



The Complete Roderick

John Sladek

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Roderick is a robot and this is his autobiography. Educated by watching television, he is adopted by an elderly couple in Kansas and tries to adjust to American society. Sladek conveys, with great sensitivity and insight, the innocence of an artificial intelligence and asks profound questions about mankind's right to manipulate others. It also portrays how a numerological mind might structure a narrative.

Inventive, funny, yet melancholy, this is one of SF's greatest creative geniuses writing at his thought-provoking best. Omnibus edition includes *Roderick* and *Roderick at Random*.

The Complete Roderick Details

Date : Published 2004 by Overlook Press (first published January 1st 1992)

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Author : John Sladek

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From Reader Review The Complete Roderick for online ebook

Ben says

I had high hopes for this when I picked it up - for a start I had not been disappointed by anything from the *SF Masterworks* series. The blurb gave the impression that I would be reading something along the lines of Isaac Asimov's many books on robots, or Brian Aldiss' *Supertoys Last All Summer Long*.

Instead what I got was a rather boring story, filled with farcical characters making pseudo-satirical comments on the state of human nature or our current society in artificial and ridiculous situations. Large chunks of the book read as poor imitations of Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus' Trilogy*, particularly the mishmash of dialogues between recurring characters in social gatherings.

Sadly for me the humour of the book, such as people refusing to recognise that Roderick was in fact a robot, and not a strange little boy in some kind of wheel-chair (and yes, he does have cameras for eyes and a metal body) is completely ridiculous. This would be fine, but then Sladek tries to shoe-horn pathos and social commentary into the story as well. The elements just clashed too much for me, and while it did give me a chuckle here and there, I generally found the commentary to be annoying and totally devalued by its absurd setting and when spouted by character after character who is essentially insane by our real world standards.

Perhaps this is the underlying point and I am missing the hidden genius of this novel, but in the end, I just largely found it boring and rather irritating.

Mawgojzeta says

I very much enjoyed this book (books). It is a fun social satire.

I kept comparing the style and feel of the writing to *The Illuminatus! Trilogy: The Eye in the Pyramid/The Golden Apple/Leviathan* and *Schrödinger's Cat Trilogy*. Almost a light version. Not the best description, I know...

SJ says

Many of us think about the ethics of AI, not least fuelled by TV goodies such as *Caprica*, *BSG* et al... I'd not heard of John Sladek before, but was delighted to read this book - the development of AI with the 'robot' himself as the main protagonist - a quick learner, and confused by humanity as would be expected. There's a massive, inter-related, interesting and complex cast - some of the sub-plots reminded me of De Lillo or DFW, sometimes I found it a bit hectic (and felt I'd benefit from a cast list), but it was immensely enjoyable and very much more novelistic than lots of other sci-fi I thought...highly recommended.

Kio says

John Sladek *really* likes brick jokes... plenty of them in this novel. Like Tik-Tok, there's a sort of Vonnegut-tone to his writing and, although the story as a whole isn't a parody/comedy, there's definitely a good humor element there and a few parts I really couldn't help laughing at (and getting funny looks from people nearby).

And then there are some parts that just about killed me. This novel doesn't paint a kindly picture of humankind. My brother felt most of the characters were incompetent; in my opinion, malicious would be a better description.

I also, personally, found it a bit depressing. But a great read; I'm very glad I found this title.

Roddy Williams says

'Roderick is a robot who learns. He begins life looking like a toy tank, thinking like a child, and knowing nothing whatever of human ways. But as he will discover, growing up and becoming fully human is no easy task in a world where many people seem to have little difficulty giving up their humanity and descending to other levels. Published here for the first time in one volume, the two novels which comprise The Complete Roderick are John Slack's satirical masterpiece.'

Blurb to the 2001 Gollancz SF Masterworks edition.

'Roderick was in his room reading I, Robot, wondering when the I character was going to put in an appearance. There must be one, because otherwise the author would have called it He, Robot, or They Robots. He couldn't imagine how it would feel, being hooked up these three terrible laws of robotics....' (p 227)

Roderick is a robot, and has been given a copy of the famous Isaac Asimov book by Father Warren, head of The Catholic School in which he has been enrolled. The priest hopes that the book will persuade Roderick – whom he believes to be a severely disabled boy – that robots are fictional creatures.

This develops into a wonderful theological discussion in which Roderick brutally and logically demolishes Asimov's three laws, which is – in some SF circles I am sure - tantamount to blasphemy. This is only one of the many small jewels in this modern twist on the story of Pinocchio.

