



Machine Man (Vintage Contemporaries)

By Max Barry

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Prosthetist Lola Shanks loves a good artificial limb. In Charlie, she sees a man on his way to becoming artificial everything. But others see a madman. Or a product. Or a weapon.

A story for the age of pervasive technology, *Machine Man* is a gruesomely funny unraveling of one man's quest for ultimate self-improvement.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Wickedly entertaining, a brilliant book: caustically funny, and-by its closing chapter-surprisingly moving."
--Scott Smith, author of *The Ruins*

"Using precision-engineered prose, Max Barry has built a gleaming, terrifying device: part love story, part horror story, part thought experiment, all entertaining." --Charles Yu, author of *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*

"A meticulously devised, deviant little parable--once it starts, you can't look away." --Austin Grossman, author of *Soon I Will Be Invincible*

About the Author

Max Barry began removing parts at an early age. In 1999, he successfully excised a steady job at tech giant HP in order to upgrade to the more compatible alternative of manufacturing fiction. While producing three novels, he developed the online nation simulation game *NationStates*, as well as contributing to various open source software projects and developing religious views on operating systems. He did not leave the house much. For *Machine Man*, Max wrote a website to deliver pages of fiction to readers via email and RSS. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and two daughters, and is 38 years old. He uses vi.

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1

AS A BOY, I WANTED TO BE A TRAIN. I DIDN'T REALIZE THIS WAS unusual— that other kids played with trains, not as them. They liked to build tracks and have trains not fall off them. Watch them go through tunnels. I didn't understand that. What I liked was pretending my body was two hundred tons of unstoppable steel. Imagining I was pistons and valves and hydraulic compressors.

"You mean robots," said my best friend, Jeremy. "You want to play robots." I had never thought of it like that. Robots had square eyes and jerky limbs and usually wanted to destroy the Earth. Instead of doing one thing right, they did everything badly. They were general purpose. I was not a fan of robots. They were bad machines.

I WOKE AND REACHED FOR MY PHONE AND IT WAS NOT THERE. I GROPED around my bedside table, fingers sneaking between novels I didn't read anymore because once you start e-reading you can't go back. But no phone. I sat up and turned on my lamp. I crawled underneath the bed, in case my phone had somehow fallen in the night and bounced oddly. My eyes were blurry from sleep so I swept my arms across the carpet in hopeful arcs. This disturbed dust and I coughed. But I kept sweeping. I thought: *Have I been burgled?* I felt like I would have woken if someone had tried to swipe my phone. Some part of me would have realized.

I entered the kitchen. Kitchenette. It was not a big apartment. But it was clean, because I didn't cook. I would

have spotted my phone. But I did not. I peered into the living room. Sometimes I sat on the sofa and watched TV while playing with my phone. Possibly the phone had slipped down between cushions. It could be there now, just out of sight. I shivered. I was naked. The living room curtains were open and the window looked onto the street. The street looked into the window. Sometimes there were dogwalkers, and school-going children. I shivered again. I should put on some clothes. My bedroom was six feet away. But my phone could be closer. It could be right there. I cupped my hands over my genitals and ran across the living room and pulled up sofa cushions. I saw black plastic and my heart leaped but it was only a remote. I got down on my hands and knees and felt around beneath the sofa. My ass tingled with the first touch of morning sun. I hoped nobody was outside that window.

The coffee table was bare on top but laden beneath with reference books I hadn't touched since Google. A phone book, for some reason. A phone book. Three million sheafs of dead tree stacked up as a monument to the inefficiency of paper as an information distribution platform. But no phone. I sat up. A dog barked. For the first time ever I wished I had a land line, so I could call my phone. I peered at the top of the TV and it was empty but maybe I had put my phone down there and it had been dislodged by minor seismic activity. As I crossed the room, my eyes met a jogger's. Her face contorted. That might have been from exertion. Behind the TV was a cord-based civilization but no phone. It wasn't on the kitchen bench. It still wasn't on my bedside table or the carpet or any of the places I had already looked. My teeth chattered. I didn't know how warm it would be today. It might rain, it might be humid, I had no idea. I had a desktop but it took forever to boot, more than a minute. I would have to choose clothes without information on the environmental conditions. It was insane.

I showered. Sometimes to solve a problem you need to stop trying solutions. You need to step back. I stood under water and mentally retreaded the previous night. I had worked late. I had arrived home around two. I don't think I ate. I went to bed and fell asleep without even using my phone at all. I realized: *It's in my car*. It made perfect sense. I turned off the water. I had not used soap or washed my hair but from water was probably 80 percent clean. That was a pass. I wrapped a towel around my waist, grabbed keys from the kitchen, and padded out of the apartment. The stairwell was ice. I almost lost my towel trying to open the door to the underground garage. My car was in the sixth bay and already I could see the empty dock. I bwipbwhipped it open anyway and crawled inside to search between seats. I could not believe I had driven all the way home without docking my phone. Or maybe I could. Sometimes I left it in my pocket and realized only when I stopped the car and reached for it. That had happened. And last night I had been tired. It wasn't inconceivable. The phone could be anywhere. It could be anywhere.

I stared out the windshield at a concrete wall and became sure my phone was at work. I had taken it out of my pocket because you couldn't take electromagnetic equipment into Lab 4. It was on my desk. Anyone could pick it up. No. There were cameras. No one would steal my phone. Especially if I arrived early. I groped for my phone, to check the time, and groaned. This was like being blind. I put the keys in the ignition and remembered I was wearing a towel. I hesitated. I took the keys out again but it felt like a tearing. I got out of the car and fixed my towel and took the steps two at a time.

