



WWW: Wake

Robert J. Sawyer

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Caitlin Decter is young, pretty, feisty, a genius at math, and blind. When she receives an implant to restore her sight, instead of seeing reality she perceives the landscape of the World Wide Web-where she makes contact with a mysterious consciousness existing only in cyberspace.

WWW: Wake Details

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From Reader Review WWW: Wake for online ebook

Jacob Proffitt says

I enjoyed parts of this very well. Caitlin was made of win and her story was both engaging and entertaining. Sawyer did an outstanding job getting into the head of a blind fifteen year-old girl and giving us her perspective as she goes through the ups and downs of gaining sight. Seriously, if that'd been all this story was, it would have been an easy four stars with the possibility of five.

Unfortunately, Sawyer "treats" us to a number of perspective shifts at almost random intervals. Some of those develop into something. Some of them disappear half-way through. Some felt like he was trying to be all deep and stuff (trying). So while interrupting the story I cared about, they also felt kind of off-puttingly pretentious as well.

Those were annoying, but worse (to me) were the *huge* logic problems with the sci-fi aspects of the story—the emergence of a self-aware web entity of some kind. Now this wouldn't have been so bad, except that Sawyer boxes himself in a bit. You see, one of the PoVs that we get is from this entity as it begins to discover itself. Which means he robs himself of being able to black-box how things happen. Details in spoiler tag, though none of this is really surprising. (view spoiler)

So anyway, there were other minor quibbles (stereotypes of intelligence and learning, mostly), but the spoiler one really killed me. I stuck with it for Caitlin, but sometimes that was hard. She was worth it, though. Lovely girl, great character, and a lot of fun to spend some time with.

Fortunately (for me), the ending of this book is extremely satisfying. I think I'm much happier with my own imaginings of what happens next without having to worry about Sawyer stepping on himself again, or transient PoVs that I don't care about.

Alexis says

Genre trash littering the road on my journey to find literary science fiction.

This book is just bad craft, bottom line. It's horribly written, the politics seem precious and the wink-wink attitude he takes towards mentioning certain political movements just pissed me off. If you want to write a political book, great - but at least be intellectually honest with me and come out and own it.

Also, it's offensive. He wouldn't know a teenage girl if one came up to him and kicked him in the head. Seriously, he'd be like, "wow, what was THAT?!?!" His teenage girl main character was not recognizable as anything other than the male-constructed social ideal of a teenaged woman: she was compliant, non-threatening, and still beautiful and smart. Bah.

His two other story/character threads were left hanging, as they never came to any sort of fruition. I get that it's a trilogy (I won't be reading the rest) but even still, that's just lazy. He can go read some Zadie Smith and then work out how story threads are meant to happen, you know, by actual, talented writers.

For someone who seems so anti-corporate (ok, that's cool but...) - he certainly drops enough brand names

owned by corporate entities to appear as though his novel is a paid advertisement. Trust me, you don't need to lean on others' brand names to appear relevant.

Finally, it was mean-spirited, exclusive, and shallow. I won't gratify it with detailed descriptions, but needless to say he makes it very clear which types of people he sees as having some kind of diminished humanity, and he feels no shame about further enforcing this lesser-than status through his writing. So not only did I glean from this that he is a bad writer, but also that he is just an asshole.

What a complete and utter waste of time. EDIT: One last point, and I'm totally aware I'm going to get skewered for it by trufans. But - placing an inherent moral value on various legal concepts is just stupid and naive. Open sourcing isn't inherently good, and intellectual property isn't inherently bad. Newsflash: We live in a world chock full of complex moral concepts. But by portraying it this way as if there were no other possible interpretation, he just comes off as poorly educated and simple. And what's worse, he comes off as though he genuinely feels like his readers are stupid. And that's just insulting.

Michael says

Good science fiction speculates on things that are theoretically possible given some of the conditions and advances of our current level of technology. In many cases, the advances may be years or decades away from becoming reality, but in the case of Robert J. Sawyer's new novel, "WWW: Wake," part of his speculated future has become a reality far too quickly.

It's disconcerting to pick up a novel that speculates on the future and find one plot element concerning an outbreak of a new form of the flu virus. In fact, the virus that breaks out is the H1N5 in the novel, possibly some distant cousin of the current virus that is creating a global scare and a potential world-wide pandemic.

Of course, I shouldn't be shocked that Sawyer has done his homework and is able to predict things that could happen in the near future. He's had a long, distinguished career of doing just that and his new novels are always those I look forward to reading next.

"WWW: Wake" is no exception.

The start of a new trilogy of novels, the story follows several different threads. One is the story of teenager Catlin Decter, who has been blind since birth. A new technology could possibly open give her sight for the first time by making use of the power of the Internet. But there's something lurking out in cyberspace, building itself up and slowly becoming more and more aware of itself.

