

# Peering Into the Future of Novels, With Trained Machines Ready

Who wrote it, the novelist or the technology? How about both? Stephen Marche experiments with teaching artificial intelligence to write with him, not for him.



By Elizabeth A. Harris

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In a new novella, “Death of an Author,” the writer, Aidan Marchine, describes a subpar plate of nachos this way:

“The cheese was congealed and the chips soggy, damp and smeared with a greasy film like some kind of lake scum. Gus forced himself to take a bite, but the flavor was rancid, a sickly sweet imitation of cheese. He washed it down with a swig of beer, but even that tasted ugly, like it had been sitting in the sun for too long.”

The writing is vivid, but there’s nothing particularly unusual about it. Aidan Marchine, however, is an unusual author — at least for now — because Aidan Marchine is a set of computer systems. Kind of.

The journalist and author Stephen Marche wrote “Death of an Author” using three artificial intelligence programs. Or three artificial intelligence programs wrote it with extensive plotting and prompting from Stephen Marche. It depends on how you look at it.

“I am the creator of this work, 100 percent,” Marche said, “but, on the other hand, I didn’t create the words.”

Pushkin Industries, an audio production company, will publish the novella next month as an audiobook and e-book. Even the moniker “Marchine” is an invention of a program, a combination of Marche and machine.

In January, Jacob Weisberg, Pushkin’s chief executive, approached Marche, who has been writing with and about artificial intelligence since 2017. He asked if Marche was interested in using the technology to produce a murder mystery. The result of that collaboration is “Death of Author,” in which an author who uses A.I. extensively winds up dead.

Whodunit? Was it her estranged daughter? Was it the professor of crime and cyberfiction who was an expert on her work? Was it the eccentric billionaire who worked with her on a secretive A.I. project?

To coax the story from his laptop, Marche used three programs, starting with ChatGPT. He ran an outline of the plot through the software, along with numerous prompts and notes. While A.I. was good at many things, especially dialogue, he said, its plots were terrible.

Next, he used Sudowrite, asking the program to make a sentence longer or shorter, to adopt a more conversational tone or to make the writing sound like Ernest Hemingway’s. Then he used Cohere to create what he called the best lines in the book. If he wanted to describe the smell of coffee, he trained the program with examples and then asked it to generate similes until he found one he liked.

“To me, the process was a bit akin to hip-hop,” he said. “If you’re making hip-hop, you don’t necessarily know how to drum, but you definitely need to know how beats work, how hooks work, and you need to be able to put them together in a meaningful way.”

Marche said that these programs could be a tool for writers, and he declared himself optimistic about the growth of algorithmic writing in his field. But the prospect makes many writers and their representatives extremely nervous, worried that machines will put writers out of a job. The Authors Guild has called for “legal and policy interventions that balance development of useful A.I. tools with protection of human authorship.”

Weisberg, the chief executive of Pushkin, said that while new tools very often displaced people, they also created opportunities. Take journalism, for example.

“If routine news stories are drafted or generated by technology,” he said, “you, as a journalist, instead of reporting on every fire, can write interesting news stories about A.I.”

Marche and Pushkin tried to use software to create as much of “Death of an Author” as possible, including blurbs and its cover art. But there was one area in which its creators felt the technology was lacking: narration for the audiobook. So they hired a human, Edoardo Ballerini, who has won several awards in the field.

“But this stuff is moving so fast,” Weisberg said. “If we were doing it now as opposed to six weeks ago, I think we could get A.I. narration that would be up to snuff.”

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