



# Machine

*Jennifer Pelland*

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## **Machine** Jennifer Pelland

Celia's body is not her own, but even her conscious mind can barely tell the difference. Living on the cutting edge of bio-mechanical science was supposed to allow her to lead a normal life in a near-perfect copy of her physical self while awaiting a cure for a rare and deadly genetic disorder. But a bio-android isn't a real person. Not according to the protesters outside Celia's house, her coworkers, or even her wife. Not according to her own evolving view of herself. As she begins to strip away the human affectations and inhibitions programmed into her new body, the chasm between the warm pains of flesh-and-blood life and the chilly comfort of the machine begins to deepen. Love, passion, reality, and memory war within Celia's body until she must decide whether to betray old friends or new ones in the choice between human and machine.

## **Machine Details**

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Author : Jennifer Pelland

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## From Reader Review Machine for online ebook

### Jon says

I'm conflicted about this book. It was entertaining, and I finished it, but it wasn't satisfying.

It attempts to explore an interesting issue, and does a good job with parts of it, but overall it feels like a thin excuse to write about robot sex. Some of the wording and "tech" talk feels childish, and some of the flat behavior of the characters enforces this.

I wanted to like this book more than I did, but it's just not quite there. There's a way to meld your sex scenes and behavior together with the plot so it doesn't feel like its the main purpose, but the author hasn't figured out how.

Entertaining, but that's all.

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### Adam Ickes says

If I had to describe this book in one word that word would be disturbing, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

I won't go into much detail so I don't ruin it for you, but *Machine* is the thought provoking story of a woman, Celia, who takes on an android body while her biological body is held in stasis until a cure can be found for her rare form of Alzheimer's. The woman has few friends to support her during her greatest time of need. She faces many unforeseen struggles in her new life as a bioandroid and has trouble coping with living in the mechanical body. To top off her problems, her wife, who she loves dearly, has divorced her because she didn't support decision to use a biomechanical body.

A disturbing scene of a future that is all too plausible is what this book delivers. The future depicted may very well be what we as a society are on our way to becoming as we continue our scientific endeavors. The author explores the various reactions to the bioandroid program from love to hate to begrudging acceptance and everything in between. The well written characters bring a level of realism to the story of Celia's struggle to accept her new body for what it truly is, a machine.

*Machine* leaves you wondering what the future of mankind may hold and how we will adapt to the inevitable changes and advances coming our way. How far of a stretch is it that we may one day be living in mechanical bodies? How would such bodies be abused and how would the world cope with such a thing?

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### Rob says

...*Machine* focuses completely on impact on the individual. Pelland doesn't spend time on exploring the implications of developments in the novel to wider society beyond what is necessary for the development of her character, which some readers may find a weakness. Personally, I think *Machine* is a very good character study. Celia is a troubled individual and her story does not make for happy reading. It's at times disturbing, at time heartbreaking and always keeps the reader on their toes. The novel offers an awful lot of questions for

the reader to mull over. So many in fact that a couple of days since I finished it, I still haven't been able to pick my next read. Not many books manage to do that. It is probably not a book for everyone but as far as I'm concerned it is recommended reading.

Full Random Comments review

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## **Ronel says**

It has been a week since I finished it and cannot get it out of my mind. This is such a fantastic book.

I've always been a huge sci-fi fan. Not so much the "Hark, an alien" type but more the "what if XYZ happens a hundred years from now." Realistic sci-fi for the lack of a better term (or is that an oxymoron?)

The book centers around the idea that the human thoughts and memories of a terminally ill patient can be transferred into a bio-android body. The body of the patient is then put into stasis pending the discovery of a cure. The bio-android body is an exact copy of the human and people cannot tell the difference between a human and a bio-android.

The protagonist is Celia, a woman who was recently put in a bio-android body. Instead of going home and living her life as before (probably the biggest selling point used by the bio-android industry) she finds everything turned upside down.

She struggles with the duality of her existence to such an extent that she decides to embrace the mechanical side of herself. The pain of everyday existence becomes too much and she decides on a course of action which will purge her of the emotional pain assailing her.

We have all probably been at a stage where we wished we could turn our emotions off and from that perspective I had immense empathy with Celia and what she decides to do with her body.

The book is dark and different. The story grabs hold of you and refuses to let go. It is as if Celia, despite her actions to the contrary, wants to scream to the world that she is still human.

The sci-fi is not so much sci-fi but more "What if". The technology is a mere prop to the intensely human story that the author tells. The author does not fall into the trap of trying to describe the technology and the science in detail. It is mentioned in passing and the author concentrates her efforts in telling a riveting story of a broken hearted woman.

