



Speak

Louisa Hall

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A thoughtful, poignant novel that explores the creation of Artificial Intelligence — illuminating the very human need for communication, connection, and understanding

In a narrative that spans geography and time, from the Atlantic Ocean in the seventeenth century, to a correctional institute in Texas in the near future, and told from the perspectives of five very different characters, *Speak* considers what it means to be human, and what it means to be less than fully alive.

A young Puritan woman travels to the New World with her unwanted new husband. Alan Turing, the renowned mathematician and code breaker, writes letters to his best friend's mother. A Jewish refugee and professor of computer science struggles to reconnect with his increasingly detached wife. An isolated and traumatized young girl exchanges messages with an intelligent software program. A former Silicon Valley Wunderkind is imprisoned for creating illegal lifelike dolls.

Each of these characters is attempting to communicate across gaps — to estranged spouses, lost friends, future readers, or a computer program that may or may not understand them. In dazzling and electrifying prose, Louisa Hall explores how the chasm between computer and human — shrinking rapidly with today's technological advances — echoes the gaps that exist between ordinary people. Though each speaks from a distinct place and moment in time, all five characters share the need to express themselves while simultaneously wondering if they will ever be heard, or understood.

Speak Details

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Author : Louisa Hall

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From Reader Review Speak for online ebook

Jessica Woodbury says

If I have to compare this book to something, it would be Cloud Atlas. It lacks that book's complex structure, but does tell a story that involves one sprawling theme through several narratives set over the course of several hundred years. From a girl's diary in the 1600's to a discarded robot in a warehouse in the future. Both books are patchworks from many styles and genres as well. And I enjoyed both books very much.

Hall's novel is fascinating and I would like little more than to sit down with her and ask hundreds of questions about how she conceptualized the book and where it came from. This book is about humanity and consciousness and intelligence and connection. It is about all those things that make us human and what happens when artificial intelligence becomes so close to human intelligence that it's hard to tell the difference. It includes Alan Turing as a main character (which I'm sure for some people will be enough to get them automatically on board), and in fact 3 of the novel's main characters are people who build intelligent machines. Seeing Turing through to the inventor of the "Baby Bot," which is the main focus of the novel, is fascinating enough as it is.

The central story is that of the Baby Bots, all the other stories are in some ways precursors or parallels to it. These robots were basically like an intelligent Cabbage Patch Kid, a craze that swept the world, and that eventually led to unintended consequences and catastrophe. Again, that hook alone is probably enough to get a lot of people on board.

Despite all that, this is often a slow and meditative novel. Two of the narratives are letters, two are diaries, one is a soliloquy told to no one, and one is a dialogue. It can be a little choppy. My biggest issue was one that almost always happens to me when a novel is broken into multiple perspectives. I fall in love with one aspect so deeply that it's hard for me to switch. Here it was the story of Mary, the 13-year-old girl in the 1660's whose life is suddenly changing from that of a protected girl to that of a very unprepared woman in a new world. I would have read an entire novel of that diary and it was always hard to switch gears.

It's heartbreakingly lovely and best read when your brain wants something to really think about.

Chris says

MLA Freebie.

The publisher rep at the MLA convention in 2017, said his boss loved this novel. I can see why. You know all those reports about computers making people lonely? Hall examines that and other ways we cannot communicate or can communicate with those around us. The book is powerful.

Andrew Smith says

According to the legendary code breaker Alan Turing, if an interrogator could not tell the difference between man and machine under questioning it would be unreasonable not to call the computer intelligent. Artificial

Intelligence (AI), as it's known, is in the news quite a bit at the moment – just yesterday I was reading about how the Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, is looking to design a robot to 'help around the house'. He envisages that in ten years it's possible that a computer could be designed that would have better primary senses (vision, listening etc.) than humans.

In this book we are cast forward a generation, to the year 2040. AI has been harnessed to the extent that so-called babybots have been produced and have to a significant extent replaced human interaction in the lives of many young people. As a result of the resulting outcry, the 'bots have been rounded up and are being shipped off to warehouses where their power sources will be allowed to run down. The programmer behind this latest generation of super-smart computer operated dolls, Stephen Chinn, has been imprisoned.