Stir in a story about China's dealing with an outbreak of the H1N5 virus by removing the affected areas and shutting off communication with the outside world for several days and a plot about a highly intelligent hybrid primate and you've got a lot of ground to cover in this first installment. And make no mistake, this is clearly a first installment. Sawyer introduces a lot of threads and a lot of fascinating ideas in the course of his story and while he does wrap-up most of the immediate plot threads in this novel, he still leaves you hanging in the end, wanting the next installment immediately, if not sooner. There's not a character in peril type of cliffhanger here, but instead there are several intriguing points that Sawyer leaves the reader to mull over and consider as we wait for the next installment.

But while the book is full of big ideas, those ideas are grounded in identifiable characters. The main focus of

the story is Catlin and her journey from lack of sight to her new ability to see. Sawyer ably puts the reader inside the mind and experience of Catlin, making us see how she works within the world while being blind and how she must learn to adapt to a world where she can see. Catlin's story will have you feeling her joy, her frustration and her curious nature in how she relates to the world. And a revelation about her father half-way through the story is ably set up and paid off in the course of this first installment.

The only real criticism I can come up with this one is it ended too soon and left me eager for the next installment. And that next installment cannot come soon enough...

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/1443406.html>

I don't think I will ever much enjoy a Sawyer novel, but this one irritated me less than most of his books. The prose was not particularly awful, and the plot mostly makes sense; the story of the blind girl gaining sight for the first time resonates almost neatly with the story of a conscious intelligence developing in the internet.

It is, of course, a flawed book. Caitlin writes a livejournal which sounds nothing like any teenager's livejournal I have read. The AI character, absorbing all the knowledge of the www, is unfazed by linguistic differences or by the difficulty of telling truth from fiction, and deduces middle Canadian morality from Project Gutenberg (and I hate cute disembodied artificial intelligences almost as much as I hate cute robots). There are two subplots, one about China and one about intelligent apes, which go nowhere (they may be setting up for the two coming volumes of the trilogy, but I must judge this volume on its own).

Most damning, Caitlin, whose life has been utterly constrained by her own disability, does not even notice her father's somewhat different disability until two-thirds of the way through the book; which seems utterly out of character for the sort of person we are told she is.

Alan says

Robert J. Sawyer is a prolific author known for writing popular, workmanlike science fiction, and *WWW:Wake* is no exception. His work is also not especially adventurous... and this book is no exception there, either. I enjoyed reading this novel (although be warned: it's the first in Yet Another Series), but it was something of a guilty pleasure.

Sawyer's take on the well-worn theme of a nascent artificial intelligence could have been entitled *When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was Web 2.0*—already a familiar riff for anyone familiar with 20th-Century sf by the likes of David Gerrold (*When H.A.R.L.I.E. Was One*), Robert A. Heinlein (*The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*), William Gibson (*Neuromancer*), Thomas J. Ryan (*The Adolescence of P-1*), D.F. Jones (*Colossus et seq.*) or any number of other works. Sawyer's newer take on the trope does seem fairly plausible, perhaps because it does take into account some more modern aspects of network architecture, cellular automata and the like, but he really doesn't break any new ground here.

And his kitchen-sink approach to the novel's backstory isn't much help either. Frequent Wikipedia-like paragraphs on Julian Jaynes, and others on Stephen Wolfram, to name two, are jarring interruptions. Sawyer

doesn't seem to have been able to resist showing off the research he did in order to write this book... which is fine, I suppose, but it should have been saved for an afterword or annotated bibliography, rather than shoehorned into the narrative.

Nevertheless, I am a sucker for the theme, familiar though it is, and I quickly found myself warming to Sawyer's protagonist Caitlin, a teenaged girl with a bent for math and a fish-out-of-water appeal as she finds herself transplanted from Austin, Texas to Toronto. Caitlin's also blind, but in a unique way that turns out to be amenable to a computational fix. The side effect of the fix—and Sawyer does a fairly good job of portraying this, actually—is that Caitlin becomes able to visualize the Web directly, in a way that sighted people can't. This gives her an edge when detecting the anomalies that turn out to be the awakening Web.

I'm damning this book with faint praise here, and I probably shouldn't—if you like this sort of thing, you will definitely like this book; it's a well-done example of its type. But... I couldn't help wanting more out of *WWW:Wake* than a few hours' entertainment... and that's *all* I got, this time.

Margaret says

Enjoyed this a lot. I won't go into detail because of spoilers but it takes an interesting approach to 'cyberspace', the internet and artificial intelligence, as experienced through a fascinating main character. Good, absorbing, imaginative Sci Fi.. and I will be reading the sequels.

