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BOOK REVIEW

Mama Bots

Carol Stivers

The Mother Code.

Berkley, 2020.

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I'm old enough to remember "meeting" George Jetson. His boy, Elroy. And Jane, his wife. While I was reading Carole Stivers's *The Mother Code*, I suddenly remembered the name of another member of the Jetson family, their fastidious robot maid, Rosie.

Rosie, or Rho-Z, is also the name of a robot in Stivers's dystopia, the first to be programmed with the "Mother Code" and the capacity to incubate an embryo and raise the child to early life. It's 2050, and humanity has practically eradicated itself with a genetically engineered virus called IC-NAN, to which only some Hopi are naturally immune. Smart scientists discover that they can manipulate the genes of future generations for immunity, but there's no time to give birth to these children naturally. So, they roll out the Rosie-type bots, called the Mothers, who

carry genetically engineered children whose biological parents are destined to die from the virus. We've come quite a way from 1962, when Rosie the robot maid was cleaning up after the Jetsons.

Then again—not so much. Many writers have imagined worlds in which robots clean up after human mistakes. They either do that, or they wipe us out as inferior beings. When it comes to artificial intelligence, science fiction tends to take one or the other of these two routes: utopian or dystopian. AIs are either the saviors of humanity (Data in *Star Trek*) or our destroyers (the Cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*). Regardless, all SF relies on a particular suspension of disbelief in what scholars call the *novum*: That new technology or discovery or advancement that creates the novel's dramatic tension. In this

novel, we are asked to suspend disbelief that a human child can be raised to eleven or twelve years old by an AI-powered robot instead of a human mother.

It's a big ask. Because of our current debates about AI and what it means to be human, it might be a bridge too far for me. Not because I mind fiction in which robots gain wills of their own—I nerd out on that stuff all the time. But nowadays the *novum* of the sentient machine tends to reinforce the posthuman idea that a living being is above all else a thinking being: *cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore, I am). It reinforces a faulty metaphor of the human brain as a computer. This metaphor elides the complexity of embodiment, making it dangerously misleading for those who want to protect the dignity of every human life. *The Mother Code* means to promote human dignity but ends up being a disservice to it.

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The scientific breakthrough for this novum comes when Rose (the human programmer) recognizes that these children, who will be born in the wilderness with no parents, will need something very close to a real human face and personality. So, Rose designs the Mother Code, which programs the “essence” of the biological mother who will donate her eggs to create the embryo that will be raised by the Mother. Rose meets with a Hopi woman named Nova, and asks one of her programmers to

extract what she could of Nova’s essence. Nova’s voice, her mild, nasal intonation, would be synthesized into the voice of one of the Mothers. Her memories, the people in places she once knew, would be gone. But her beliefs, her way of seeing the world around her, would remain. Rose could only hope that this was a start toward encoding those elusive elements of family, of belonging, of self.

And here is the problem. Although it is plausible for a machine to learn the contents of a person’s beliefs, those beliefs cannot be separated from their memories, as if beliefs were just thoughts or bits of denuded information. But that is not true. Beliefs are in the body, and the body keeps the score. Beliefs and personalities are built out of experiences, the intensity of which determines which memories remain. The novum in *The Mother Code* requires us to believe that what matters most can be found in the mother’s brain. As

I’ve written above, this depends on a posthuman definition of life—that it comes down to pattern recognition, what can be called thinking. Sure, the creators give the robots very soft hands, nutrient dispensers, interior “cocoons” to hold the children, and a lot of video footage of actual humans, but this is nowhere near a mother’s face, body, or presence. Not to mention the role that hormones, pheromones, microbiota, and other biological processes play even in the first few minutes of an infant’s life. And how about attachment theory? We laugh at a children’s story in which a squirrel thinks it is a beaver because it woke up to a beaver mother, but this is categorically not the same thing.

So, when I got to this point in the novel I’m thinking, “Oh goody, we are going to get to see just how messed up these children will necessarily be without real, embodied love.” But that is not what happens. These robot Mothers (if they land safely) all succeed with their one child. They protect the infants and then teach the children how to communicate with them directly. (The term cybernetics denotes enhanced communication between humans and machine intelligence). We are thus asked to accept that an artificial intelligence that learns more, and is more connected to human neurology, will necessarily become first sentient and then loving. But if we accept this premise, we lose a little bit of our understanding of what actually makes us human. We are not human because of our ability to communicate, as if better communication means greater understanding.

We are human because we were born into a human family with discrete bodies, experiences, and radical connectedness to, and otherness from, other humans. Our birth mother’s being is extended into our being in a way much more mysterious than code could ever capture. Because the universe is inherently personal, love is not a kind of information we share. Love is ec-static. It is the reaching out of one person toward another in a profound act of recognition of inherent dignity: *You matter to me*. I do not believe that a machine that must be programmed to love can love in this kind of personal way, no matter how well it mimics it.

To be fair, *The Mother Code* was an enjoyable read with a life-affirming theme. In a genre still largely the province of male writers, it endeavors to illustrate that the love we get from our mothers is the essential starting point that enables us to venture out into the world of others without fear. A mother’s unconditional love and protection help us to see the world as a possibility for connection rather than as a war zone in a zero-sum competition for resources. There’s no question we need that perspective now more than ever. Let’s just remember that all persons are created in the image of a personal God, mysteriously connected to each other through body, blood, and memory. The gift of self-sacrificial love is meaningless in a world that doesn’t recognize personhood itself as the original gift.