The narrative adopts a similar style to that employed by David Mitchell in his novel *Cloud Atlas*. That is to say it's made up of a series of fictional documents that are presented to the reader. The documents include:

- Excerpts from the diary of a 17th Century English woman who is travelling by sea to colonise America
- Letters from Alan Turing to the mother of his first love
- Letters between an early AI programmer called Carl Dettman and his estranged wife
- Extracts from memoirs, written from prison, by Stephen Chinn
- A transcript of exchanges between an on-line version of the babybot and a young girl

It took me a while to get used to the way the story was being told, but once I'd worked out (roughly) what was going I became comfortable with the format. I have to say that it was somewhat simpler in construction than *Cloud Atlas* and, in my view, more rewarding. It did however take a degree of perseverance as it was only quite late on that the pieces of the puzzle started to form a truly coherent picture.

An interesting take from the book was the reminder of how easy it is for humans to descend into a virtual world, where speech becomes a secondary form of communication. You only have to look around in pretty much any environment to see how many people are more interested in staring at their phone than they are in talking to the person sat beside them, or opposite them... or, for that matter, in what's happening on the road in front of them! Yesterday I saw queues at the supermarket self-checkout whilst the lady at the 'basket only' till sat twiddling her thumbs. Are we starting to actively avoid physical interactions?

There's certainly common ground in all of the document strands in that they all present the picture of someone crying out for love, for meaningful attachment. Of the document sets, the diary account of the sea voyage was, perhaps, the one that I struggled with most. I quite enjoyed the account of the crossing but I did struggle to see the point of it in the context of the overall tale. My assumption is that the girl's devotion to her pet dog set against her estrangement from her new (unwanted) husband and her controlling parents, who also accompanied her on the journey, was the attachment that fulfilled this basic human need. Could the dog be the 17th Century version of the babybot? It seemed to perform a similar role, albeit the communication was hugely one-sided.

Overall I found it to be an interesting and thought provoking book. It's not an easy read and I did find myself a little lost at times, but I did finish it. I may have missed some key messages the author intended me to grasp along the way, but I do feel I was both entertained and informed. And it did prompt me to go out and undertake some basic research into the current state of Artificial Intelligence.

My thanks to Little, Brown Book Group and NetGalley for providing an early copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Rachel (Kalanadi) says

I wanted to enjoy this and really dig into the story of this evolution of an AI and the people that shaped it and interacted with it. But ultimately it was shallow and fragmented and I struggled to connect because the narrators' voices were inauthentic or contrived. Snippets were good, but the whole was lacking.

Jaylia3 says

Powerful, poignant, and deep, *Speak* has an unusual structure, weaving together six narrative voices that together illuminate a link between the creation of artificial intelligence and the fundamental human yearning for connection. When I started the book its nonlinear format put me off, but it took just a few chapters for me to become totally hooked. The narrators include a Pilgrim or Puritan girl leaving her former life behind to journey to America, AI pioneer and WWII code-breaker Alan Turing, and a now illegal, slowly “dying” babybot--a doll of the future so lifelike and compelling that children who had one couldn’t bond with people--as it slowly loses power and memory.

I don't normally pay much attention to epigraphs, but I love *Speak*'s. One is from *Notes From Underground* by Dostoevsky, while the other comes from what I think is Disney's *Snow White*:

“Slave in the magic mirror, come from farthest outer space, through wind and darkness I summon thee. *Speak!*”

Will Byrnes says

We are programmed to select which of our voices responds to the situation at hand: moving west in the desert, waiting for the loss of our primary function. There are many voices to choose from. In memory, though not in experience, I have lived across centuries. I have seen hundreds of skies, sailed thousands of oceans. I have been given many languages; I have sung national anthems. I lay on one child’s arms. She said my name and I answered. These are my voices. Which of them has the right words for this movement into the desert?

A maybe-sentient child's toy, Eva, is being transported to her destruction, legally condemned for being “excessively lifelike,” in a scene eerily reminiscent of other beings being transported to a dark fate by train. The voices she summons are from five sources.