Ben Babcock says

Seldom does a book live up to blurbs like "Unforgettable. Impossible to put down," as Jack McDevitt says of *Wake*. Usually, such claims are empty hype, even when the book is good. Not so with *Wake*. I agree wholeheartedly with McDevitt, for I was 100 pages into the novel before realizing it was 2 AM and I should probably get some sleep. There's no way that *Wake* could be mistaken for "an action-packed thrill ride" or any of those other tired blurb clichés floating around in the critique pool, but "impossible to put down" definitely describes the opening to Robert J. Sawyer's new trilogy about an emerging artificial intelligence.

For a fairly short volume, and one that lacks any sort of action or suspense, there's a lot packed into *Wake*. The central plot, which deals with Caitlin Dechter's bid to gain sight and how this leads her to discover the Web's emergent intelligence, happens against a backdrop of the ongoing information wars in China and research into primate intelligence in the United States. Sawyer makes accurate allusions to current technology and scientific developments. This sense of scope and style reminds me of how Cory Doctorow writes about technology in his books. With ease, these authors transcribe to paper actions and descriptions about technology we use every day but don't always pause to understand *how* we use it. Moreover, because the descriptions are accurate, Sawyer is educating the less technologically-adept even as he immerses us in this very human plot. So kudos.

I call the plot of this book "human," even though it concerns an AI, because the nature of being human is the motif that connects all of the disparate subplots in *Wake*. I wish that something beyond theme connected these subplots; the critic in me has to profess disappointment that Hobo the chimp's story is only tangential to Caitlin's, at least for now. This is a structural issue with the narrative, however, and it doesn't detract from the thematic brilliance of Sawyer's writing.

Caitlin often refers to Helen Keller and her writing, as well as a book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. She mentions Keller's descriptions of what her thought processes were like before she learned how to communicate and interact with the external world. Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness* similarly discusses a theory about a turning point in human history where the two halves of the brain managed to talk to each other and act on conscious thoughts instead of instinct.

In China, the Communist Party decides to kill several thousand people in a remote province to eliminate the threat of H5N1. To prevent the Chinese people from seeing the inevitable backlash of the world media, it severs all communication outside of China. These are the actions of humans, yet the idea of killing thousands of people merely to prevent the spread of an infection seems, at least to me, very *inhuman*.

Then there's the bonobo-chimpanzee hybrid, Hobo, who can communicate via sign language and startles everyone when he paints representational art—a profile of one of his researchers—instead of the typical abstract pictures so far produced by non-human primates. The way Sawyer portrays Hobo makes him seem far more human than he actually is, and this is where, as a sceptic, I have to balk. Artificial intelligence aside, this is probably the part of the book that relies the most on extrapolation of something we haven't achieved yet. I do believe it's possible for apes to use sign language to communicate intelligently; don't get me wrong. And Sawyer's portrayal of Hobo's humanity serves its purpose of parallelling the development of the Web AI.

This final piece of the plot puzzle is what connects the other three, of course. When China puts up the Great Firewall, it severs this non-sentient entity into two, suddenly enabling it to begin conceiving of time and eventually abstract thought. From there, it begins to learn and teach itself new concepts, something that continues up to and after Caitlin discovers its existence. Sawyer does his best to portray the alien nature of this intelligence's journey toward sentience while still describing it in terms we can comprehend. For the most part, he pulls this off, although I preferred the observations that Caitlin, her father, and Dr. Kuroda make about the intelligence's composition as cellular automata over Sawyer's first-person depictions of the intelligence. The former were just so unique yet tantalizing, since it really drives home the point that the Web is a fluctuating network of constant streaming data and not some sort of static series of Facebook pages and Google search results all stored in a database and delivered to your browser when you hit "Go."

To return to the motif of humanity, however, I'd like to point out a section toward the end of the book, in which Caitlin leads the emerging intelligence to Wikipedia, which it consumes eagerly, and then onto Project Gutenberg:

And then, and then, and then—

It was—

The gold mine.

The mother lode. . . .

Not just coded conceptual relationships, not just definitions, not just brief articles.

No, these were—*books!* Lengthy, in-depth treatments of ideas. Complex *stories*. Brilliant arguments, profound philosophies, compelling narratives. This site, this wonderful Project Gutenberg, contained over 25,000 books rendered in plain ASCII text. . . .

It took me an eternity—eight hours!—but I absorbed it all: every volume, every polemic, every poem, every play, every novel, every short story, every work of history, of science, of politics. I *inhaled* them . . . and I grew even more.

Firstly, I'd like to note that Sawyer has described precisely how I feel about books, about reading in general, and about wonderful libraries like Project Gutenberg. But if you're reading this review, you're probably on Goodreads, and you probably understand, so I won't belabour that point. Secondly, while Sawyer is far from the first SF author or scientist to make this point, it's an important one when it comes to discussing how to deal with an artificial intelligence, should we create one or should one emerge spontaneously as it does in *Wake*. It's going to learn. Fast. And the information we feed it will determine what opinions it forms about humanity.

