "Bite-sized definitions…". Careful editing might have addressed such mixed metaphors and confusions, but given the speed with which AI innovations are being released, perhaps the goal was simply speedy publication.

If what you want is a grab bag of fun facts, cursory descriptions of current AI developments (as of 2023), some research findings, and general explications of pedagogical concerns, all in the service of supporting the argument that human thinking benefits from human writing, then you will find it here. But then, that's what you might have expected from the subtitle, right?

In contrast, *Literary Theory for Robots* presents readers with a challenge: to see the "ordinary magic of literary computers" (Chapter 1). It does this by nudging us to think of computers as alien life forms that we can understand only by also thinking "in alien ways" (Chapter 1). Which means, according to Tenen, that we think in terms of cognitive evolution (i.e., *How is thinking evolving with AI?* rather than the simplistic *Is AI smarter than humans?*). He argues that humans have been thinking and writing "with and through machines" (Chapter 1) for centuries and provides compelling examples for how our thinking is bound up with tools and with others.

The book is organized into eight chapters, with the last providing a series of "nine important ideas that will totally change your life in addition to explaining why AI will neither destroy humanity nor solve all its problems" (Chapter 8). I appreciated the levity. His view that humans have long used a variety of "machines" to learn and think and write is supported by historical anecdotes and detailed explanations (such as his description and diagram of zairajahs – medieval Arabic divination circles – as an early text producing system [Chapter 2, "Table"]). His focus is unapologetically historical and literary. Chapter 7 takes a dive into mathematics, probability, and poetry. It can be hard to follow, even when he includes short exercises we can follow that illustrate his points. But persevering leads to a series of conclusions that invite deeper thinking in response to the current fixation with speed related to all things AI.

Tenen leads readers away from doomsday scenarios towards a view of AI as trailing a long history that shows "thinking and writing happen through time, in dialogue with a crowd" so we can see AI as "just another way to give that collaborative a voice. It does not, as we will see, amount to one thing but many" (Chapter 1). This isn't to suggest Tenen sees the AI-inflected future as entirely rosy: "We should be preparing for a future of 'writers' and 'coders' incapable of authoring a single line

unassisted" (Chapter 8, "Technology Encodes Politics"). He has shown, however, that it may have been delusional for us to ever have claimed our thinking and writing were unassisted.