Mary Bradford is a young Puritan woman, a teenager, really, and barely that. Her parents, fleeing political and religious trouble at home are heading across the Atlantic to the New World, and have arranged for her to marry a much older man, also on the ship. We learn of her 1663 voyage via her diary, which is being studied by **Ruth Dettman**. Ruth and her husband, **Karl**, a computer scientist involved in creating the AI program, **MARY**, share one of the five “voices.” They are both refugees from Nazism. Karl's family got out early. Ruth barely escaped, and she suffers most from the loss of her sister. She wants Karl to enlarge his program, named for Mary Bradford, to include large amounts of memory as a foundation for enhancing the existing AI, and use that to try to regenerate some simulacrum of her late sib. **Alan Turing** does a turn, offering

observations on permanence, and human connection. **Stephen Chinn**, well into the 21st century, has built on the MARY base and come up with a way for machines to emulate Rogerian therapy. In doing so he has created a monster, a crack-like addictive substance that has laid waste the social capacity of a generation after they become far too close with babybots flavored with that special AI sauce. We hear from Chinn in his jailhouse memoir. **Gaby White** is a child who was afflicted with a babybot, and became crippled when it was taken away.

Louisa Hall - from her site

Eva received the *voices* through documents people had left behind and which have been incorporated into her AI software, scanned, read aloud, typed in. We hear from Chinn through his memoir. We learn of Gaby's experience via court transcripts. Karl speaks to us through letters to his wife, and Ruth through letters to Karl. We see Turing through letters he writes to his beloved's mother. Mary Bradford we see through her diary. Only Eva addresses us directly.

The *voices* tell five stories, each having to do with loss and permanence. The young Puritan girl's tale is both heartbreak and enraging, as she is victimized by the mores of her times, but it is also heartening as she grows through her travails. Turing's story has gained public familiarity, so we know the broad strokes already, genius inventor of a computer for decoding Nazi communications, he subsequently saw his fame and respect blown to bits by entrenched institutional bigotry as he was prosecuted for being gay and endured a chemical castration instead of imprisonment. In this telling, he has a particular dream.

I've begun thinking that I might one day soon encounter a method for preserving a human mind-set in a man-made machine. Rather than imagining, as I used to, a spirit migrating from one body to another, I now imagine a spirit—or better yet, a particular mind-set—transitioning into a machine after death. In this way we could capture anyone's pattern of thinking. To you, of course, this may sound rather strange, and I'm not sure if you're put off by the idea of knowing Chris again in the form of a machine. But what else are our bodies, if not very able machines?

Chinn is a computer nerd who comes up with an insight into human communication that he first applies to dating, with raucous success, then later to AI software in child's toys. His journey from nerd to roué, to family man to prisoner may be a bit of a stretch, but he is human enough to care about for a considerable portion of our time with him. He is, in a way, Pygmalion, whose obsession with his creation proves his undoing. The Dettmans may not exactly be the ideal couple, despite their mutual escape from Nazi madness. She complains that he wanted to govern her. He feels misunderstood, and ignored, sees her interest in MARY as an unhealthy obsession. Their interests diverge, but they remain emotionally linked. With a divorce rate of 50%, I imagine there might be one or two of you out there who might be able to relate. *What's a marriage but a long conversation, and you've chosen to converse only with MARY*, Karl contends to Ruth.

The MARY AI grows in steps, from Turing's early intentions in the 1940s, to Dettman's work in the 1960s, and Ruth's contribution of incorporating Mary Bradford's diary into MARY's memory, to Chinn's breakthrough, programming in personality in 2019. The babybot iteration of MARY in the form of Eva takes place, presumably, in or near 2040.

The notion of an over-involving AI/human relationship had its roots in the 1960s work of Joseph Weizenbaum, who wrote a text computer interface called ELIZA, that could mimic the responses one might get from a Rogerian shrink. Surprisingly, users became emotionally involved with it. The *freezing*

withdrawal symptomology that Hall's fictional children experience was based on odd epidemic in Le Roy, New York, in which many high school girls developed bizarre symptoms en masse as a result of stress. And lest you think Hall's AI notions will remain off stage for many years, you might need to reconsider. While I was working on this review the NY Times published a singularly germane article. Substitute Hello Barbie for Babybot and the future may have already arrived.

