

Best known as Kryten, the Red Dwarf robot with manic cleaning tendencies, Robert Llewellyn has written a novel about **how computer users are perceived**. Robert Juman Blincoe finds an enthusiast within the affable android as he tells of his first furtive embraces of technology.

# The robot writes back

**R**obert Llewellyn, the man who sports a rubber mask to play Kryten, the square-headed android star of TV's Red Dwarf, is guilty of portraying PCW readers as total and utter losers. He has written a book called *The Man on Platform 5*. Its hero is Ian Ringfold, a camcorder-toting, train-filming, anorak-wearing, computer-loving chap who is transformed into a designer clothes horse for a bet. As part of the deal he has to move in high society and celebrity circles without boring anyone rigid with techie-talk or asking for an autograph.

The reason you should perhaps take offence is because the model depicting Ringfold on the book-jacket is clutching a copy of PCW — and you'd be a fool to think this was representing the "after" version of the character. He has been bestowed with the interests and style that go with nerd clichés. So, several erroneous assumptions could be made about PCW's readership — they could do with a makeover; can quote Red Dwarf scenes verbatim; and are intimate with trains, but Llewellyn doesn't

the media to have a go at them — I really wanted to attack that perception," says Llewellyn.

Deciding to have a copy of PCW on the book's cover was agonised over for a good five minutes. Llewellyn initially wanted a Mac title as he works in the creative and luvvie world, and so is a fan of the Apple PowerBook. But no-one uses a Mac in the book. So PCW was selected in the end: "It's instantly recognisable," explains Llewellyn. "I said to the art director, that's the one you always see in every newsagent."

**L**lewellyn doesn't feel his book is a generous gesture on his part, in presenting computer lovers or Red Dwarf fans in a more acceptable light for the benefit of the trendy sectors of society. This patronising idea makes his face crack up — literally. "Sorry, I just had to adjust my ear," he says in a muffled voice. He's wearing underpants, socks and his Kryten head, taking a break while filming Red Dwarf 8. The book's elements concentrating on IT reveal he has a strong understanding of what IT can currently do for users, and what he believes

it should deliver and how simple it should be to use. It's obvious he feels strongly that technology is not boring and that the shallow, beautiful people are missing out if they ignore the topic due to knee-jerk prejudice. For example,

Ringfold spends time explaining his ideas for the front-end of a complex object-based database developed in Unix and utilising Java applets. The user interface is vital, and Llewellyn shows he and his characters are confident about getting their hands on new technology, but want it to be simple and intuitive to use.

Techno-babble is used in his book as a comic device, and as a neat illustration of how enthusiasts use jargon to exclude others and feel more superior to those not in the know. The flip side to this is the speech and manner conventions used by different social classes to achieve the same effect.

The point of the book was to cast a new light on all those clichés about **COMPUTER NERDS, SCIENCE FICTION FANS AND TRAINSPOTTERS**

intend this. His message is, you can't judge a book by its cover. If you do, you're as guilty of stereotyping as the snobbish, elitist characters inhabiting the book.

Its plot is a reworking of *My Fair Lady*. In Llewellyn's version we're presented with a man who at first glance is the image of Duane Dibley, the thermos-carrying *alter ego* of Red Dwarf's ultra-vain Cat. The plan is to turn him into a man with all the qualities of Ace Rimmer, the much admired hero of selected episodes.

"The point of the book was to cast new light on all those clichés about computer nerds, trainspotters and sci-fi fans. It's easy for people in



Photograph by Nick Dawe

**L**lewellyn's first foray into computers came through his writing. "I use computers all the time. I'm a first-generation word processor user and I've never written on anything else. I learned to write and started writing properly when I got one of those Amstrad green-screen things that made your eyes go weird." Subsequently he's become unafraid of recommending or rubbishing kit he's come across, so his book can be taken on one level as a kind of *Which?* consumer guide.

While making the Channel 4 TV series *I camcorder*, he picked up a lot of expertise about the video-camera market. "I learnt a hell of a lot about cameras and I was just fantasising about the cameras I'd like." The result is advice passed on in *The Man on Platform Five*: don't buy the Sanyo PX 5 S-VHS but get the Canon Hi8 E2 instead.

Ringfold owns a Compaq PC, a US Robotics/3Com 36.6Kbs modem and a Zip drive, and is a keen player of F18 Hornet, version 5. Perhaps worried that if he'd owned a Mac he would not have been as representative of nerdkind, Llewellyn blessed Ringfold with Windows technology, even though he's never used a PC himself.

It was early-shock experiences watching friends navigate DOS that put him off. "I think I was baffled at that pre-Windows stage. I have a very good friend who is a computer programmer. I used to watch him do 'slash slash backslash dot dot E drive'. I thought I'd never get that together." He can't recall where he first came across Apple machines, but felt instinctively that he could understand them. "The operating system did it for me. It was so visual."