Highly, highly recommended.

## Ryan says

Celia Krajewski is unsure of how long she has to live. None of us do, really, but for Celia the matter is a bit more pressing, as she's recently discovered she carries a gene for a rare mutation that will eventually destroy her mind. She has an out, though; she can place her body in stasis, transferring her mind and personhood to a bioandroid body so that she can continue living until a cure is found.

Death always demands payment, though, and Celia's attempt to cheat it comes with the cost of her marriage; her wife refuses to see Celia as the 'real' Celia, claiming that to be with her robotic body would amount to infidelity. This starts Celia questioning exactly how human her new self is. Eventually, she starts to hurt herself, to remind herself of her humanity. To her surprise, she finds that she starts to like the pain. And that she's not the only bioandroid who feels that way.

While the science fictional elements of *Machine* are absolutely essential parts of it, they are not the central focus of it; instead, Pelland wisely chooses to focus her story on Celia's attempts to retain a feeling of humanity as she starts to lose many of the relationships with others that define who we are; our romantic relationships, friendships, hobbies and career choices are so often a part of our self-definition that to be stripped of them can remove that feeling of humanity from any of us, if only momentarily; to be stripped in that way while inside a biomechanical body that only reinforces those feelings of nonhumanism.

Beyond the character study of Celia, *Machine* also has some interesting things to say about the interplay of individual rights and collective good. Given the subject matter of the book, it would be very easy to think of *Machine* as a book that would argue that individual rights are always paramount, and the first-person narration that Celia provides definitely seems to support that. "Body autonomy", as it is phrased in the book, is understandably important for all the mechanical characters, and it is the realization that she lacks that that drives Celia to make some of the choices that she does in the course of the story. However, as first-person narrators are inherently unreliable, it's important to look beyond Celia's opinion and see what's actually happening. The reality that we can observe when we look beyond Celia is that all of the crises that Celia faces throughout the book stem from others using their own bodily autonomy – their 'free will', to use a somewhat loaded term – without regard to how those choices will impact others. The regularity with which that occurs doesn't seem to be coincidental, but rather seems to be a statement from the author on the need to balance one's own self-discovery and actualization with the knowledge of how that will affect others around them.

The human characters in Celia's story are fascinating and self-contradictory. Most of those that recognize that there is still humanity in her, or at least claim to, refuse ultimately to treat her as human, instead objectifying her and using her as a tool for their own ends. Within the moral framework of the story, this objectification is somewhat defensible – it could be argued, after all, that they're operating with the same desire for individualistic autonomy that Celia desires – but it is still ultimately counterproductive and serves only to increase Celia's feelings of separation and otherness from her new body.

*Machine* was, at times, a hard book to read. The emotional power of Pelland's writing left me breathless at a few points, and the depths that Celia is willing to go to prove her remaining humanity to herself will no doubt be shocking to some readers. The tragedy that sits at its core makes it a very rewarding read; Jennifer Pelland manages to put a very human and humanistic face on a subgenre that at times tries to flee from those descriptors.

(note: Apex Publications provided a copy of *Machine* for review).

## Shara says

**The premise:** ganked from BN.com: *Celia's body is not her own, but even her conscious mind can barely tell the difference. Living on the cutting edge of biomechanical science was supposed to allow her to lead a normal life in a near-perfect copy of her physical self while awaiting a cure for a rare and deadly genetic disorder.*

*But a bioandroid isn't a real person. Not according to the protesters outside Celia's house, her coworkers, or even her wife. Not according to her own evolving view of herself. As she begins to strip away the human affectations and inhibitions programmed into her new body, the chasm between the warm pains of flesh-and-blood life and the chilly comfort of the machine begins to deepen. Love, passion, reality, and memory war within Celia's body until she must decide whether to betray old friends or new ones in the choice between human and machine.*

*"I'm not sure anyone else could take material like posthuman politics, kinky sex and body modification, and explicit metaphors for the abortion debate and euthanasia, and turn it all into a heartrending love story, but Jennifer Pelland nails the dismount every time." --NK Jemisin, Hugo-nominated author of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms**

### **My Rating: Worth Reading, with Reservations**

The book is chockfull of interesting, fascinating ideas and questions, and for that alone I'd recommend it. I'd also recommend it because Pelland is an up-and-coming talent, and while I'd admit to preferring her short fiction over this, I still can't wait to get my hands on whatever she publishes in the future, because her fiction is so idea-centric in a way that makes the reader really question the things they took for granted. She wants to make you uncomfortable and she wants you to think about why, and that's an awesome thing to have in science fiction. However, the reservation is because what makes the reader uncomfortable may be a trigger for some people, and while nothing was a trigger for me personally, I wasn't so invested in Celia's motivation that I was able to fully empathize with her actions. However, the book is a solid and fast read. Pelland's doing a lot with this book, some of which is successful, and some of which is *almost* there. For a reader who wants to check out her work, I would recommend starting with her short story collection *Unwelcome Bodies*, because you get a variety of stories that really showcases what Pelland is capable of. But despite my liking this a bit less than her short fiction, Pelland is a talent to watch, and I look forward to seeing what else she's got up her sleeve.