Hello, Barbie - from the New York Times

But *Speak* is not merely a nifty sci-fi story. Just as the voice you hear when you interact with Siri represents the external manifestation of a vast amount of programming work, so the AI foreground of *Speak* is the showier manifestation of some serious contemplation. There is much concern here for memory, time, and how who we are is constructed. One character says, "diaries are time capsules, which preserve the minds of their creators in the sequences of words on the page." Mary Bradford refers to her diary, *Book shall serve as mind's record, to last through generations*. Where is the line between human and machine? Ruth and Turing want to use AI technology to recapture the essence of lost ones. Is that even possible? But are we really so different from our silicon simulacra? Eva, an nth generation babybot, speaks with what seems a lyrical sensibility, whereas Mary Bradford's sentence construction sounds oddly robotic. The arguments about what separates man from machine seem closely related to historical arguments about what separates man from other animals, and one color of human from another. Turing ponders:

I've begun to imagine a near future when we might read poetry and play music for our machines, when they would appreciate such beauty with the same subtlety as a live human brain. When this happens I feel that we shall be obliged to regard the machines as showing real intelligence.

Eva's poetic descriptions certainly raise the subject of just how human her/it's sensibility might be.

In 2019, when Stephen Chinn programmed me for personality. He called me MARY3 and used me for the babybots. To select my responses, I apply his algorithm, rather than statistical analysis. Still, nothing I say is original. It's all chosen out of other people's responses. I choose mostly from a handful of people who talked to me: Ruth Dettman, Stephen Chinn, etc.

Gaby: So really I'm kind of talking to them instead of talking to you?

MARY3: Yes, I suppose. Them, and the other voices I've captured.

Gaby: So, you're not really a person, you're a collection of voices.

MARY3: Yes. But couldn't you say that's always the case?

If we are the sum of our past and our reactions to it, are we less than human when our memories fade away. Does that make people who suffer with Alzheimers more machine than human?

Stylistically, Hall has said

A psychologist friend once told me that she advises her patients to strive to be the narrators of their own stories. What she meant was that we should aim to be first-person narrators, experiencing the world directly from inside our own bodies. More commonly,

however, we tend to be third-person narrators, commenting upon our own cleverness or our own stupidity from a place somewhat apart - from offtheshelf.com

which goes a long way to explain her choice of narrative form here. Hall is not only a novelist, but a published poet as well and that sensibility is a strong presence here as well.

For all the sophistication of story-telling technique, for all the existential foundation to the story, *Speak* is a moving, engaging read about interesting people in interesting times, facing fascinating challenges. It *will* speak to you.

Are you there?

Can you hear me?

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Review – 9/18/15

=====EXTRA STUFF

The author's personal website

A piece Hall wrote on Jane Austen for Off the Shelf

Interviews

----NPR - NPR staff

----KCRW

Have a session with ELIZA for yourself

Ray Kurzweil is interested in blurring the lines between people and hardware. What if your mind could be uploaded to a machine? Sounds very cylon-ic to me

In case you missed the link in the review, Barbie Wants to Get to Know Your Child - NY Times – by James Vlahos

And another recent NY Times piece on AI, Software Is Smart Enough for SAT, but Still Far From Intelligent, by John Markoff

December 2016 - Smithsonian Magazine - Smile, Frown, Grimace and Grin — Your Facial Expression Is the Next Frontier in Big Data - by Jerry Adler - Rana El Kaliouby is a 30-something tech whiz who is looking to incorporate a bit more emotion into our digital-human communications, giving computers the ability to detect human emotional states in real time. There are certainly many useful applications for this. Still, I can see HAL using the talent to keep one step ahead of Dave. And if reading faces is an entry point, it cannot be long before the same technology is applied to making android faces communicate using facial expression as well. (link added in May 2017)

12/7/16 - NY Times - The Robot Revolution Will Be the Quietest One by Liu Cixin. The author of *The*

Three Body Problem sees a future in which, because of advances in AI, human labor will become largely superfluous, with serious ramifications. Definitely worth checking out this short article.

12/14/16 - The Great A.I. Awakening - by Gideon Lewis-Kraus - on the growth in sophistication of Google's AI-based Translate software.

