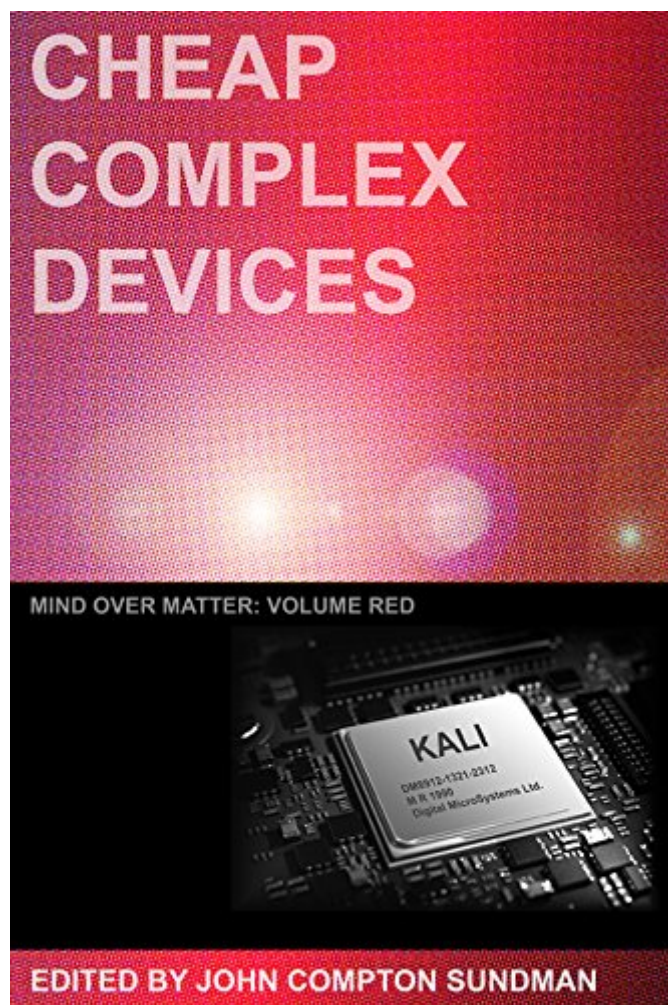


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Cheap Complex Devices: Mind Over Matter: Voume Red



Synopsis

Cheap Complex Devices, purportedly an anthology of winners of the inaugural Hofstadter Prize for Machine-Written Narrative, is part of the larger work Mind Over Matter, which also comprises Acts of the Apostles by John F.X. Sundman and The Pains by John Compton Sundman. While ostensibly telling the story of the inaugural Hofstadter Prize for Machine-Written Narrative, Cheap Complex Devices tells the story of an entity coming to awareness. What is that entity? Is it Todd Griffith, the chip designer with bullet in his brain from the novel Acts of the Apostles? Is it a bee, or a swarm of bees, a Shaker village or a very buggy floating point processor? There is ample evidence to support any of these hypotheses. Or is it, possibly, the mythical meta-character named "Sundman"? Read the book and form your own opinions. Acts of the Apostles is a Bourne-Identity style thriller about nanomachines, neurobiology, Gulf War Syndrome and a Silicon Valley messiah. It tells how Todd Griffith, a chip designer, gets a bullet in the head after successfully debugging a race condition in the Kali chip. In Cheap Complex Devices, Todd's situation is looked at from a different angle. Some people even think that Todd himself, or his consciousness transferred into a bug-riddled computer, is the real author of Cheap Complex Devices. The Pains is a lavishly illustrated dystopian phantasmagoria set in a universe that is part George Orwell's 1984 and part Ronald Reagan's 1984. It tells the story of Mr. Norman Lux, a sincere young monk beset with bewildering maladies that seem somehow chaotically connected to the fate of the world. Some people have observed that Mr. Lux's condition is markedly similar to that of an electron in a race condition in a buggy chip -- perhaps the one Todd Griffith was designing when he was shot? Or the one in which his thoughts are now imprisoned?