Llewellyn shops at Micro Anvika on London's

▲ **Robert Llewellyn:**  
part actor, part  
author, all  
technojunkie —  
and proud of it

Tottenham Court Road, famous for offering examples of cutting edge technology at rock-bottom prices. Micro Anvika is a store well known amongst celebrities, most of whom run Macs. Stephen Fry and Jonathan Ross are regulars, and even cult US film star Harvey Keitel has popped in. The store has sorted out Llewellyn's high-tech needs. Kashif Merchant, Micro Anvika's technical expert who works on Llewellyn's kit, gets a name check in the acknowledgements section: "He's the man who's kept me going when things have gone a bit wonky — which always tends to be my fault."

**H**is first expensive machine was the Apple SE2. Although the kit provided a lot of pleasure and suffered a lot of use, the model's name doesn't trip easily off Llewellyn's tongue — he has the same problem with some of the software he uses. Now he's got a PowerBook, but not having it on his lap makes it difficult for him to recall which model it is. "It's got a colour screen. It's a 3, it's a 3,000... or is it a 320C? Something like that. It's the last generation of new ones. It's not the G3, which is what I'd like to get, which is the new, new one. I think it's a 3200C." What he actually owns is either a 2400C or a 3400. Like Ringfold, Llewellyn isn't above perusing the glossy pages of magazines, checking out the latest add-ons he could buy if he wanted to stall his writing career. "My anxiety is always that if I get too many bits, I'll play with them too much and won't write. Anything else just distracts me, including having a digital camera. I've wasted thousands of writing hours fiddling around with pictures of my kids."

As with other products, he's forthright about the performance of his Nikon CoolPix digital camera. "I have to say I'm not that impressed with it. It does its job for all I want, and it was one of the early ones, as I got it 18 months ago. But I think the lens is not particularly great so you don't get very good results with it. All I see now is really brilliant digital cameras for half the price."

The digital camera was bought to give a visual boost to Llewellyn's web site. This was launched following the demands from US Red Dwarf fans and serves as a vehicle for giving fans the latest news, allowing them to mail Kryten, and as a place to plug Llewellyn's books. "It's a blatant way of using Red Dwarf to launch other things I do," he admits.

Llewellyn embraces internet technology the way web visionaries like Nicholas Negroponte (whose autograph Ringfold has) sees it going. He views himself as a small publisher, and the concept of running his own on-line magazine is what excites him. He's thrilled by the number of hits he's had and the number of emails it has produced. His record is logging on to find 360

unread messages waiting for him. "A lot of people just say they love the show and I don't need to reply." On his web site, he points out that only himself and fellow Red Dwarf actor Craig Charles have email addresses and web pages. "What can I say? I have tried to encourage them [the cast], and I will continue to do so."

**L**lewellyn loves what internet technology can do for him, and he's prepared to go a certain distance doing things for himself. But there's no point killing yourself cracking HTML programming when you've been good friends with a top technical support chappie since your schooldays. This is Charlie Dancey, who originally scared Llewellyn away from DOS and now gets a nod of thanks in the book for his help. Llewellyn can upload his photos and text and makes a brave stab at page layout. "Charlie tells me what to do. I try and do it. Then he does it, and he does it

**He [Llewellyn] has felt the TRUE POWERLESSNESS of a man who's taken on technology to improve and share his life, only to have it turn round and bite him**

about 5,000 times quicker than I can."

Alongside his PowerBook and his digital camera, the other item that would make it into Llewellyn's high-tech kit bag is 3Com's PalmPilot. He left the shop with it, sharing the sentiment Ian Ringfold expresses in the book and Kryten makes in Red Dwarf: "Nothing smells quite as exciting and special as brand-new electronic items," an observation only someone in love with high-tech gadgets can make. A week later, Llewellyn was brought down from the heady heights his dream purchase had taken him. He read a review telling him he'd got the wrong thing, and discovered it didn't work well with the Claris Organiser on his PowerBook. But he still likes it.

More recently, he's felt the true powerlessness of a man who's taken on technology to improve his life, only to have it turn round and bite him. "The PalmPilot has been absolutely brilliant, until I forgot to replace the batteries about 10 days ago. It wiped everything I had on it. I was using the diary and I had loads of appointments which all went. I know, I know, I wasn't using it properly," he cries, demanding absolution.

Ian Ringfold would have kept his charged. But then, he's a fictional romantic ideal. And he bought a Psion Series 3.

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● *The Man on Platform 5* is out now in hardback, published by Hodder & Stoughton, price £14.99.