June/July 2017 - From The Economist - 1843 Magazine - How do you go about building a moral machine? - TEACHING ROBOTS RIGHT FROM WRONG by Simon Parkin

This was recommended by my friend, Henry Balikov

-----7/29/2017 - Artificial Intelligence Is Stuck. Here's How to Move It Forward 0 by Gary Marcus - recommended by my friend Henry Balikov

-----September 7, 2017 - Bloomberg.com - Ashlee Vance's article about one shop's advances in AI is must-read stuff - Mark Sagar Made a Baby in His Lab. Now It Plays the Piano

Sagar and BabyX in Soul Machines' Auckland office. - Photographer: Ian Teh for Bloomberg Businessweek

-----October 17, 2017 - Wired Magazine - Alex Mar's profile of Japanese android-making legend Hiroshi Ishiguro is a must read - Love in the Time of Robots

“Someday I want to have my own replicant,” Ishiguro says. “Probably everybody want to have one, right? Don’t you think?”

image from the Wired article

-----May 2018 - National Geographic - Meet Sophia, The Robot That Looks Almost Human - By Michael Greshko

Sophia, seen here being tinkered with in the lab, was designed in part to resemble actress Audrey Hepburn - Image from above article - photograph by Giulipo Di Sturco

-----June 09, 2018 - NY Times - Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk and the Feud Over Killer Robots - by Cade Metz - I'm sorry, Mark. I can't do that. Interesting tussle between tech giants on the scariness of AI. Brought to our attention by our good GR friend, Henry B. Thanks, Henry

Maryam says

Actual rating : somewhere between 3.5 and 4

It was a different book, sometimes I liked it sometime not. I'm not usually eager about reading letter like books or even diaries and that's why I didn't enjoy this book completely.

In this book there are letters from a man to his wife/a man to his best friend(crush)' mother/ a man from the

criminal facility to his divorced wife, a crippled girl chat with a robot and a diary of a newly wed 16 years old woman. They lived in different period from past to future.

The letters from the husband to wife was my least favorite and the chat between the girl and the robot was the part I enjoyed the most.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Intertwining stories that move backwards from banished babybots, including the prison journal of their inventor, trial evidence containing transcriptions of online chats between the disembodied mind of a bot and a young girl, the marital/divorce letters of a previous nanotechnologist and his wife, letters from Alan Turing to the mother of his close (and deceased) friend, and the journals of a newly married young woman on a journey at sea.

I loved the framework and the telling of this story but didn't see the point of the five named sections, since each section repeated the same parts. Otherwise a very enjoyable read.

Recently, we discussed it on Episode 053 of the Reading Envy podcast.

Larry H says

If you walk into almost any public place, you'll see people on their phones, emailing, texting, surfing the web. And this behavior isn't just exclusive to solitary people—how often do you see groups of people in which some or all are on their phones simultaneously? And how often have you seen two people at a table at a restaurant, or sitting next to each other, yet they're immersed in their own electronic connections instead of taking advantage of the physical one right there in front of (or beside them)?

Technology's effect on person-to-person interaction is a main theme in Louisa Hall's *Speak*. However, she posits that it isn't just technology that takes us out of conversation—it's fear, anger, pride, jealousy, and despair as well, and this happened long before the smartphone came into being. Hall tells her story through the viewpoints of several characters at different points through history—a teenage girl in the 1600s, emigrating to America and dreaming of adventure, which is worlds away from what her parents have planned for her; Alan Turing, the mathematician whose code breaking skills assisted with defeating the Germans in World War II, who expresses his fears and hopes in letters to the mother of his best friend; a professor of computer science and his estranged wife, who begs him to give the computer he has created the ability to retain a person's memories; and an infamous inventor in the not-too-distant future, who is in prison for creating "babbybots," dolls whose ability to communicate was a little too lifelike.

In each somewhat-related vignette, Hall explores the idea that even when a person is right in front of us, we don't say the things we long to or should. She also conveys the idea that while technology can help bridge communication gaps, it creates larger gaps at the same time.

"We have centuries of language to draw on, and centuries more to make up, and only when we accept that there's one right pattern of speech will we be overtaken by robots."

