



Robopocalypse: A Novel (Vintage Contemporaries)

By Daniel H. Wilson

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In this terrifying tale of humanity's desperate stand against a robot uprising, Daniel H. Wilson has written the most entertaining sci-fi thriller in years.

Not far into our future, the dazzling technology that runs our world turns against us. Controlled by a childlike—yet massively powerful—artificial intelligence known as Archos, the global network of machines on which our world has grown dependent suddenly becomes an implacable, deadly foe. At Zero Hour—the moment the robots attack—the human race is almost annihilated, but as its scattered remnants regroup, humanity for the first time unites in a determined effort to fight back. This is the oral history of that conflict, told by an international cast of survivors who experienced this long and bloody confrontation with the machines. Brilliantly conceived and amazingly detailed, *Robopocalypse* is an action-packed epic with chilling implications about the real technology that surrounds us.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best Books of the Month, June 2011:In the not-too-distant future, robots have made our lives a lot easier: they help clean our kitchens, drive our cars, and fight our wars--until they are turned into efficient murderers by a sentient artificial intelligence buried miles below the surface of Alaska. *Robocalypse* is a fast-paced sci-fi thriller that makes a strong case that mindless fun can also be wildly inventive. The war is told as an oral history, assembled from interviews, security camera footage, and first- and secondhand testimonies, similar to Max Brook's zombie epic *World War Z*. The book isn't shy about admitting to its influences, but author Daniel H. Wilson certainly owes more to *Terminator* than he does to Asimov. (A film adaptation is already in pre-production, with Steven Spielberg in the director's chair and a release date slated for 2013.) *Robocalypse* may not be the most unique tale about the war between man and machine, but it's certainly one of the most fun. --Kevin Nguyen

Guest Reviewer: Robert Crais



Robert Crais is the 2006 recipient of the Ross Macdonald Literary Award and the author of many New York Times bestsellers, including *The Watchman*, *Chasing Darkness*, *The First Rule*, and *The Sentry*.

Robocalypse is as good as Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain* or *Jurassic Park*, and I do not invoke Mr. Crichton's name lightly.

Daniel Wilson's novel is an end of the world story about a coming machine-versus-man war. You know the reader's cliché: "I couldn't stop turning the pages"? So shoot me--I couldn't. Started on a Friday afternoon, finished Sunday morning, and I'm slow. My daughter finished it in a single night, and then my wife. My wife *hates* science fiction, but she loved this book.

Set in a future only a few weeks away, the world is still our world, where advancements in silicon-chip technology and artificial intelligence have given us rudimentary android laborers and cars that can get around without human drivers.

The war begins the fourteenth time a scientist named Nicholas Wasserman wakes an amped-up artificial intelligence dubbed Archos. In a protected lab environment designed to contain his creation, Wasserman has awakened the sentient computer intelligence thirteen previous times, always with the same result: Archos realizes that it loves that rarest of miracles—life--above all else, and to preserve life on Earth, it must destroy mankind. This wasn't exactly what Wasserman wanted to hear, so thirteen times before, a disappointed Wasserman killed it and returned to the drawing board. But unlike Archos, Wasserman is a man, and men make mistakes. Now, on this fourteenth awakening, a simple (but believable) error by the scientist allows Archos to escape the barrier of the lab. And the war is on.

When Archos goes live, its control spreads like a virus as it reprograms the everyday devices of our lives, from cell phones to ATM machines to traffic lights to airliners. A normally benign "Big Happy" domestic robot murders a cook in a fast-food joint. A safety and pacification robot (think of an overgrown Ken doll with a dopey grin, designed to win hearts and minds) used by the army in Afghanistan (yes, we're still there) goes bad and kills dozens of people. And, in a particularly creepy scene, "smart toys" wake in their toy boxes at night to deliver ominous messages to children.

The book is rich with high-speed-action set pieces and evocative, often frightening imagery (smart cars stalking pedestrians; human corpses reanimated by machines into zombie warriors), but *Robocalypse* is a terrific and affecting read because it is about human beings we can relate to, invest in, and root for.

Among them: Cormac Wallace, a young photojournalist who escapes Boston at Zero Hour (the moment when Archos unleashes its machine army against humankind), and fights his way across the United States as the leader of a band of guerrillas known as the Brightboy squad. Takeo Nomura, a lonely technician in love with an android "love doll" named Mikiko, who, when she is reprogrammed by Archos, is driven by his love and sadness to fix her, an effort that will ultimately help turn the tide of the war. And Lurker, a pissed-off hacker and phone pranker furiously determined to identify the mysterious person who is taking the credit for his elaborate pranks . . . only to find himself in Archos's crosshairs and running for his life.

Little by little, the discoveries they (and others) make and the battles they fight lead to locating Archos, and the final battle for humanity's survival. By choosing to show us these events through the eyes of the men and women involved, Wilson gives us a high-speed, real-time history of the war on its most human level, and it is our investment in these characters and their desperate struggle that grabs us and pulls us along at a furious clip.