Read over that last paragraph again. In eight hours, the AI consumes the sum total of Project Gutenberg's library (this is after it's partaken in Wikipedia and in Cyc, an encyclopedia tool specifically designed for teaching AIs). In so doing, it has consumed all these myriad works of humanity, works that talk about being human, whether they're philosophy or fiction or scientific in origin . . . and it's seen our history. How we've treated each other, continue to treat each other, and how we've treated this planet.

An intelligence that emerges from the World Wide Web emerges from the combined knowledge and information that we humans put on the Web. So even if this intelligence itself is not human, everything it learns is going to be a product of humanity, at least at first. Whether consciously or not, we're going to shape the first opinions of an emergent intelligence. It's something worth considering.

Beyond the human angle, Sawyer's crammed so much in here that I'm not sure where to start. So let's talk about Caitlin's blindness.

I'm not blind, so I'm certainly not congenitally blind, and as such, I'll never really know what Caitlin's world is like. Yet Sawyer at least gave me an inkling of what it's like to be blind, both from a conceptual perspective and a technological one. One thing I noticed is that instead of providing visual descriptions of places and people around Caitlin, Sawyer is always careful to describe in terms of sound, touch, and smell. Caitlin concludes Dr. Kuroda is tall because of the direction from which his voice comes but heavy because of the way he wheezes. We don't know if he's bald or has thick hair or blue eyes. As someone who doesn't really visualize things when I read, I didn't miss the lack of visual description and appreciated this change.

Sawyer also introduced me to how the blind and visually-impaired interact with the Web. Oh, I already knew about screenreaders like JAWS and refreshable Braille displays, etc., but this was the first time I'd really thought about how they get used. For Caitlin, this was all just *normal* for her, and through her eyes I began to understand how it was possible to interact with the world in this way.

And beyond her blindness, as a person, Caitlin is a well-thought-out character. She's "feisty" as the jacket copy promises, but she isn't perfect—she has a few melt-downs and tantrums. Still, Sawyer manages to make her a realistic LiveJournal-using, ebook-reading, iPod-listening teen without making her into a caricature or stereotype. Now if only she could kick that nasty exposition habit she develops in the second third of the book. . . .

This is why it was so hard to put down *Wake* and why the first thing I did upon waking today was pick it up and finish it. Sawyer makes me think, but he also makes me look at stuff I already think about in different

ways. He does this with Caitlin, and he also does this with China.

"The Great Firewall of China" is a pretty well-known term on the Web. Most people are aware of the Chinese government's tight control over the Internet in China, both in terms of access and in terms of content—Google's controversial decision to censor its search results, China's tendency to block websites that it finds too seditious or inappropriate, the spyware built into the networks and the computers themselves, etc. Let's be honest for a moment. For those of us reading *Wake* in North America or Europe, that's half a world away, and the public consciousness has a fleeting attention span. Sawyer reminds us that the oppression in China has been ongoing for decades now, and even if the People's Republic is doomed as some projections claim, that won't stop them from committing further atrocities before they fade into history. Fortunately, it isn't all grim: dissidents are using the Internet to fight back. And while the increasing globalization of the economy does prop up the communist government, it also makes it harder for that government to simply cut off all ties from the outside world. Unlike North Korea, which has fewer people and doesn't make stuff for Wal-Mart, China *is* dependent on the outside world. The Web connects us, and even when censored, offers hope for freedom.

We live in exciting times. Well, I suspect that we've always lived in exciting times ever since our bicameral minds fused and we started to keep track of time. But don't doubt that here and now, the present, is full of wonders. Just as Apollo 8's photographs of Earth from space changed how we perceive ourselves, so too is the Web changing how we interact. The advancements in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology . . . everything we uncover only shows that there's more to learn, but if you thought the Renaissance was exciting, just recall that we know so much more now. We can be terrible, cruel, nearly insane . . . but when we come together to do good, we can be a wonderful species. *Wake* reminded me of that, of the good and the bad about humanity, of the incredible events and discoveries happening all around us every day. It reaffirmed my desire to read and watch and grow and know *more*, my love of learning, and my love of life.

Lightreads says

I *loathed* this book. Its Hugo nomination makes me cringe. This morning I came out of my room with a happy Labrador bouncing around my feet and the sunshine pouring in, and my roommate said, "good morning!" and I said, "I *hate this book*."

A congenitally blind teenager is fitted with a neural implant to restore her sight, but first it lets her see the internet, where something is coming alive.

There are a lot of things wrong with this book: cardboard writing, pacing issues, characterization of a teenaged girl so off-key it was painful, including Livejournal entries that were so tone deaf it was embarrassing. But that's not the point here.

This book got off on the wrong foot with me before it even started. The acknowledgements note a deafblind man who touched the author's life. Because, as we all know, the value of people with disabilities is measured by their ability to inspire able-bodied people to flights of limping philosophy about what it all means. Obviously.