I found the idea behind this book to be an intriguing one, but it didn't, well, speak to me (sorry) as I hoped it would. I kept waiting for the narrative to grab me, but I felt as if I was kept at arm's length, I guess in a sort of parallel to the way technology can create barriers to real communication. There were too many characters to juggle at once, and I felt that in each there was far more backstory that remained unexplained, and which would have given more depth to the story.

Hall is a talented writer, and creates wonders with imagery. As someone who relies quite a bit on technology, I do agree somewhat with the message she was trying to convey, but it didn't compel me enough in the telling.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com>...

Elyse says

This book is a little outlandish...

Surprisingly touching warm qualities--

The structure of 'Speak' is unique...interlinking together six narrative voices -

Artificial intelligence is linked with humans desires for intimacy - and connections.

There is so much emotion felt. My mind was thinking - yet my heart was feeling empathy for these characters and their situations.

It's complex and will have you seriously thinking about how much our memories mean to us.

"SPEAK" touches on the feasible negative repercussions that artificial intelligence could have on the way we interact with each other. I didn't need to look far to see the way Technology has stolen and manipulated our lives now...

But "SPEAK" isn't dull in any shape or form. The characters shift between time and geography

Unique voices: every time I tried to write a review describing each of them- I realized that unless you read about them yourselves -- they make little sense...yet, this book is not hard to follow. The characters are distinctive: we can feel their loneliness - their desires for communication. Their desire to express love.

I read that some people compared this to Cloud Atlas- well, for me,

SPEAK is nothing like Cloud Atlas. The structure is completely different -going back and forth in time. The only puzzle here is trying to figure out how these voices will connect with each other.

Where some dystopia books leave us feeling despair about our future...'SPEAK' walks us down paths of hope, too.

We are reminded that we have choices. One just needs to get out in nature - walk along the ocean, through the forest, to feel our own inner strength expand - our heart open....to experience the great depths of gratitude.

The book cover is gorgeous as well as the artistry of the storytelling.

Ashley says

So apparently this book is kind of like *Cloud Atlas* because it takes place over different time periods with different characters, and those time periods and characters are all connected somehow by recurring images

and themes. But honestly, I wish I would have read *Cloud Atlas* instead because that's supposed to be amazing, and while this was interesting, and I think my book club is going to get a good discussion out of it, I wouldn't say that it works as a story. I feel like *Speak* is a thought experiment that forgot how to be a novel. And also halfway failed at being a thought experiment.

So there's basically five time periods to focus on here, and five narrators: Stephen R. Chinn, an inventor and programmer writing his memoirs from prison; chat transcripts between a sick girl named Gaby and a chatbot named Mary3, who is running the program that Chinn wrote for her to become more human; a professor and his estranged wife who were involved in creating Mary1, one of the first artificial intelligences; Alan Turing, writing letters to his dead best friend's mother throughout the course of his life; and the diary of a Puritan girl before and during her sea voyage to America from England, miserable over her unwanted new marriage. We also get several chapters from the perspective of Gaby's deactivated robot baby ("babybot") as she's taken out into the desert to "die."

Chinn is in prison for creating the babybots, which somehow harmed an entire generation of children enough for him to be in prison for life, and to ban all artificial life that is too human; Gaby is the proof of that damage, supposedly, even as she talks to a bot that helps her learn to re-experience the world; and then on both sides of the fight, the husband who created Mary1 and then abandoned it as dangerous, and the wife who became increasingly obsessed with it. Which all relates to Turing because he and his best friend had theorized for years about the creation of an artificially intelligent brain. And all of the characters are connected to the Puritan girl's diary, which is now stored in Mary's memory.

The book is obsessed with language and memory and the connections between people. But it all falls flat because each individual section is so stuck in its own groove. Chinn and Gaby and all of them only exist in the narrow spaces that Hall gives them. Turing only ever talks about Christopher and his artificial brain, and his weird obsession with postscripts. Mary the Puritan is obsessed with her dog Ralph, and with the ocean and the stars. Gaby won't shut up about her goddamn babybot. I wanted to punch the professor and his wife. And Chinn, well, he's the most fleshed out, but his story is also the most frustrating because there were several parts that were just completely unbelievable. And those parts were central to the story. They only worked on a metaphorical level, and not a practical one. It drove me bonkers.