In lesser hands, the story could have been head-shot with pseudo-science technical jargon, overwrought explanation, and cartoonish characterizations. Instead, Wilson has given us a richly populated and thrilling novel that celebrates life and humanity, and the power of the human heart . . . even if that heart beats in a machine.

Review

"Terrific page-turning fun."

—Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly*

"An ingenious, instantly visual story of war between humans and robots."

—*The New York Times*

"Richly haunting. . . . Wilson has terrific timing in building a page-turner around the perils of technology's advance into our lives."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"An *Andromeda Strain* for the new century, this is visionary fiction at its best: harrowing, brilliantly rendered, and far, far too believable."

—Lincoln Child

"A tour de force. . . . A fast-paced, engrossing page-turner that is impossible to put down. . . . Wilson's taut prose and the imaginative scope of his story make him a worthy successor to the likes of Michael Crichton, Kurt Vonnegut and Isaac Asimov."

—*Buffalo News*

“A superbly entertaining thriller. . . . [*Robocalypse* has] everything you’d want in a beach book.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“You’re swept away against your will. . . . A riveting page turner.”

—Associated Press

“[Wilson] presents a doomsday scenario more plausible than most. No vampires, no zombies. . . . Science fiction has been grappling with the possibility of traitorous computers and mutinous androids for much of its history, but Wilson has devised a way to put an original spin on the material. *Robocalypse* is a well-constructed entertainment machine, perfect for summer reading. It’s especially refreshing to read an end-of-the-world novel that’s actually self-contained, that doesn’t require the investment in two or three more thick volumes to deliver the apocalyptic goods.”

—*The San Francisco Chronicle*

“Wilson’s training as a roboticist makes accepting a ubiquitous robot presence natural to the author; it also helps him imagine and describe some amazing machines, efficient, logically designed and utterly inimical to human life. . . . [*Robocalypse*] reads at times like horror. That its events are scientifically plausible makes them all the more frightening.”

—*Seattle Times*

“A gripping, utterly plausible, often terrifying account of a global apocalypse brought on by a transcendent AI that hijacks the planet’s automation systems and uses them in a vicious attempt to wipe out humanity.”

—Cory Doctorow, *Boing Boing*

“*Robocalypse* is the kind of robot uprising novel that could only have been written in an era when robots are becoming an ordinary part of our lives. This isn’t speculation about a far-future world full of incomprehensible synthetic beings. It’s five minutes into the future of our Earth, full of the robots we take for granted. If you want a rip-roaring good read this summer, *Robocalypse* is your book.”

—*io9.com*

“This electrifying thriller . . . will entertain you, but it will also make you think about our technology dependency.”

—*Parade Magazine*

“A brilliantly conceived thriller that could well become horrific reality. A captivating tale, *Robocalypse* will grip your imagination from the first word to the last, on a wild rip you won’t soon forget. What a read . . . unlike anything I’ve read before.”

—Clive Cussler

“[A] frenetic thriller. . . . Wilson, like the late Crichton, is skilled in combining cutting-edge technology with gripping action scenes.”

—*Booklist*

From the Author

A Q&A with Author Daniel H. Wilson



You have your Ph.D. in Robotics from Carnegie Mellon. Having made the leap from studying robotics to creating an all-out robot Armageddon in *Robocalypse*, do you believe we will ever see a real robot uprising?

My professional opinion is that robots are not going to rise up and slaughter humankind. Isn't that comforting? Instead, I believe the idea of a robot uprising embodies the thing that we're all *really* afraid of: our near total dependence on technology for survival. Billions of human beings are alive today thanks to an ancient, towering infrastructure of technology cobbled together over the ages. If this technology were to disappear--or worse, turn on us--how would we survive? **You have said that *Robocalypse* "explores the intertwined fates of regular people who face a future filled with murderous machines." Cell phones, toy dolls, elevators, and even the "Big Happy" domestic robots turn on their owners and become creepily sinister. In terms of technological advances, are you concerned that computers or robots could eventually "think" on their own someday?**

Machines of all shapes and sizes can already think on their own--and that is absolutely wonderful. A robot is only useful *because* it can think. Artificially intelligent machines make our cars safer, sniff out bombs, and build our favorite products. The sinister part only arrives when we consider that "thinking" also happens to be the only attribute that makes a *human* useful. I see why that can be a bit threatening, but I think there is plenty of room for thinkers here on planet earth. **One of the most interesting robot battling groups in the book is the Osage Nation in Gray Horse, Oklahoma. You are part Cherokee and grew up in Tulsa. How did your upbringing shape the residents and setting of Gray Horse in the book?**

In 1889, the United States government took Indian Territory away from Native Americans and gave it to settlers. Nevertheless, there are still dozens of sovereign Native American governments operating in Oklahoma. These mini-nations have their own governments, police forces, hospitals, jails, and laws -- all while co-existing with the US government. Growing up as part of the Cherokee Nation, I always felt that even if the wider world were to crumble, the nucleus of these tribal communities would hold firm. That's why in *Robocalypse* the Osage Nation keeps operating as a bastion of humanity in the face of a total government meltdown. **Robots are everywhere in our daily lives--from the military to our operating rooms to our self-parking cars--and permeate popular culture. Why do you think the public loves a robot story--be it *The Terminator*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers* or *Wall-E*?**