Things did improve for a while. Sawyer clearly did a certain amount of research about practicalities – his blind protagonist uses Jaws and keyboard commands, has a USB Braille display, etc. It's funny how your expectations become more demanding when someone puts out the minimum effort. If Sawyer had written

some helpless, computer illiterate blind girl, I would have dropped the book, called him a couple uncomplimentary things, and forgotten about it within the week. But since he did do the bare minimum, all of the ways he failed become way more important. A nitpicky example: protagonist is IMing at one point. Her friend says “see you later” and protag thinks that she probably actually wrote “c u,” but she can’t tell the difference. Er, no. “See you” and “c u” are absolutely distinguishable auditorially – I’m listening to the difference right now, and it’s huge. That sort of fail where the book has a surface layer of proper technology, but absolutely no experiential depth to it.

And then we really swung into things. Let me summarize:

Book: *projects piles of able-bodied bullshit onto blind protagonist, who obviously wants to be cured because that’s what disabled people want, and who thinks about everything she’s missing all the time even though she’s been blind since birth and vision is frankly irrelevant to her sensory experiences at this point*

Me: *sigh*

Book: *all she really wants is to know what “beautiful” means*

Me: I’m blind and I know what beautiful means and I have been moved by beauty fuck you.

Book: *extended passages of awful writing from the point of view of an emerging intelligence*

Me: *rubs temples* *perseveres*

Book: *protag has only one disabled figure to relate to, and absolutely no connection to blind culture or history. Because Helen Keller is who idiot able-bodied authors can be bothered to Google.*

Me: *pours a drink*

Book: *focuses on language in that obnoxious wink wink way able-bodied people do when they think they’re being “sensitive” and they’re actually just being ablest assholes. E.g. “She wasn’t blind, so to speak, to the implications of what she was reading.*

Me: *bangs head gently into wall for a while*

Book: *random incident of sexual assault so that the protag can tell teenaged boy that she doesn’t have to see to be able to see right through him. The point eventually emerges that the boy has ruined his chances of scoring with the protag, not that, oh wait, *that was sexual assault.**

Me: *weeps quietly*

Book: *Has a character explain how autism is nothing to be ashamed of, even though they have kept it a secret in this family and never talk about it and she can’t even bring herself to say the word.*

Me: *numb acceptance*

Book: *a doctor explains to protag that she’s lucky to have been blind because her gifts with math could have come with inherited autism, but hey maybe they did and her blindness . . . cured her? Because autism is about not making eye contact seriously I don’t even fucking know anymore. The phrase “dodged a bullet”

was used. Because *that's* not an ablest metaphor for disability.*

Me: *emits wounded vowel sounds, emails a blind autistic acquaintance and says “fuck!” a lot*

Book: *cutesy anecdote about how blind girl didn't know white people aren't actually “white.”*

Me: Yes she did. Being a sentient human being over the age of eight who can fucking read. She also knew there were green apples as well as red, having gone to fucking preschool.

I could go on. More than I already have, I mean.

....

Don't lie, you missed me, really.

Diana Sandberg says

Gosh, real old-school sci fi, not fantasy; makes me quite nostalgic. Not that it isn't quite up to date in subject matter - it's all about the dawning consciousness of the World Wide Web and other technological immediacies. I gather that Sawyer is enormously popular and, indeed, one of the best selling authors Canada has ever produced. This book is highly readable but Sawyer is no Bradbury; it's not art.

Like all old-school sci fi, the basic what-if scientific idea is the whole *raison d'être* of the story; Sawyer does tell a story to clothe the idea in, and it's a workmanlike construction, but not deeply engaging. One is drawn on in the reading not by empathy but by intellectual curiosity. It works, I probably wouldn't sound so negative about it but for the (of course) over-the-top praise on the jacket cover which cites “graceful” prose. I just can't go that far.

SPOILER ALERT: I was amused to note that when the “webmind” is coming to consciousness, and Our Heroine is feeding it information - Wikipedia, The Gutenberg Project - and it gathers up all of human written culture, it somehow skips/misses/is not affected by all the porn and crackpot hate literature out there. Sigh. Innate good taste, I guess.

Maurinejt says

I spent half of this book wondering why so many people loved it. Did anyone who nominated it for a Hugo actually read it? Honestly? Fess up, people. Seriously, it was that off. The most generous explanation I have is that maybe his other books are brilliant; I had never read Robert Sawyer so I had no preconceptions. When I love an author, I tend to make excuses for work that isn't good (unless it continues to be substandard, then I get irrationally angry with him or her). Maybe the good reviews came from loyal fans. *WWW: Wake* is about a blind American teenager. And neither the American, the blind, or the teenager part are very believable. One point that bothered me is that Caitlin keeps using the Canadian slang "washroom". Americans don't say "washroom", we say "bathroom". She was from Texas and just had moved to Canada; her speech patterns wouldn't have changed so fast, especially given the limited interaction she has outside