Also, on the plus side for this book, the heroine is a character of color (mixed race, if I recall) as well as a lesbian. So if you're wanting to read more speculative fiction that features one or both of those things, then you should definitely get your hands on this.

**Spoilers, yay or nay?:** Yay. This book has a lot of meat to its bones in terms of issues and execution of said issues, so if you want to remain spoiler-free, do not read the full review. The full review is at my blog, which is linked below, and as always, comments and discussion are most welcome.

### **REVIEW: Jennifer Pelland's MACHINE**

Happy Reading!

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## Sally says

Good science fiction makes you think. Pulp science fiction entertains you. Great science fiction, on the other hand, makes you think while entertaining you. Such is the case with *Machine* by Jennifer Pelland.

The concept at the heart of the story is an interesting one, and even though it's been done before, it's never been done quite like this. In the not-too-distant future, science has managed to create entirely human-looking android bodies into which human thoughts and emotions can be copied. It's a technology that was designed for the benefit of terminally ill patients with incurable diseases, allowing them a chance to live while they wait for a cure, although it's starting to become something of a cosmetic procedure as well, despite the overwhelming political and religious objections.

The novel follows the story of Celia, a young woman with a rare genetic disease that's a low priority on the medical research front. She wakes up from the copy-over process, acting, feeling, and thinking exactly as she did in her old body. For her, there is no change, and no awareness of being different from what she was before. Unfortunately, her wife doesn't see it the same way, and Celia awakes to find herself divorced . . . alone . . . shunned by the woman she loves, who refused to cheat on the woman she loves with a soul-less copy.

D.B. Story's *Fembot Chronicles*, which I've reviewed her many times of the past few years, are some of my favourite stories to deal with the concept of mechanical beings and self-awareness. There, the focus on the story was on robots acquiring sentience, and fighting for rights they never had. Here, with *Machine*, the focus is instead on humans becoming something less-than-human in the transition, and fighting for the right to distinguish themselves from what they have lost.

On the one hand, it's a rather dark and disturbing reality with which we're presented, with Celia and her new found friends illegally modifying themselves to look less than human since society's rejection has made them feel less than human. It begins with Celia slicing open her finger to see the ceramic 'bone' beneath, and quickly progresses from there. Polished chrome skin, featureless mannequin-like bodies, and glowing eyes are the physical aspect, with the ability to suppress emotions, voluntarily go into lockdown, and play with the sensitivity of their pain/pleasure receptors is another. Like I said, it's almost heartbreaking to see the lengths to which they feel forced to modify themselves, even as we share in the exhilaration of freedoms and feelings otherwise impossible for the rest of humanity. The voluntary fetishization of their condition is oddly confusing, coming across as erotic and exciting when they fetishize one another, but disgusting and inexcusable when they play to human kinks.

As part of her exploration of what it means to be human, Jennifer does an amazing job of dealing with questions of sexuality and gender. Celia, as I mentioned previously, is a lesbian, although it's entirely inconsequential in the future presented. Other than one instance where another character reminds her that her marriage would once have been as controversial as her new body, her sexuality is a complete non-issue. Similarly, we get to explore some interesting ideas of gender through Celia's augmented friends, including one who can alter his gender at will to be male, female, or a combination of the two, and another who is entirely featureless and androgynous since, as it points out, robots do not have a gender.

If I were to voice one complaint, it would be over the ambiguity of the ending, but I realised that was intentional. Celia's fate is what we make of it, and that brings us right back to the concept of making you think while entertaining you. I realise I haven't done the story justice, but hopefully I've highlighted enough of the elements handled so masterfully by Celia that you'll want to give it a read.

## **Arachne8x says**

This is a very gritty, very creepy, extremely insightful book.

Is the self in the mind, in the soul, in the body, or in all of the above? Is a constructed body that is virtually identical to the original a place where the human psyche can feel at home?

Celia is inhabiting an android body that is virtually indistinguishable from the one in medical stasis, but while this seems like a perfect solution to the problem of deadly or debilitating diseases, as Celia discovers there are parts of society and the human psyche that cannot handle the difference.

