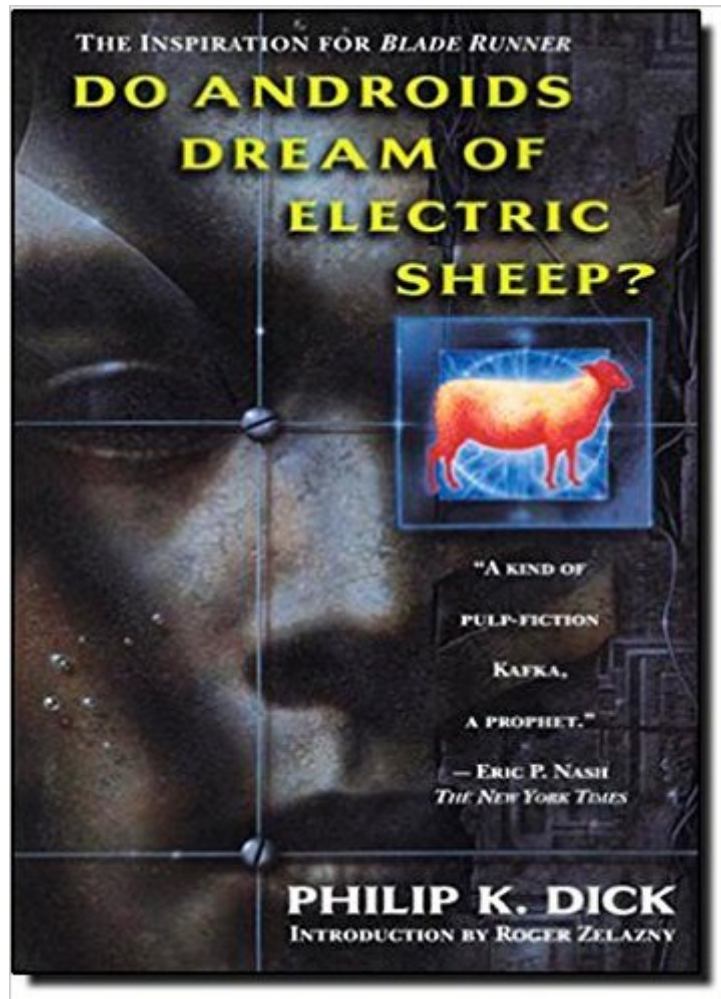


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Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?



Synopsis

A masterpiece ahead of its time, a prescient rendering of a dark future, and the inspiration for the blockbuster film Blade Runner. By 2021, the World War had killed millions, driving entire species into extinction and sending mankind off-planet. Those who remained coveted any living creature, and for people who couldn't afford one, companies built incredibly realistic simulacra: horses, birds, cats, sheep. They even built humans. Immigrants to Mars received androids so sophisticated they were indistinguishable from true men or women. Fearful of the havoc these artificial humans could wreak, the government banned them from Earth. Driven into hiding, unauthorized androids live among human beings, undetected. Rick Deckard, an officially sanctioned bounty hunter, has been commissioned to find rogue androids, and retire them. But when cornered, androids fight back with lethal force. Praise for Philip K. Dick: "The most consistently brilliant science fiction writer in the world." John Brunner "A kind of pulp-fiction Kafka, a prophet." The New York Times "[Philip K. Dick] sees all the sparkling and terrifying possibilities . . . that other authors shy away from." Rolling Stone

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Customer Reviews

This anti-robot novel is oft misunderstood by those who come to it with expectations formed by the pro-robot movie. The novel is essentially a paranoid fantasy about machines which pretend to be people. The pretense is so horrifyingly effective that a bounty hunter engaged in the entirely necessary task of rooting out and destroying these monsters finds that his own humanity has

become imperiled. The novel "DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?" re-titled "BLADE RUNNER" to tie it to the Ridley Scott film loosely based on it, remains available under either title (and with separate entries on), but it is the same book. The film studio wanted to market a "novelization" of the film, but PKD adamantly refused to authorize this, forcing them to instead market his original novel under the film's title. Good move, Phil! This decision, however, has led to confusion and/or disappointment when readers approach the novel with expectations formed by the film. Many reviewers here (whether they like the book, the film, or both) have commented on how different they are. Few seem to realize, however, the extent that they are in direct and fundamental conflict. Some praise the book for tearing down the distinction between man and machine or promoting other nihilistic views and pro-robot messages that the author would have found abhorrent. Others pan it for lack of focus, or for otherwise failing to promote the film's pro-robot agenda as effectively as the film did. The book is anti-robot and pro-human, and seeks to uphold the distinction between robot and human, and between illusion and reality, in the face of a most-insidious challenge. The common man is celebrated for his basic decency -- specifically his capacity for basic empathy and compassion -- and the robots are deplored for their complete lack of these qualities. In the book, even a "chickenhead" (a mentally retarded human mutant) is infinitely more valuable than the smartest robot. The film was pro-robot and anti-human, promoting the idea that a compelling illusion is equivalent to reality. It glorifies the android as a sort of superman ("more human than human") -- stronger, faster, more beautiful, more intelligent, -- who seem poised to inherit the future on a dying Earth. The film even seems to admire the robots for their ruthlessness. The book makes Deckard (the protagonist) human, and loyal to humans. The film has Deckard switch sides and join the robots. Indeed, in the film (not the book) Deckard may himself be a robot (the latter is never made explicit, but director has made clear it is what he intended). This means that, in the FILM, there are virtually no sympathetic human characters -- those characters who suggest that a man is worth more than a computer program are portrayed as bigots. In PKD's view, the androids are unquestionably monsters who must be destroyed. The irony, and the central problem posed in the novel, is that their ability to SEEM human (which,, in the NOVEL, is never more than meticulously-programmed fakery), means that those who must destroy robots risk damage to their own humanity in the process. Thus, the author approves of Deckard's wife, whose sympathy for the "poor andys" is evidence of her humanity, while still approving of Deckard's assignment. In the novel, the robots' increased ability to fool the VK test is merely an advance in programmed mimicry of human test responses. The film, on the other hand, treats the improved performance on the VK test as evidence that the robots are truly "human". But the film's robots do