As a species, humankind is in love with its own reflection. People are interested in people. (That's why nobody cares for those great landscape shots in your vacation photos.) Robots are fascinating because they remind us of ourselves. In movies like *Terminator*, we see them as rivals who are capable of taking our world away from us and gaining supremacy. In other stories, like *Star Wars*, robots are integrated into our lives and cooperate as allies and tools. We love a robot story because the stakes are huge--these machines could eradicate us, or they could take us to the stars. **Have you always been fascinated by robots? And while pursuing your doctorate, did you create any robots?**

As a kid I dreamed about robots and as an adult I built them. Now, I write about them. In school, I designed artificially intelligent “smart homes” that monitored their elderly occupants to help them live safely and independently. I also helped build an autonomous boat; designed multi-robot systems that exhibited swarm behavior to search for disaster survivors; and tailored a machine learning algorithm to detect (and remove) bathroom sounds from cell phone conversations. Each of these problems was different, but the solution was always the same: a machine with some brains. Robotics is truly the Swiss army knife of the sciences. **Your protagonist, Cormac Wallace, discovers the black box of the robot uprising at the opening of the book. Cormac compiles the stories and lets them unfold in the distinct voices of the heroes of “Zero Hour” starting a full year before the robots ever attack. Why was this technique essential to the telling of *Robocalypse*?**

The story starts out a year before Zero Hour because my goal was to root the characters and events in a familiar place with relatable characters, and *then* proceed step-by-step into the nightmare of automated war. I intentionally included very little science fiction up front. That’s the scariest part of *Robocalypse*--that it’s *feasible*. There are no glinting robot armies from outer space, just the ordinary technology of our lives turning on us, ripping apart our civilization, and then *evolving* into something that human beings never intended. **The ethical impact of robots on society is attracting serious consideration. A 2009 *New York Times* article (“Scientists Worry Machines May Outsmart Man”) reported on a debate between top computer scientists on whether robotics research should be limited. Do you agree?**

Robots *can* be dangerous. For example, a titanium-clawed hexapod once savaged a friend of mine at the Robotics Institute (though in all fairness, the climbing robot simply mistook him for a tree and climbed him). Then again, any tool can be dangerous. Robots are particularly tricky to safeguard, because they act in the real world without supervision; they can learn new behaviors on the fly; and they are often stronger, faster, and smarter than human beings. These points must be taken into consideration while building robots, but we should also remember that these are exactly the attributes that make robots incredibly powerful tools. With that in mind, promise should never limit research. **The arrival of robots often conjures up thoughts of doomsday scenarios. Yet robots are rapidly improving the lives of humans with each passing year. Why do you think the fear impulse kicks in?**

It’s a question of trust. Never before has humankind trusted non-humans with the level of responsibility that machines now have. We humans are a cooperative species and we naturally work together, but we also *understand* each other. We have emotions, language, body language, and so on. We are experts at reading each others’ minds. On the other hand, robots do things that people used to do, but the machines can be inscrutable. We just aren’t *used to* the machines--not yet. How do you trust a waiter that’s got a smile permanently stamped on its plastic face? **DreamWorks purchased the film rights to *Robocalypse* and last November they announced that Steven Spielberg will direct the film version. Can you describe the day you heard the news and what that felt like? How involved will you be with the movie version?**

The movie news was an emotional overload: waves of happiness followed by pangs of terror that this is all somehow a cruel joke on the guy who loves robots. Luckily, the filmmakers have consistently consulted me on the design of their robots, exoskeletons, and a whole spectrum of other technology. I wrote it, but they have to draw it, see how it moves--make it *real*. It’s been a ridiculous pleasure to be a part of this process. Based on the robot ecology that DreamWorks has built, I cannot wait to see this movie. **Since completing *Robocalypse*, what changes or developments in artificial intelligence and robotics have struck you, and would you have written the book differently if you started today?**

I hope the book will stand on its own for a long, long time, regardless of new advances in robotics. And I think there’s a good chance it will, because many real-world developments in robotics are simply *too* fantastic. In just the medical domain, consider bacteria-sized robots that can swim in your bloodstream; flea-sized robots that can locomote over the surface of a beating heart; or micron-sized teams of robots that can cooperate with each other. All of these robots exist today, and yet I considered them too “out there” and distracting to include in *Robocalypse*. **Steel cage deathmatch: C-3PO versus Bishop from *Aliens*. Who wins and why?**

C-3PO is an awkward, shuffling golden protocol droid and Bishop is a rugged Alien-fighting android willing to be ripped to shreds to complete his mission. Based on Bishop’s dogged determination, lack of

complaining, and incredible knife-play, I predict he would slice Threepio into golden ribbons.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Evelyn Looney:

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Joni Thompson:

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