her family. Some of the descriptions of being blind are plausible, but the basics are off-base. She ignores her tactile sense or smell, which both would have been paramount. She seems shocked later in the book by revelations of the items in her house, most of which I felt she would have explored by touch. From what I understand of the completely blind, they know where everything is in the area they inhabit, and spend a lot of time touching objects and even faces of loved ones if possible. I mean, why not? That's how they "see". For instance, Caitlin is shocked when she discovers there is a window on the stove. Wouldn't she have felt the front of the stove at some point and realized the texture changed, etc, and there was something of significance there? Smell is a sense rarely dealt with in the book (I don't actually remember it mentioned at all but maybe I missed it), again from what I understand it is very important to the blind because it helps them create a sense of place, and to recognize individuals. And she does NOT behave like a teenager. She behaves in the way every parent of a teenager wants their teen to behave, like a mini adult. She interacts almost exclusively with adults, she only cares about adult issues, and is obedient and thoughtful. Yeah, she is brilliant at math, but that doesn't make the rest of being a teenager go away. Teens are about exploring independence, and Caitlin spends entirely too much time playing mother-may-I with her parents; especially following her sheltered childhood coupled with her intelligence. It almost reaches the point where the book isn't really about her, that she's just adjunct to the super-smart and all-knowing adults around her. She also doesn't have any real friends. I think we are supposed to believe in the friendship between her and her "best friend", but Caitlin's parents are paying this girl \$100 a week to essentially be her seeing eye person/friend. It seems a little sick to me.

And speaking of the all-knowing adults, let's talk about the massive, dry, and boring information dumps. Caitlin works with a colorless middle-aged Japanese researcher Kuroda who is trying to give her sight. He stays with her in Canada mostly to lecture her about how the web works so we understand upcoming plot points. It's REALLY tedious stuff. And I found myself wondering, what if the researcher was a twenty year old hot shot who really felt superior to Caitlin so there was this verbal fencing back and forth during the explanation? What if this was an older, jaded woman who is obviously grooming Caitlin for nefarious ends and the young girl is thoroughly charmed? Or, more simply, what if we were just told only the very necessary ideas without a lot of pomp? The explanations felt like someone's dissertation dressed up with field specific terminology, but actually the ideas are very easy to understand if they had been written to be understandable. Throwing a lot of fancy words at us doesn't make it impeccable science. I kept thinking about Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and how she handled the explanation of the tesseract. Yes, I am quite sure she had read the papers, and articles and knew all the terminology. But she chose not to use all that, and instead present her idea simply and well. To take the comparison a bit further, her main character was also a genius teenager. But Meg was definitely a teen first, mathematician second.

I think the best thing I can actually say about the novel is that the actual idea was interesting. And there were bits throughout that worked. *WWW:Wake* suffers not from mundane plot or bad characters but from an overall laziness and lack of imagination.

Ric says

If machine consciousness were to arise in our generation, where would it take root? *WWW: Wake* posits the world wide web as the fertile ground, with its vast architecture and ready access to data and processing power. And, with supreme ambition, Sawyer tells this birthing tale through the "eyes" of a blind teenager. Here we have a tale told with deliberation on the evolution of consciousness, both biological and digital.

The main protagonist, Caitlin, takes up most of the narrative setup and progression, as the reader is situated in her worldview, then moved through an experimental process that gives her sight and to her first encounter with the Webmind. The author builds this in true scientific method, starting from familiar concepts, and painstakingly detailing his thesis from fact into fiction, from Google to Jagster. This is a style that the author not only applies to the story of Caitlin, but also to other elements of the book, including the evolution of the Webmind and the discovery of advanced intelligence in non-human primates. The result of this style is that the book starts sluggishly (in the SF sense), and takes a while to build narrative momentum. A reader looking for SFnal entertainment needs to be patient until the author hits the gas about 50-60% into the book, and the mental fun really flies off the pages.

Something rare in fiction, but on hindsight, quite consistent with the SM, is the inclusion of the author's references, including Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* (on autism), Julian Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. From the research-y nature, it appears Sawyer set out with a deeper message than just the tale of awakening. He does allude to it in the ending of the book which I will not spoil for you. But there are two more books in the series with which to elucidate these ideas which hopefully I will get to in time.

There was a chilling segment where Sawyer describes how agencies, such as the NSA, monitor (or spy on) the internet data stream. Coincided with the day's headline. <http://nsa.gov1.info/surveillance/>

This book brought back memories of John Varley's *Persistence of Vision* and the wonderful evocation of blindness/deafness of the thalidomide children. Easily a 4 star read; no surprise that this was nominated for several awards. Recommended for readers who like their science fiction prepared with hefty doses of cool but real science and with logical, deliberate development.