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Customer Reviews

There once was a madman who dreamed that he was sane and it was the rest of the world that was mad. From that day on he was never certain if he was mad, or if he was a swarm of bees, or if he was a Shaker village, or if he was a court deposition in defense of Ted Kaczynski, or if he was a fictional character in a novel written by a computer. Or if there was really any difference between these things. To put it another way: "Read This Manuscript, It Is By a Madman Who Thinks He Is a Computer Program." John Sundman's long-awaited second novel, Cheap Complex Devices is astonishing, on just about every level a book can be astonishing. In one sense, it is a full 180 degree reversal from his first book Acts of the Apostles which was a fairly straightforward techno-thriller in the Michael Crichton mold. In another sense, CCD is the exact same story as Acts. Cheap Complex Devices is composed of four (or possibly five) parts, at least one of which is actually missing. The Foreword tells the story of the book's genesis according to nominal editor John Compton Sundman, of Stanhope Island, Maine. He recounts how he became involved in a prototypical game of nerd one-upmanship at a meeting of the Special Interest Group for Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI). Two research groups, both working on "Human-Language Storytellers" (or "Hals", which are software programs that write stories) meet over dinner one night, and eventually get into an argument about whose Hal is better. The rivalry between the two competing research groups leads them to propose a contest, the first ever Hofstadter Prize for Machine-Written Narrative, to determine whose storytelling program is the best.

This is not a review of John Sundman's "Cheap Complex Devices" (CCD). If it were, the first sentence of this paragraph would be false, forming a rather simplistic example of a "strange loop", one of those inherently self-contradictory structures whose existence is postulated by Goedel's theorem to be possible in any "sufficiently complex" system that can represent statements in logic. After the obligatory snippets of glowing reviews, the back cover proudly declares that CCD was

awarded the Hofstadter Prize for computer-generated fiction. Douglas Hofstadter is the Pulitzer Prize winning author of one of the seminal literary works related to computer science, "Goedel, Escher, Bach: the Eternal Golden Braid". Goedel, as mentioned above, was a mathematician whose most famous work dealt with self contradiction in logical systems; Escher was an artist who created many famous works that play upon our interpretations of "3 dimensional" drawings done on flat surfaces. Bach, of course, was a 17th century German organist of some repute. The first key to understanding CCD is to realize that there is, in fact, no Hofstadter prize, and no Society for Analytical Engines to award it. This book was not written by a military surplus AWACS computer with (or without) a faulty floating point unit. Even the review snippets on the back cover are fictional. All of these fictions regarding the book could be described as "meta fiction", which exist on a different conceptual level from the book itself. The clever use of meta-fiction justifies this volume's claim on the Hofstadter Award. Except that, if the award actually existed, the metafiction would not, and this book would no longer merit the award. Strange loops indeed.

"Cheap Complex Devices" is one volume of a matched pair with "Acts of the Apostles." Both are laced with references to each other and retell scenes and themes from different viewpoints in an eternal golden braid. Reading both, any geek will enjoy finding the jokes, the errors, and the parodies and elegies of themselves. The whole effect is naughty and pretentious and fun: like drinking Glenlivet, listening to late Beatles, and discussing Dan Dennett with that stunning comp. sci. major you'd rather be sleeping with. And like the Beatles, it helps to have a guide to the backstory: The other and earlier volume, "Acts of the Apostles", reads as a technological thriller. It is an entertaining and satisfying story that you can imagine would have Harrison Ford or some other favorite actor in the lead role. It stands on its own. The CCD volume contains the novella, "Bees, or, The Floating Point Error." This reads like Hunter S Thompson narrating Douglas Hofstadter: "Goedel, Escher, Bach" on acid. Also included in CCD is an introduction to both stories. It purports to be an academic article describing each story as written by a computer program for an AI story-telling contest. Finally, we have a forward in CCD that presents an explanation of why there are two separate volumes, several different John Sundmans, and yet another name for the collection. All are threaded with malfunctioning brains and psyches and processors. There's guilt and Ted Kaczynsky and a quest to internalize God. But while the craft of "Acts" is in telling an entertaining story, CCD is deeper and closer to the author. Like many a second album, it might not be appreciated by people who enjoyed the popular hooks of the premier.

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