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Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (February, 2024)

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Naomi Baron’s book, *Who Wrote This? How AI and the Lure of Efficiency Threaten Human Writing*, addresses the current impact of artificial intelligence (AI) text-generation technology on writing as a human activity—from cognitive development and learning to issues of employment, creativity, and authorship. In the prologue, Baron begins with how “the contrast between human authorship and today’s AI alternatives represents an historic human moment” when questions about authorship, literacy, and the “lure of efficiency” are at the forefront of many academic disciplines and public conversations (p. xii). She presents an accessible account that weaves plain-language descriptions of complex, technical terms and concepts with her own authorial voice, making the book engaging to read beyond its timely and intriguing subject matter.

Particularly in the last year, there has been a proliferation of articles, social media content, and books addressing questions related to AI in the wake of the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT-3.5 at the end of 2022. This will likely not be news to readers of this review. Many academic concerns surround public access to tools like ChatGPT, particularly regarding the end of the “academic paper” as a student assignment, a long-standing method for assessing written communication competency and mastery at the undergraduate level. Many are also embracing, or at least exploring, the affordances and constraints of these tools in the context of teaching writing. Talk to any teacher and they’ll likely have at least some familiarity with an AI text-generation tool, whether as a writer, teacher, or reader. AI writing technologies are not new. However, they are becoming more common and “domesticated,” as Baron explains in the prologue, with “the move to invisibility ... [and] taken-for-grantedness” (p. xxiv). The invisibility of writing technologies (and of writing as a technology itself) is where the problems often arise.
Baron’s survey of the historical and contemporary AI and writing/literacy landscape focuses on eight foundational questions that form the underlying structure of her book, including:

—What’s your motivation for writing?
—Is AI a threat to human-written creativity?
—What writing skills are worth keeping?
—Can you AI-proof your personal writing voice?
—Is AI redefining authorship?
—Does AI threaten professions built on writing skills?
—Where do you draw the line between collaboration and handing over the keys?
—Will disclosure rules help? (pp. xxix-xxx)

To address these questions, Baron offers a survey of “everything from effects of literacy on the brain to the evolution of contemporary natural language processing” (p. xxx). She provides definitions of complex technical terms and explains acronyms in a useful addendum at the end of the book. Baron also situates her book in a time when AI technology is rapidly changing and reminds the reader that “reports on today’s AI are inevitably outdated by the time the metaphoric ink dries” (p. xv). This is thus not a book on the current status of ChatGPT; instead, it’s a book meant to engage readers in crucial conversations about key questions related to writing, literacy, creativity, and authorship when writers have increasing access to AI text-generation tools.

Baron offers readers insight into AI’s impact on employment in writing-intensive careers related to journalism, translation, and legal practice. She contextualizes these career impacts with a survey of writing machinery (or machinery engaging in “writing”) for crafting correspondence and letters, novels, hypertext fiction, narrative computer gaming, and copywriting. Baron explores the push for automation of (writing) labor in the aforementioned disciplines of journalism, translation, and law, where questions of meaningful, intellectually stimulating labor and a writer’s voice collide with the book’s subtitle (“The lure of efficiency”), where a glass-half-full perspective shines a light on the idea that now we will all be free to do more creative, challenging work as the AI assistant handles everything we don’t enjoy about putting words on a page. Baron cautions that a key issue with this perspective is that it cloaks the assumption that some writing tasks are neutral and do not require human intervention.

In chapter 9, Baron explores creativity and writing, offering multiple definitions and perspectives on “creativity” as a human activity. Human readers value authenticity and life experience from writers; Baron argues that “the real sticking point, as Joy Guilford suggested back in 1950, is that ‘thinking machines’ challenge our sense of human uniqueness.... The real threat we feel from AIs that can write decently, even creatively, is to our turf. Our self-definition” (p. 153). What follows this chapter is an exploration of Baron’s earlier commentary on domesticated technology that has become ubiquitous and invisible. She begins with spellcheck and works through additional examples such as texting and grammar-checking tools. Readers will encounter questions about the impact of AI writing-assistant tools on learning, improving, and maintaining writing-related and literacy skills. Baron offers “collaboration” as a lens through which to write with AI: “what matters is that when talking about how computers work and what they’re capable of, we need to include humans in the picture” (p. 179). Baron illustrates this “human-centered” approach to collaborating with AI through examples such as chess, coding, and mental health treatment (p. 179).

Baron also shares results and insights from a survey study focused on this overarching research question: “What do today’s everyday writers think about AI as a writing technology?” (p. 191). Drawing from her experience studying how people read
via print or digital devices, Baron surveyed two groups of participants about their perceptions of AI writing assistants, spelling, editing and proofreading, predictive texting and text generation, handwriting, and impact on jobs where writing is the focus. Baron encourages writers to use these tools carefully to reap the benefits of the cognitive value of writing and write in a unique, human authorial voice. Baron’s work is bookended with an introductory overview of the development of human literacy and a coda exploring the value of “human authorship” (p. 213). She offers readers a heuristic for building our own personal writing “scorecard” through a review of the book’s eight defining questions (p. 215). Her final thoughts ask readers to consider their purposes for writing, be it intellectual development, labor, and livelihood, or finding their writerly voice.

Readers may want perspectives beyond the scope of Baron’s book and ideas for using this book with students. One key area that merits attention is AI writing tools and writers who use assistive technologies. Readers will want to explore research on AI and writing from the field of disability studies for these crucial conversations. For teachers of writing, Baron’s book could be used to help students engage with questions related to motivation for writing, authorship/authenticity, writing technologies, and creativity. These questions aren’t new, but the recent influx of AI writing tools has made addressing them even more important, especially for those of us who are tasked with teaching writing—from sparking students’ ideas, maintaining their motivation, helping them work through an intentional and iterative writing process, and evaluating and assessing student writing (potentially with AI assistants embedded in course management systems). This book would be appropriate to assign undergraduate students a survey of AI-literacy-writing-related topics and introduce them to contemporary issues related to writing-intensive careers. Finally, all readers interested in exploring questions about what it means to write as a human will find a willing conversation partner in Baron’s book, starting with Plato’s *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE), where Socrates raises concerns that a new technology (writing) will impact people’s ability to memorize and remember. Readers might also engage in handwritten marginalia when cracking the spine of Baron’s book: according to some of the research cited in chapter 12, they might learn more through this act of “embodied cognition” (p. 202).
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