DRIVING IN, I GRIPPED THE WHEEL. THE SUN BEAT THROUGH THE windshield, mocking my sweater. I had overdressed. I reached the point where I had to decide between the avenue or by the park and didn't know which had less traffic. I hadn't read a news headline for hours. War could have broken out. There could have been earthquakes. I turned on the radio for the first time in years and it jabbered about discount carpets and what an excellent medium for advertising radio was and would I like to win a thousand dollars, and I stared at it in disbelief and turned it off. I wished I had my phone. I didn't even want to do something specific. I just wanted the possibility to do things. It could do so many things.

The avenue was choked with traffic, of course. I sat there and exchanged ignorance with time. Finally I turned the car into the science district and sped past research houses and machine fabricators. At the end, on the river, was Better Future: an eight-story complex of a half-dozen connected buildings, a wide lawn out front and razor wire everywhere else. There was more underground but you wouldn't know. At the boom gate I fumbled my security pass and had to get out to pick it off the concrete. A security guard wandered out of his booth and I tried to wave him away because the last thing I needed now was conversation. But he kept coming. "Morning, sir."

"I've got it." I swiped the card. The boom rose.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes. Just dropped my card." A hot wind blew by. I tried to pull off my sweater and my security tag snagged in the sleeve and slipped from my fingers again. By the time I freed myself, the guard was offering it to me.

"Hot one today."

I looked at him. This sounded like a criticism of my information-impaired clothing choice. But I couldn't be sure. I opened my mouth to request a clarifying restatement, then realized it didn't matter and took the card. I got back in the car and drove into the bowels of Better Future.

I SWIPED FOR THE ELEVATOR AND AGAIN FOR ACCESS TO BUILDING A. We were big on swiping. You couldn't go to a bathroom in Better Future without swiping first. There was once a woman whose card stopped working and she was trapped in a corridor for three hours. It was a busy corridor but nobody was permitted to let her out. Ushering somebody through a security door on your pass was just about the worst thing you could do at Better Future. They would fire you for that. All anyone could do was bring her snacks and fluids until security finished verifying her biometrics.

I passed the atrium, which was already filling with young people in white lab coats and older managers in suits and skirts. At the central elevator bank was a young woman with dark hair. Marketing, or possibly recruitment. The call button was lit but I moved to repress it anyway, then stopped myself because that was completely illogical, then went ahead and did it because, seriously, what was the harm. It wasn't like I was doing anything else. As I stepped back, I saw the young woman looking at me and glanced away, then realized she was starting to smile and looked back but then she was looking away and it was too late. We stood awhile. I reached into my pocket for my phone. I hissed. She said, "Take forever, don't they?"

"No, I lost my phone." She looked confused. "That's why I was . . ." I trailed off. There was silence.

"They're all on three," she said. According to the display, three cars were at Sublevel 3 and the fourth was right behind them. "All these engineers, you'd think we could figure out how to decluster the elevators." She smiled. "I'm Rebecca."

"Hmm," I said. I was familiar with the elevator algorithm. It sent cars in the same direction so long as they had a destination, then allowed them to reverse. It was supposed to be efficient. But there was an alternative that allowed people to enter their destination *before* getting in, which allowed the scheduler to make more intelligent decisions. The problem was the system could be gamed: people figured they got elevators faster by mashing buttons. I wondered if cars should move away from one another when idle. It might even be worth delaying one car to create a gap. You would slow one journey but benefit everyone who came after. I

should run some numbers. I opened my mouth to say this and realized an elevator had arrived and the woman was entering it. I followed. She pulled her satchel close to her body. She seemed tense. I tried to think of something to say but all I could think was, *Takes forever, doesn't it*, which was what she had said to me. She got out at Organizational Communications without looking at me.

I AM NOT A PEOPLE PERSON. WHENEVER I'M EVALUATED, I SCORE VERY low on social metrics. My ex-boss said she had never seen anyone score a zero on Interpersonal Empathy before. And she worked with engineers. If anyone is having a party, I am not invited. In meetings, during downtime, the people I'm seated between will both talk to the person on their other side. There's something about me that is repellent. I don't mean disgusting. I mean like magnets. The closer people get, the stronger their urge to move away.

I am a smart guy. I recycle. Once I found a lost cat and took it to a shelter. Sometimes I make jokes. If there's something wrong with your car, I can tell what by listening to it. I like kids, except the ones who are rude to adults and the parents just stand there, smiling. I have a job. I own my apartment. I rarely lie. These are qualities I keep hearing people are looking for. I can only think there must be something else, something no one mentions, because I have no friends, am estranged from my family, and haven't dated in this decade. There is a guy in Lab Control who killed a woman with his car, and he gets invited to parties. I don't understand that.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sharon Hall:

Do you have favorite book? In case you have, what is your favorite's book? Book is very important thing for us to learn everything in the world. Each e-book has different aim or even goal; it means that book has different type. Some people experience enjoy to spend their time for you to read a book. They can be reading whatever they get because their hobby will be reading a book. Why not the person who don't like reading through a book? Sometime, individual feel need book if they found difficult problem or exercise. Well, probably you will want this Machine Man (Vintage Contemporaries).

Peter White:

Have you spare time for a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity for spend your time. Any person spent all their spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open or maybe read a book titled Machine Man (Vintage Contemporaries)? Maybe it is to get best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with the opinion or you have some other opinion?

Glenn Bail:

What do you think about book? It is just for students since they are still students or the item for all people in

the world, what best subject for that? Just you can be answered for that problem above. Every person has distinct personality and hobby per other. Don't to be pressured someone or something that they don't would like do that. You must know how great and also important the book Machine Man (Vintage Contemporaries). All type of book are you able to see on many resources. You can look for the internet solutions or other social media.

Sheila Robinson:

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