This book handles the topics of dysmorphia and the tendency of us to think of our minds and bodies as separate entities so deftly that even though we are not living in the world Celia does, her turmoil feels very real.

An outstanding work that is very thought provoking, but not for the faint at heart.

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## **Bryan Schmidt says**

If the author had set aside her ideology and just focused on story, this would be a five star book, but unfortunately, despite being hard to put down, the story suffers under the weight of the preachy tone. Questions could have been asked and left up to readers to decide how they come down on the issue. But that doesn't happen here enough. And that's too bad, because there's a rollicking good Science Fiction tale underneath, one I found it hard to tear my eyes away from. But just when I was getting wrapped up again, the sledgehammer slung through with another ideological sermon and ruined the moment. I dislike ideological blathering in the guise of fiction, whether the ideology matches my own or not. In spite of that, the book is a fascinating tale set in a fascinating, well built world with a well drawn lead and some nicely handled, though thinly drawn supporting characters. The plot and pacing are almost spot on, except for the above mentioned preaching issue. The book just carries you along, infusing you with a desire to find out what happens next. The tale of a woman diagnosed with a rare, bad version of Alzheimers who takes advantage of future tech to have her "brain and memories" transferred into a biorobotic body until a cure can be found, while her fleshly body lies in stasis, Machine asks some truly fascinating questions about science. How far should it go and at what cost? Just because we have the technology, does that make it right to use it? Are there other questions we should ask? It's compelling and emotional and fascinating. Too bad the ideological lectures got in the way. None of those political things is essential to the story which already has so many deep questions to ask and does just by its plot and circumstances. The politics distract focus and would not be missed if they weren't there. Still, Pelland shows great talent as a writer and storyteller and I have no problem understanding why it found a willing publisher. There were probably several.

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## **Tamahome says**

Just got it on the basis of the ebook sample. Seems nicely creepy and depressing à la Octavia Butler. The author was just on sfsignal's podcast, but the interview mostly covered belly dancing.

Lesbian woman gets a new body, wife leaves, she starts taking herself apart.

28% - (kindle book has no page numbers) Io9 is going to rave about this.

56% - Oboy. (She doesn't shy away from the sex.)

90% - Ok, let's finish it. I think I can do 600 'units' an hour and there's 800 left.

All done. Very different from my usual reads. May be too 'squicky' or depressing for some people. Reader beware. I was just a little ansy 75% of the way through, but was fairly satisfied by the ending.

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## Misha says

I've known Jennifer Pelland for something like 14 years and have watched her carve out a niche as a top-notch small/indie press science fiction writer exploring how people relate to technology and to their own bodies. *Machine* feels like the culmination of her exploration of those themes, bringing them all together in one dark, kinky, twisted, screwed-up ride about a woman learning to live in an android body. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who likes their science fiction to kick over humanity's rocks and see what scurries out from underneath. There are some timely political themes about our rights over our own bodies and those who want to deny those rights on religious grounds, but also a heartfelt exploration of what it means to be human, how we form bonds with other people, and the dark places we can go when something breaks us. An excellent read by an author who deserves attention. I also recommend her short story collection *Unwelcome Bodies* for explorations of similar topics.

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## L Timmel says

*\_Machine\_* is an engaging exploration of somatophobia, mostly that of main character Celia's hatred of her temporary "body" which she endeavors to variously "control," "punish," and annihilate when she learns that her wife rejects it. (Another, more generalized version of somatophobia, in which certain characters desire to permanently replace their bodies with immortal machinery that they consider "perfect" in comparison with the weakness and imperfection of their somatic bodies, is simply noted often, without exploration.) My problem with *\_Machine\_*, though, is that it couples a fantastic, logically impossible premise with an sfnal story. Fantasy can sometimes be meshed with sf, but not when the narrative style is that of non-playful straightforward psychological realism.

The novel's foundational assumption is that Cartesian dualism-- the belief that "mind" exists apart from the "body"-- is literally true, when in fact the last half century of neuroscience has shown that consciousness ("mind") is in an artifact of the neurological processes of the brain and central nervous system (i.e., the body), and not an entity that can be neatly downloaded into a machine and then continue to function as a discrete entity quite apart from the processes that have been producing it. As I read *\_Machine\_*, I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. (Granted, I was a bit puzzled at the beginning when Celia woke from the transfer process and experienced no difficulty standing, walking, using her hands, etc., without training or practice of any kind.) We are told repeatedly that Celia's machine body is "simulating" the emotions and physical responses of a somatic body, but the more this was repeated to me, the harder it became for me to quash my need to question just what kind of "brain" a machine might have that it could reproduce consciousness and hormonal flows so seamlessly that Celia never ever perceived a difference between her somatic body and her "machine" body. Of course, our brains are creating bridges all the time in order to maintain a sense of seamless continuity and sensory construction of the world. But would a machine brain be

able to do that, too? The narrative, in its constant invocation of Cartesian dualism, never once hints that anything quite that complex is involved in its "android" bodies and never admits that the mind is inseparable from the body that produces it. This is consistent with Celia's view, of course, in her desire to punish and control the body her wife has rejected. But given how often experts are allowed to speak their expertise in this novel, the absence of a more sophisticated view (one that acknowledges the obsolescence of Celia's belief in mind/body dualism) is glaring.