It's interesting that Sladek's creation should be a robot, rather than an android or An Artificial Intelligence (Capital A, Capital I). Robots as such are rare devices in late Twentieth Century SF. The word has become dated, rooted as much in a cinematic history as a literary one, and is associated with the clanking metal creatures of B-Movies and low-budget TV series. Asimov, of course, though not the first author to explore the concept, is arguably the one most associated with robots.

The term has acquired an air of absurdity, which is why perhaps Roderick fits so neatly into the world Sladek has created for him.

The novel is more about the humans who are woven in a complex pattern around Roderick's 'life' from the outset, the absurdity of their obsessions and irrelevancies ruthlessly reflected from Roderick's child-like naivety and inarguable logic. It is densely packed with ironies, subtle jokes – many of which are genre-specific and which are aimed at seasoned SF fans – and observations of actions whose consequences are often dropped casually into the narrative pages later.

Roderick's journey through life is a hectic roller-coaster of a ride. Created in the University of Minnetonka he is 'liberated' by his creator and sent to live with foster-parents, one of whom he accidentally kills before nailing himself into a crate and getting posted on to his next home, from where he is kidnapped by gypsies, sold into slavery, rescued... and so it goes on.

Postmodernism in some aspects of its manifestation employs the use of icons and conventions of the past, given a contemporary twist, which is exactly what Sladek does here with the term 'robot', lifting a genre

convention of SF of the first half of the Twentieth century and making it the centrepiece of a Nineteen Eighties novel. If by the Nineteen Eighties the term was unfashionable in SF, it was still very much a part of the English Language, as it is today, though used on the whole to describe the automated devices employed in manufacturing industry, something of which Sladek was no doubt well aware. There are constant references and examples within the text of our dependence on robots/computers/labour-saving devices, and our attitude toward them, polarised by the surreal opposed views of Hank Dinks (Leader of the Luddite movement) and his ex-wife Indica (Leader of the Machine Liberationist).

As a novel, it is sometimes over-complex and demands re-reading if only to pick up on jokes and references one might have missed the first time round.

It's witty, farcical, quite brilliant and, although listed in Pringle's 100 Greatest SF Novels is, strictly speaking, not an SF novel at all.

Roderick is a literary rather than a mechanical device who, like Pinocchio and The Tin Man before him, embodies more humanity than the 'meat' specimens with whom he comes into contact. But at no stage is he a fully realised 'mechanism' and although Sladek gives us clues as to his appearance, the details of his construction are a mystery, but arguably an unimportant one.

Through this device Sladek mercilessly exposes the hypocrisy, inhumanity and absurdity of The Military, The Church, The Media, The Art World, The Business Community and the Publishing Industry, often so subtly that it almost passes one by.

'Maybe he is a priest, maybe he ain't,' the General said to Roderick. 'You can't hardly tell the clergy from anybody else these days, they go around wearing drag and smoking pot just like human beings.' (p. 435)

Erik says

Roderick is an AI, gradually learning and evolving from his original inception in a thinktank, and tanklike body, to a convincing Turing test ready android. Roderick solves one puzzle in each book and they both involve a kind of original thinking. The first, a "Clue" like mystery involves a reductio argument from an absurd conclusion and the second again the revision (or correct interpretation) of an initial assumption in face of incoherent information in one of those LSAT type pairing questions. These puzzles are very much illustrative of what he is learning from absurd humanity throughout the series. Rather than making robots who think more like rational humans, it's robots who are rational and make sense, humanity is insane, as Sladek amply illustrates. I think Tik Tok should be included as a kind of dark epilogue to the Roderick saga.

Josiah says

My impression is that the author started with a collection of jokes, logic problems, and palindromes in one column. Then he started another column of modern trends that he wanted to satirise. Then he put both columns in random order and attempted to write a plot that somehow linked everything together. The author indulges himself further with group conversations where the dialog of one person leads directly into what someone else is saying, but in such a way to twist the meaning of both statements... for pages at a time. A character who gets mentioned in passing at the beginning of the book will be mentioned, probably in passing, again by the end of the book. All these shenanigans make for an incredibly slow read where every line has the potential to have multiple meanings or significance - if the reader bothers to attempt to track it all. Sometimes it pays off (the results are often quite amusing), but more often it all fails to gel and one gets the impression of having put forth far too much time and effort.