James Scholes says

I started reading this book because of the talk about it on Twitter. At first I scanned through the text, thinking it was a joke. Being visually impaired myself, I was overwhelmed by the attention to detail as far as the main character being blind was concerned. The author has obviously done his research into JAWS, Braille Displays, etc, and once I started actually reading the novel I managed to put aside my original opinion in favor of adopting a different view. It occurred to me that the amount of detail regarding blindness had been used by the author in place of the amount of detail he could have included if he had chosen to write about a sited character.

Once I had adopted this view, I did not find it hard at all to start enjoying the actual storyline. When I do read mainstream books, this is the type of book I read, so the plot appealed to me. And once I'd started reading, I couldn't stop. Not because I was astonished at the quality of writing, or at the huge variety of vocabulary used. In fact, not even because of the plot, as I still believe the storyline to be decidedly average. But it was the type of book that I had to read in large chunks, otherwise I would have lost interest very quickly. And that is why it has only received a 3 star rating from me. 4/5 star ratings will be reserved for books that, for lack of a better phrase, blow my mind, and really make me want to read them, no matter how long the duration between reading sessions is, or how many chapters I read during said sessions.

Many people chose to be offended by the portrayal of visual impairment in this book. And while I see there point for the most part, the fact remains that this is a work of fiction, and that no matter how much research the author may or may not have completed before writing this text, he will never be able to accurately portray blindness from the perspective of a blind individual. He is not blind, and has grown up in a sited world. No amount of Googling or interviews can change that.

Gensan says

I grabbed an ARC of this the other day and am pleased to say that I enjoyed it immensely. My first Robert J. Sawyer experience was calculating god, and to this day it is one of my favorite quick reads - it's crossed the country in countless carry ons.

Until now I haven't been as fond of his other works. I always find his ideas fascinating, but I don't click with his characters - and since his novels are very much character pieces as well as imaginary voyages into the unknown that creates a slight (but annoying) disjoint.

This time the characters were almost secondary (in my attention, if not the author's intent) to the ideas that were unfolding.

The basis of the novel is sight. a young girl finding it through the wonders of cybernetics and how it changes her life. Oh, and the spontaneous creation of intelligence in the internet. The intermingling of these two themes is fun and the way they contrast is also striking, the innocent teenage girl teaching the even more innocent intelligence.

the funny thing is that I was primed to enjoy this book by my recent other readings in related subjects. neuropath is a dark thriller that aims to make you question the basis of human intelligence in many of the same ways that **Wake** questions machine. An Anthropologist on Mars is an anthology of essays about human cognition and perception including some concepts in actual cases lifted directly into the novel.

the first of a proposed trilogy (WWW: Wake it says on the cover, is that the first W? I hope it is something more involved than a simple www.) I'm interested enough to be eagerly awaiting a copy of the second.

Michelle says

Book was good, but I found the style a little difficult at times. If it was written for adults, then there was too much teenaged content. But as a teen novel (which it is, at least in our library system), I found it a little too complicated and advanced for what I would expect most kids would want to read. It was a strange mix, and seemed to flip flop from teen novel to adult content over and over again.

I was confused about why storylines were created and dropped. I realize this is the first book in a series, but the storylines weren't ever even fully developed. They were technical (which I usually appreciate), but then didn't seem to really contribute to the story. (What the heck did the details about the avian flu have to do with anything?!)

I don't think I'd recommend it to anyone. I didn't let my kids read it due to the occasional foul language and sexual comments. Which, by the way, had no reason to be included in the book. They just didn't mesh with the novel in any way whatsoever.

Scott Sigler says

There's an awful lot going on in *WAKE*, the first of an internet-comes-alive trilogy by Robert J. Sawyer. The concept has been done before in the *ENDER'S GAME* series by Orson Scott Card, but Sawyer is trying to show how it might happen with today's internet, not a future, even more-powerful internet. Sawyer does an excellent job making the main character real and compelling. I'm looking forward to the second book in the series. Warning: Action-adventure fans, this one is not for you.

Sandi says

I have two questions:

1. Just how much info-dumping does Robert J. Sawyer need to do per novel?
2. What was the point of the chimpanzee???

Seriously, do we really need to know the history of Google's search engine? Do we need to be told that Lenscrafters can make glasses in an hour? This book would have been half the length it is without info-dumps of stuff aimed at people who probably wouldn't be reading science fiction in the first place. The story itself is interesting enough, if not complete enough, but it's too cluttered with background detail that should be fairly common knowledge. Half the time I was reading it, I felt like I was being "educated".

I think this is supposed to be Sawyer's attempt at a young-adult novel, but the main character just didn't ring true. I suspect that most teens would just walk away from this one. I only gave the book 3 stars because of the concept. Writing-wise, it's a 2.

