

Ciència-ficció

CARME TORRAS
LA MUTACIÓ SENTIMENTAL



X Premi de Narrativa de Ciència-ficció
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Pagès editors

The Sentimental Mutation
by Carme Torras

Winner of the *X Pedrolo Prize for Science-Fiction Novels 2007*
and the *Ictineu Prize to the best Catalan SF Book published in 2008*

Published in Catalan language by Pagès Editors
Lleida, Spain

Plot

Celia, a thirteen-year-old girl, cryogenically frozen because of her terminal illness, is cured and brought back to life in the 21st Century in order to be adopted. Aside from her memories, she brings something else from the past: feelings and emotions that are no longer in existence. These are what most attract Silvana, a middle-aged woman who works as an emotional masseuse trying to recover the sensations humans have lost. Celia's feelings are also precious research material for Leo, a bioengineer who is designing a creativity prosthesis for the mysterious Doctor Craft, owner of the leading robotics company, CraftER.

About the book

On the back cover one reads: "The story develops in a future society where personal robots and other technological appliances have modified the human psyche and intimate relationships, the emotions and feelings, to enhance or deteriorate them depending on each one's opinion."

The author said in an interview: "Because of my profession, I attend meetings to foresee what robot technology may be ready to offer in five, ten years time, but what finally comes true is shaped by economic factors and market opportunities. I think that society as a whole must be able to choose what type of robots we would like to have as personal assistants when they become as widespread as personal computers are nowadays. We must be able to choose whether the robots should be stimulating to foster our creativity, or spoil us so that human beings will progressively become useless creatures. Information technologies influence the evolution of the human mind, and with robot companions such technologies enter the sphere of feelings and emotions. We, researchers, ought to design robots so that they make the human mind and feelings evolve in a purposefully chosen way."

Sample reviews

“The charm of this novel lies in the author’s look on the world of advanced technology. A look where you won’t find any trace of gratuitous catastrophism, short-sighted ecologism, or apocalyptic manicheisms. Carme Torras loves robots —don’t miss the chapters where they are the main characters—, but she has a clear view of the role that the human being and the machine have to play in this *pas à deux* in which we are irremissibly engaged. This is the true sentimental mutation.” **Joan Josep Isern, Avui** 5/7/2008. (Joan J. Isern is one of the most respected literary critics in the Catalan literature arena, and *Avui* is the most widely sold newspaper in Catalan language.)

“An intelligent, spine-chilling and, at the same time, oddly close story, which Torras tells us with plenty of humor and irony.” **Imma Monsó, La Vanguardia** 19/7/2008. (Imma Monsó is a famous Catalan writer, whose novels have been translated to many languages, and *La Vanguardia* is one of the leading Spanish newspapers.)

“The plot, the technical descriptions and the reflections are perfectly combined in the body of the novel, so that we never feel that the author stops the narrative flow to give us a lecture, which is always a merit in this literary genre. [...] We face, thus, a key question: how to digest that techno-scientific progress, which eases our daily lives and increases our freedom as individuals, at the same time makes us more dependent and vulnerable as a species? [...] Carme Torras, a courageous author, does not hide and shows her viewpoint in the ending of the story.” **Jordi Font-Agustí, BEMonline** 8/8/2008. (Jordi Font-Agustí won the International UPC Science Fiction Prize in 2004, with his novel *Traficants de llegendes (Legend dealers)*, and BEMonline is the most widely known online Science Fiction magazine written in Spanish: www.bemonline.com)

“Some logical riddles are scattered along the book, which, on the one hand, serve to the plot by contrasting the thinking of the pro-techno and the anti-techno, but, on the other hand, stimulate the reader to further develop his/her intelligence.” **Toni Segarra, Bulletin of SCCFF** 1/6/2008. (Toni Segarra is a scholar of science fiction literature, cinema and comic strips, and SCCFF is the Catalan Society of Science Fiction and Fantasy.)

Summary of the novel

(Sample chapters translated into English may be supplied on request.)

Development

Celia has trouble adapting to school and to her new situation in general. When Silvana is hired to help her, a deep bond is established between them, which makes Celia's adoptive mother jealous. Meanwhile, in his search for creative individuals, Leo interviews Celia and obtains some intracranial recordings from her. The girl is deeply impressed by the bioengineer and when her mother cancels a further appointment with him, she convinces her schoolmate Xis to escape from school and sneak into CraftER.

Xis is not used to going anywhere without ROBix, her robot assistant, and when the two girls become trapped on a balcony on a high-level floor, she panics and while Celia dozes, she throws herself off. Leo, Silvana and the two mothers cooperate and compete to rescue the girls, before they discover that Xis is dead. Their reactions are very disparate when they hear the news, and Celia falls into an extreme depression.

Leo and Silvana establish a relationship of rivalry that becomes closer as they defend opposite stands on life. He argues that technology widens human abilities, thus enabling humankind to reach unforeseen goals, while she counterattacks, saying that slave robots make owners despotic, the entertaining ones take away their users' brains, and the efficient ones spoil people by doing everything for them, even making their decisions for them.

Leo is uneasy with how much he is being controlled; up to the point that his thoughts at work are encrypted so that when he leaves his office he is unable to recall them. This is made possible by Doctor Craft's invention, the *time-out device*. Nevertheless, Leo's desire to know is so intense, that he injects himself with Celia's brainwaves but his personal assistant ROBco has to unplug him before his body becomes irreversibly damaged. When he tells Silvana about the extraordinary emotion he has experienced, she identifies it as the extinct feeling of admiration, and wants to experience it too. However the day she goes to his office, Doctor Craft gets in the way and she is totally disillusioned by Leo's submission to his boss.

Ending

With extreme care and patience, Silvana succeeds in rescuing Celia from her depressive state. Besides the massages, she sometimes resorts to playing the role of the girl's biological mother, with the help of a ring that becomes a sort of talisman for them.

Leo asks Silvana for help, after an interview with Doctor Craft opens his eyes to the fact that he will be fired as soon as he hands the creativity prosthesis over to his boss. He wants at least to retain the knowledge that he has gained within the project. Silvana doubts whether to attend the call, since she is with Celia at *The Com* —the anti-techno community where she lives. Finally, a colleague convinces her that it will be therapeutic for the girl to sneak back into CraftER and see that, hopefully, nothing terrible happens to her.

While the two of them head towards Leo's office, Doctor Craft asks ROBco to inject Celia's brainwaves into him so that he doesn't lag behind the bioengineer's accomplishments. His old body, however, can't stand the tension of the youngster's feelings and he dies, without his robot assistants being able to do anything to save him.

Leo, Silvana and Celia receive the news from ROBco, and the two of them convince Leo to stay in the office so that he can complete the creativity prosthesis and open it up for public use.

The book ends with a riddle —similar to the ones Doctor Craft has been solving throughout the book— of three monks, living in distant monasteries, who have to save their entire order. A metaphor for the open ending where the three main characters, although inhabiting very different worlds, take on the joint mission of modifying the way technology is being developed.