Manny says

- Hello Roderick.
- HELLO MANNY.
- Tell me who you are, Roderick.
- I AM A ROBOT. I AM THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A NOVEL BY JOHN SLADEK.
- Okay, Roderick, and what is the novel about?
- IT IS ABOUT ME.
- That's true, Roderick, but what else is it about?
- IT IS ABOUT HOW MACHINES ARE LIKE PEOPLE AND HOW PEOPLE ARE LIKE MACHINES.
- Very good, Roderick! Now tell me how you are like a person.

The rest of this review is available elsewhere (the location cannot be given for Goodreads policy reasons)

Kirk Macleod says

With five titles left of my journey through David Pringle's Science Fiction: the 100 Best Books, I've just finished John Sladek's *The Complete Roderick*, which was originally published as *Roderick* (1980) and *Roderick at Random* (1983). The story is highly satirical and follows Roderick, the world's first self-aware robot, as he navigates his way through human culture.

Much of the novel is designed to make fun of the modern world from the point of view of an innocent. Roderick is created in a second-rate university hired by a representative from NASA who is only using the project to cover his own embezzling. As Roderick makes his way through the world (and to be fair, Roderick has no gender, so I should be saying "makes its way") it comes across all sorts of groups and institutions that simply refuse to see it as a robot, and instead assume Roderick is a disabled child. The novel doesn't have a lot of trust for larger institutions and is definitely against capitalism run amok, but at the same time shows how a creature unfamiliar with our world can construct a world view so alien as to seem impossible.

A fascinating read.

Kian says

Roderick is a machine intelligence and consciousness, embodied in a mechanical body. Strictly speaking, he is a robot.

Most stories about robots and robotics revolve around the robot themselves and their impact on society.

Roderick's impact is relatively zero-sum, he is distinctively a footnote, an observer for things that happen to and around him.

"Roderick" looks at the early years of Roderick's life, from his initial inception from the mind of a deranged genius (with a healthy nod to Frankenstein), his adoption by Ma and Pa, early education, later education and eventually reaching adulthood. Sladek clearly does not like authority, be it education, church or government and slaps all with a healthy amount of ridicule. Each scene introduces new characters in a new setting, and inevitably, things go wrong around Roderick. Rarely is Roderick the direct cause of the distress, although he is often blamed for it. Science Fiction itself is not safe, and Sladek takes a shot at Asimov, in a discussion between a priest and Roderick about the implications of the three laws. The book ends on a pleasant high, setting up well for the sequel.

"Roderick At Random" starts where "Roderick" left off and we see Roderick leading the typical life of a young adult - a low paying job, an employer that has some real issues, and trying to deal with the direction of his life. There's less humour in the sequel, and the overall tone is darker. As the book progresses we are given the impression that computers are becoming more intelligent, and developing their own consciousness, making Roderick no longer alone. But rather than identify with them Roderick is scared by them, and at one point performs an act which likens him to a human more than a machine. Religion is explored, and given a heavier treatment than the first book. Not content at just ridiculing the Catholic church, Sladek turns Zen Buddhism in to a stock-trading and gambling sham, and takes aim at a celebrity religion which smells not unlike Scientology. The darker tone of the book reflects in the conclusion, which is enough to make you go away and think for a few hours.

Sam says

This book reminded me of two other novels: Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut and Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert Heinlein. Sladek has a lot of the same sensibilities as Vonnegut as a writer. They're both great at dark/black humor and they both seemed interested in fake religions, of which this book contains many. It reminded me of Heinlein's novel because of the use of religious matter and an alien entity (in this case a robot pretending to be human) who is introduced into our society and has to make sense of it.

Roderick the robot provides Sladek the perfect vantage point to evaluate the mankind in a nearly objective fashion. This novel is funny, but it is pretty dark in its overall themes, such as the absurdity of life and the inability to find a purpose in said absurd life. Sladek does a good job providing many view points on the idea of what makes an entity human or at least a worthwhile, thinking creature, through his use of various religions and philosophical view points.

This novel really does a good job of progressing an absurdist view and Sladek does some interesting things with his prose, such as providing Roderick's stream of consciousness, which is fairly entertaining in his naive state.

Christopher Rush says

So I read the first book about two years ago, and it was fine. Mr. Sladek loved his puns and his satire and his Eliot-like wellspring of allusions and knowledge and Joycean showoffiness. The first book was a bit slow, intentionally so, giving us Roderick's buildingsroman, if you will. I can be clever, too, when I wanna. It's all

a a delightful, whimsical romp of how dangerous it is to put your faith and trust in machines and also be afraid of machines. Or something like that. Sometimes, as with the second, it gets a bit tendentious. It may be good to take this in smallish increments. However, be warned: Mr. Sladek wants you to remember just about every character, as they all come back again and again, and then again a few more times, especially in the second book.