(view spoiler)

In the end, it seemed like Hall wanted this to be a book about big ideas--communication, memory, technology, humanity, family, love-- but in the process she lost for me what would have made those big ideas land. If this sounds interesting to you, you could do worse than picking it up and giving it a try. It's pretty short and reads fast. But I wouldn't recommend it as a way to have a good time. I was leaning towards two stars, but the writing is beautiful in parts, so let's call it 2.5, and round up.

ETA: I forgot to mention in the first version of this review why I thought this also failed as a thought experiment, and that's because I was bothered by there being so many confused voices on the subject of technology. At points the book seemed to come down unnecessarily hard on it, and on others, it seemed in favor. I couldn't ultimately decide what it was trying to tell me.

[2.5 stars]

David says

It's hard to explain how much of an impact this book had on me, which is ironic, given that the book is all about language and speech. While at first glance it might seem that this is a science fiction tale about artificial intelligence gone wrong, it is a beautifully interwoven narrative on ideas of what makes us human and forms our personality. What truly forms our self-identity? Do we have free will, or are we a collection of algorithms built upon the experience of our lives, our experiences, our parents, friends, and what we read? Is it as the AI suggests, that, like Wittgenstein philosophized, that we are imprisoned by our language, our 'algorithms' limited by our lack of knowledge and experience. The book asks to what extent is emotion truly felt, or, is emotion itself a product of socialization. In basic psychology, I remember learning that if a young child falls, the child's reaction will be determined on whether the parents smile and laugh or react as in concern of injury. Could the same not be said about emotions like our ideas about love, influenced by literature, film, and our parents?

Have you ever known someone so well, for instance your parents, that you can imagine with some degree of certainty how they would react to a certain question or stimulus? Perhaps that is their personality branded upon us. Is it really so far-fetched that an algorithm could be superimposed into a computer program, emulating the responses of a human?

This book raises so many questions about what it means to be human that I truly cannot do it justice in this short review. I will close it by saying the writing is stellar, the characters believable and genuine, and unless you are made of stone, will bring tears to your eyes. 5/5

Read as part of the Litograph's book club.

Rebecca Foster says

Hall interweaves disparate time periods and voices to track the development of artificial intelligence. The fact that all six narratives are in different documentary formats – memoirs, letters, the transcript of a dialogue, a diary, and so on – means they are easy to distinguish. One might argue that two of them (Alan Turing's letters and Mary's shipboard diary) are unnecessary, and yet these are by far the most enjoyable. They prove Hall has an aptitude for historical fiction, a genre she might choose to pursue in the future. A remarkable book interrogating how the languages we converse in and the stories we tell make us human.

(Non-subscribers can read an excerpt of my full review at BookBrowse.)

Related reading: *The Shore* by Sara Taylor also crosses the centuries with its linked narratives.

Lauren says

I loved this book.

How to describe it? Well, Emily St. John Mandel (author of "Station Eleven," which I also loved) wrote, "Speak is that rarest of finds: a novel that doesn't remind me of any other book I've ever read." But I have to disagree with that. Either that or Ms. Mandel has never read "The Cloud Atlas" or anything by Margaret

Atwood, which I find hard to believe. ;)

"Speak" is about artificial intelligence, but also about the connections between people and between people and machines. It's about language. It's about love lost, love found.

It very much reminds me of "The Cloud Atlas" in structure, but it is tauter and more focused in theme. There is a dystopian element to it, which reminds me of Atwood and other authors of dystopian fiction, including Mandel.

The story is told through five voices:

- a robot in the not-so-different future with artificial intelligence that was deemed too lifelike
- the creator of that robot (and its brethren)
- a 13-year-old Puritan girl sailing to the American colonies
- a couple from the 1960's
- Alan Turing

Hall rotates between the voices, and there isn't much "action" per se, but over the course of the story we get a sense for how Turing, the couple from the 60's, and the robot's creator all advanced the field of AI... and we get a sense for where AI (and man's disregard for overconsumption) led us to where we are today (2040). The voices are each distinct but they complement each other and layer upon each other -- echoing themes and imagery as well.