Alex Telander says

From an author who has written a number of books and has won just about every award a science fiction author can comes one of the most original and fascinating novels to be published in a long time. It's one of those books that has just as much right to be on a fiction shelf with other literature classics. *WWW: Wake* is the first in a trilogy about a blind girl, Caitlin Decter, who undergoes new and theoretical surgery in Japan to bring back her sight. With an implant in one eye, signals are sent to a small machine via bluetooth, which Caitlin refers to as her "eyepod." Patches and downloads for the software for the eyepod are made online, as Caitlin returns to Canada. With a new patch, she begins to see something that is not real life. She soon realizes it's a view of the Internet through a browser though she has no control over what she's seeing. Then with another patch update, Caitlin begins to see through the eye with the implant and her life is changed. Yet there is still something on the Internet that is apparently alive, communicating with her at first through her restricted sight and then online with her, and it's intelligence is growing rapidly. The book ends at this point, along with something very strange going on in a China, and an ape who is somehow able to paint pictures of people.

WWW: WAKE is a book that will grow on you as you read it. Sawyer has done a fantastic job of researching the science, but also throws in lots of references that any savvy Internet user will recognize, appreciate, and be amused about; as well as putting the readers in the mind of a blind person and how they do the amazing

things they do each day. By the end of the book readers will be impatiently wanting the sequel, *WWW: WATCH* due out in 2010.

For more book reviews and exclusive author interviews, go to BookBanter.

Lisa Vegan says

This was an incredibly fast read, and I really enjoyed the story.

I loved the premise. I loved all the subplots, even though some of them are abruptly dropped, at least in this first book; it is a trilogy. All the parts of this book did make sense to me though and they did all converge well.

After the first several pages, I completely enjoyed Caitlin Decter, an almost sixteen year old girl who has been blind since birth, and then gets an opportunity to have an operation that might allow her to see. I found her to be likeable and interesting.

I was fascinated with all the Helen Keller quotes and information about her life. I've always been interested in her, and using her as an example in this particular story was a brilliant move.

I appreciated all the secondary characters including the Decter's cat, Caitlin's father (very interesting!) and mother, Hobo and his humans, Sinanthropus, Masayuki Kuroda, Bashira, and some others. In fact, not too far into the book, there were so many characters, I was afraid I wouldn't remember them all, but the narrative actually ended up being very easy to follow. But, Caitlin and the not so mysterious entity Caitlin is able to see first, are the most compelling characters.

There's some interesting stuff here about blindness, and vision, the world wide web (WWW), sentience, language, etc. It might not be great literature, but I found it thought provoking.

This is my first Robert J. Sawyer book. His website is at sfwriter.com, and he's got some interesting group discussion questions for this book.

This book is the first book in a trilogy and, while it works okay as a standalone book, I am curious about what happens next. I will most likely read the second and third books, although I might wait to see whether other Goodreads members rate book two as highly as they do this one.

Mike says

I'm never quite sure why Sawyer wins all the awards he does. I'm not entirely clear on why I read his books every once in awhile. I think I am over him and his pontificating, and then a couple of years later, I delve into another of his far-fetched tales and get wrapped up in his storyline.

He can really tell a story. I knocked off this novel in about 6 hours of reading. The book is about a blind girl who has a rare sight disorder. She can actually see (the eyes and optic nerves work) but the information won't process in the brain, so she is functionally blind. A Japanese doctor contacts her family to tell them he has

developed a software device that will decode the information coming from the eyes so the brain will see. When they first try it, the girl still cannot see. But since she is hooked into the Internet for software updates, she starts to see things happening in the framework of WWW.

There is where the backstory kicks in. The Web is alive and is becoming self-aware. Much of this is from Sawyer's latest love affair with the book "The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind" by Julian Jaynes. This is another of the attempts by evolutionary atheist biologists to pinpoint an evolutionary purpose in the idea of God. Sawyer's earlier series on Neanderthals was a more forceful thrust in the eye of the theists...but since this book is the first in another series, it gives Sawyer more than enough time to take more potshots at religion.

As with so many of today's science fiction writers, the uses his plot to put forth his view of how the world should be. Can't there be something in Sci-fi between dystopic gloom and doom scenarios and the Sheri Tepper/Robert Sawyer visions of a utopian landscape? This book got on my nerves with its contrivances. First, there is no explanation for how the Net could come alive. Second, there is no explanation for how a 16-year old girl could be the Annie Sullivan in teaching the Net to learn of its own existence. Then there is no explanation behind the science of how she can see the Net at all (or anything else for that matter). It is a collection of "what ifs". What if a sightless girl could see? And what if the Net were alive? And what if that aliveness the Net achieved were like what Jaynes thinks happened 3,000 years ago to humanity? And what if I stopped reading Sawyer's books?

At least one good question in the lot.

Carolyn says

Told from the viewpoint of a blind young woman, and never loses that perspective, even after she gains 'websight'. Plenty of pop-culture references, hopefully won't make the book 'stale' in 10 years. The message is a positive one. Not marketed as YA, but suitable for readers 15+ (complex math & science concepts abound). Another excellent book from Robert Sawyer.