The second book, which I somehow read rather rapidly, enjoys that sequel-privilege of assuming you know all the characters, and since Roderick is all grown up you don't have the rather irritating "growing up" section from the first book. The further into it you get, the more layered you remember it all is: all the tiers of characters return and interact and live, and Sladek has created a rather believable satiric world, in which time passes and consequences are encountered, and it's all a jumble of Voltaire and Hugo and D. Adams. It's terribly clever and extremely well-written, but the saltiness and satire tend to bunch up and annoy. However...

We should have listened to John Sladek back in the day. This may seem nonsensically outdated, what with all the Machines Lib and this and that, but we are all using a great deal more technology in 2018 than we were in 1983. How did he know? Probably because he was using a lot more technology in 1983 than he did in 1963. Well, we didn't listen. And now you people are addicted to cellular phones and tablets and pagers and blueberries and snozberries and all sorts of things. Students look at me like I'm insane when I suggest they write things by hand instead of type things on their computers at home with their earpuds in their ears with their instantaneously streamed music and shows and hula hoops and whatnot. The Scientists are out there dabbling with AI computers and soon we'll all be their slaves just like in Terminator. Except they killed us all just like the Cylons, didn't they? Uh-oh. We should have listened.

You may like this book, or these books, especially if you like layered stories with believable characters and a "living world" in which time passes for everyone without explicit descriptions of it (I guess Mr. GRR Martin didn't invent that after all), and one that satirizes computers and machines and drug abuse and thoughtlessness and asks genuine questions about life and sentience and worth and all that, you may like it. It doesn't tie off every single thread nicely, but it ties them all up well enough if you pay attention enough. It was all right.

Jacob says

First, I must qualify this review with this: I DID NOT FINISH THIS BOOK. I read the first half, which is the first of the two Roderick books, but refuse to subject myself to the second book. I say this because I tend to finish books even if I hate them.

The novel - the story of a robot growing up in the Midwest - is dreadful. Meant to be funny, the jokes feel like the work of a hack pun writer for some D-List comedy show. The novel is disorganized, jumping back and forth between poorly crafted characters and numbingly stupid story lines. I cared zero for anybody in this book. The b.s. philosophy can't decide whether its luddite or anti-luddite. Or maybe anti-anti-luddite.

The novel is inspired by Vonnugut's "Player Piano," going so far as having a character reading that book and making insipid meta-references to it. "Player Piano" is both Vonnugut's first and his weakest novel, but is stellar fiction compared to "Roderick."

Nenad Jaksic says

Roderick is an aquired taste, not everyone will appreciate Sladek's kind of humor. To me it was hilarious and I kept chuckling all the way throughout the book. It reads kind of like watching an episode of Arrested development, the jokes are delivered in almost a rapid fire tempo, and if you don't pay much attention you'll probably even miss few of them.

See if you like this, and decide whether Roderick is for you:

"...look, they found the dead girl with her leg cut off, blood all over the place, and in her hand was this book covered with his finger-prints, may not be enough for a court-room but it sure as hell works out fine on the front page. Forget about did he do it, get down to work on why? Why, why, as our police colleague likes to say." He picked a morsel from a back tooth and examined it before flicking it away. "Listen you try this for a size: I'm doing a think piece to go with this story, on how all these cybernetics guys are repressed faggots, sadists and what have you. This a.m. I picked up coupla their magazines, got a list here somewhere of some of the kinky words they use, strong sex angle running right through it, listen to this, bit, byte, RAM, how about those?"

"I don't know, they ain't got much on him - "

"Gang punch, flip-flop, input, what do you think that really means, huh? Stand-alone software, how about that? Debugger, you can't make it plainer, and even the company names, how about Polymorphic Systems, how about The Digital Group? Or Texas Instruments, ever wonder what a Texas Instrument is? Or a Honeywell? IBM, says a lot there..."

If this excerpt made you laugh, then you'll probably like the rest of the book :)

Antony says

Not what I was expecting at all, this is a satirical novel about a robot who nobody believes is a robot, despite him telling them so at any opportunity. I'm not exactly sure what the author is trying to tell me about the human condition but it is an enjoyable ride. Not too much plot, more a series of increasingly strange episodes.