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### **Kelly Flanagan says**

WOW At this point I think I need to breathe and blink a couple hundred times to stop the tears. What an amazing story. Celia has a problem, well a few problems. one her body is in stasis because of a genetic disorder. two, her bioandroid body isn't good enough for her wife and three, she doesn't feel human anymore. This book is an intense ride through the rough and gritty reality of not fitting into your body. Now the book is all about bioandroids but the premise is one that runs through many peoples lives-what to do when your outsides and insides don't match. For Celia the answer is clear. change the outsides. But life intercepts her chances to be more machine and leaves her to make the hardest decision yet. to erase her machine mind so that her body in stasis never remembers what she did while a machine. We've all wondered "who am I" but never have we had the chance to try to match the viewable us with the us we feel we are like Celia does. Could you do it?

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### **Nikki says**

I've been thinking about this for a while, and I'm still not quite sure what to say. Machine is a powerful exploration of body dysphoria, set in a world where your consciousness can be downloaded into a medical android body replacement, while your human body is cryo-frozen to prevent the progression of disease. It reflects on body dysphoria in general, of course, and it's pretty inconclusive about the answer — should you modify, should you learn to live with it, how will people around you react...

There are parts of this which are frankly disturbing — the erotica parts didn't interest me, obviously, but I actually found them actively discomforting even to skim past. That's 100% intentional, and that's obvious, so that's not meant as a criticism. It's just something you might want to bear in mind if you find the book interesting.

I found it difficult to believe in the central couple, whose separation sparks the whole plot. Rivka doesn't seem like a great person, if she couldn't even tell her wife that she wasn't happy with the medical replacement body before she went through the whole procedure. Character-wise, no one really shines — even the main character's closest friend and people who are sympathetic to her do stupid things which out her to the world (which is fairly anti-robot), things which I wouldn't tolerate in a friend even in the less fraught environment nowadays for queer people.

It was interesting and powerful, but not something I was willingly emotionally involved in, or emotionally involved in for the reasons I'd usually enjoy. The ending... it was what I wanted, in a sense, but it felt like a cop-out as well. Consequences-be-gone.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

## Dale says

Whether you call it science fiction, or speculative fiction, or sociological fiction, or any other term, the genre field is about technological advances, but more importantly, what those changes in technology mean to us as humans. The best examples show us how people's lives are altered with this new leap in the sciences-- what about us changes, and what remains essentially the same. The humanity of the story is what truly matters.

In *Machine*, the humanity of the story is all, as it should be. Jennifer Pelland gives us a heart-rending tale of a life altered by a technological advance. When science can put our consciousness into a mechanical body, who would want to go back to their fleshly frame? When there are, in effect, two of you, which is the "real" one? Does that term have significance anymore? How would your loved ones react to your mind in a different shell?

These questions and more pop up in this masterful book. So many different viewpoints are shown as to what people would think about the technique, and what happens to those who undergo it. There are religious and ethical protesters, opportunists, fetishists, and others who are portrayed against the personal struggle of one woman to keep her identity and life together.

When, for medical reasons, the protagonist Celia Isoke Krajewski undergoes the procedure to put her fleshly body in stasis while she "lives" in a mechanical copy, she awakens to find that in the eyes of some, she is now a monster. Those now opposed to her include her nearest and dearest loved ones. She soon becomes an outcast, separated from all she has known. She finds unlikely allies in her struggle to understand who she now is and what that means.

The book realistically shows that although society changes in regard to some personal choices, people in the book continue to hold bigoted opinions about what others are doing with their bodies and selves. The characters are tolerant about their own choices, but demand that others submit to a different standard.

So we have a grand example of a book that examines what it is to be human when the boundaries of humanity are stretched and morphed into alternatives. Is it an evolution or an abomination? *Machine* will make you think and give you a new understanding about identity, gender, and beliefs.

When you have finished with *Machine* and want to read more by this talented author, get her book of stories, *Unwelcome Bodies*, with further explorations of identity and change.

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