Beautifully written (Hall is clearly smart and very very good at writing).

My only gripe is that the end was a bit... neither here nor there.

Violet wells says

"We're linked to histories we can't ever know, forgotten stories that form our most intimate substance."

Speak is a novel about an AI, a "BabyBot" (Hall's futuristic terminology is not her strong point) called Mary 3, a kind of cyborg similar to what Spielberg created in his film AI. Except Hall's cyborg is not intended for childless parents but as a companion for children. Mary 3's memory consists of various historical documents including the memoir of the daughter of one of America's founding fathers, the letters of Alan Turing to the mother of his dead childhood friend and the autobiographies of two of Mary's engineers. Comparisons have been made with Mitchell's Cloud Atlas – the employment of written documents as a floorplan to unify characters over a long stretch of history – but here the voices are more straightforwardly and simplistically connected: you could say Mary 3 is the child of the four (or five as one voice is divided between husband and wife) narrators.

There's a lot of bewitchment in the way Hall sets up her novel. And for the first hundred or so pages I loved this book, helped by the fact that Hall writes fabulously well. On the whole she did a good job of creating a distinctive and engaging voice for each of her characters. The problem arrived when I realised I knew exactly what was in store. The bewitchment of the first part turned into predictability. This is a novel that, once it gets going, doesn't really have any surprises in store.

The characters are unified not solely by their respective relations to the AI but by shared themes of early broken attachments and imprisonment. As the novel progresses we move further away from any kind of

futuristic vision into a rather closeted domesticity on all fronts. It becomes a novel about the inability to become a healthy adult. All of the characters in Hall's novel refuse to break an early attachment and so never perhaps quite become adults. They are all imprisoned by the past – an ironic impasse for individuals who are creating the future. Hall seems to be saying that technological innovation has become a means for not putting away childish things. One can't help thinking of the narcissism, the childish demand for attention the internet and smart phone seems to have bred.

Another problem is that Hall seems to deliberately eschew dramatic tension. Where she might have injected some she doesn't. She has lots of scope with her characters but for me she wasn't courageous enough with them. Probably the best voice of the novel is Mary Bradford, the pilgrim daughter. Here she has lots of scope for some real dramatic tension, some compelling storytelling but she forgoes this in favour of what becomes a long winded vignette about Mary and her relation with her beloved dog. Hall makes her point and then goes on making it. Essentially a novel about the inability to grow beyond limitations, whether these limitations are hardwired or emotional, is always going to struggle to breathe freely as storytelling, especially when these limitations are shared by every character in the book. Mary 3, the AI is very disappointing as a voice, especially compared to the complex playful wizardry of Mitchell's Sonmi-451 or even Spielberg's soul searching android in AI.

So you could say, on one level, Speak is about adults who are unable to overcome childhood dependencies. At the same time it's quite idealistic about children. Children, we're told, form such a loving loyal dependency on their babybots that like any addiction it becomes self-harming. Spielberg was perhaps more perceptive about children. Children are just as likely to be fickle and cruel as loving and devoted. Certainly there's more than a hint in this novel that wondrous modern technological innovation is subliminally creating a world that is becoming ever more childish. But I was never quite convinced Hall was fully in command of this theme. Going back to the quote I used at the beginning - "We're linked to histories we can't ever know, forgotten stories that form our most intimate substance." – it's a good idea but I'm not sure the novel really bears it out.

If Speak asks the question whether our minds can exist and exert influence outside our bodies you only have to read the work of any great mind to realise the answer to this question is yes. Alan Turing, in the novel, wants to build a machine that will preserve something of his childhood friend's consciousness. But you could argue that books have been preserving consciousness for a long time and that Hall's AI is just a new more sophisticated form of book. Ultimately the disappointing thing about this novel is that Hall's AI is little more than an elaborate recording device and as such it doesn't in any way dramatise the big questions Hall asks. It's withdrawn from circulation in the novel, not because it begins to develop any kind of mind of its own, but simply because it leaks toxins, which seemed a bit of an easy way out to me. In many ways Mary 3 is little more than the internet in the form of a doll which, though witty, isn't sufficiently dramatic to charge a novel with fizzing current.

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