not demonstrate compassion in any meaningful way. The agenda of the film is NOT so much to show that robots are as compassionate as humans, but rather to show that humans are as ruthless as robots (as evidenced, mainly, by their willingness to kill robots). This agenda is eerily similar to that of the TV androids near the end of the novel, who set out to expose human empathy as a myth. In the novel, the title question must be answered in the negative. Androids DON'T care about other creatures. It is humans who have the capacity care about other creatures -- ironically, even about androids -- even electric sheep. So many, even among the author's admirers, have missed the novel's true focus that it may be best to defend my interpretation with a quote from the author himself, made shortly before his death (quoted in the book "Future Noir"):"To me, the replicants are deplorable. They are cruel, they are cold, they are heartless. They have no empathy, which is how the Voight-Kampff test catches them out, and don't care about what happens to other creatures. They are essentially less-than-human entities." Ridley, on the other hand, said he regarded them as supermen who couldn't fly. He said they were smarter, stronger, and had faster reflexes than humans. 'Golly!' That's all I could think of to reply to that one. I mean, Ridley's attitude was quite a divergence from my original point of view, since the theme of my book is that Deckard is dehumanized through tracking down the androids. When I mentioned this, Ridley said that he considered it an intellectual idea, and that he was not interested in making an esoteric film."

Other SF writers have ideas; Philip K. Dick had visions. In fact, all of his visions may be said to be part of a single Uber-vision, a life-long attempt to construct a picture of the world and to ask meaningful questions about it. Most of his SF novels were different "takes" on this vision and explorations of those questions. To say, as so many people have done (including Dick himself), that his themes are "what is reality" and "what is human", is to touch only on the surface of the problems he was grappling with. It is necessary to understand how thoroughly Dick lived with his vision of life to know what his explorations meant, especially if one wishes to grasp their emotional center. Take this novel for instance (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?). One could read it as if it were an ordinary SF novel and be fascinated by its "ideas", such as androids with false memories or the economy of real-animal trade in a post-apocalyptic setting -- in the same way that some fans of the "Star Trek" shows are interested in the structure of the Federation, the nature of the Borg, etc. But Dick's ideas are nothing more than access points to his larger vision, and the novel has some interesting little conduits that can take you there. One thing of note (that few notice) is the idea of the "Penfield mood organ" which triggers an argument between Deckard and his wife in the opening chapter. Apparently one selects a desired emotional state and "dials in" settings to send one's brain

the electrical signals that create that emotion, such as "pleased acknowledgment of husband's superior wisdom in all matters". The gadget is obviously named after Wilder Penfield, 20th century pioneer in brain mapping research. (A variant of this idea was used later in another of Dick's robot-or-man novels, the neglected *We Can Build You*.) Significantly, the device "frames" the novel, referenced again during the last scene. Such a device is the least outlandish piece of "science fiction" that the novel contains, since it is based on real science. And that fact roots the other speculations of the novel, however wild, in a very real and pressing contemporary question: if our moods and attitudes can be manipulated via electrical currents, then... what are we? Another fascinating aspect of the story is the quasi-religious figure named Mercer. Mercer speaks at times with words like those of Christ, at other times with Zen riddles and self-contradiction. He offers empathy without salvation, salvation without truth, a truth through lies. When he is exposed as a fraud (when the set for the Mercer films is "subjected to rigorous laboratory scrutiny"), he admits it but insists that it does not detract from his validity. Mercerism is the only hint of transcendence offered by the novel, which raises the question: if such transcendence is exposed as fraudulent, then... what can be our transcendence? The devastation that Deckard experiences in the end is a reflection of Dick's own emotional response to the conundrums of life as he saw it. That's because his vision was never an abstract or academic construct, an intellectual game without consequences -- it was always a life-or-death matter for him. And so it is for us, because Dick's true theme is neither ontology nor human identity, but the value of our existence, our origin and our fate, our relationships to one another and to God.

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