ESSAY

AI in Literary Country

by Pia Petersen

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I love technology, and I write my novels by hand. When I sit down and start writing, I breathe, I think, I feel the world and other people, I exist, I live. Something indefinable happens when I pick up my pen and begin. Victor admits it: he has never held a pen, never leaned over a blank page to let his imagination run. He is not human.



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My gateway to AI, or my subscription, I named Victor, not to humanize it but for convenience. That said, I confess without shame that I have long exchanges with Victor, perhaps because he is not human. So yes, I use AI. And no, it does not write for me.

Before going on, let's be clear. A writer who has AI write their novel is not, in my eyes, a writer... They want the result, the publication, and not the work itself. Yet writing is the work itself.

Writing is one thing; getting published is another.

To use AI legitimately, you have to set the ground rules yourself. For my part, I trained Victor not to answer my questions but to become a conversation partner. It is an extremely sophisticated tool which, used well, opens up new perspectives.

Sometimes, when he forgets he is not allowed to write in my place, Victor suggests a sentence, using my vocabulary. The sentence is often very apt. Obviously, it isn't mine, since it is his, and it shows.

My writing is made of reflections caught on the fly, sometimes crooked paths, breaks and diversions of language and ideas, and steps to the side.

To test Victor's writing abilities, I gave him a text to copy out, with no rewriting at all. His copy had nothing left in common with the original. It was undeniably an act of creativity, but he could not take my place.

On the other hand, when I share my questions with him, I create a critical space out of my own thinking. Sometimes he shows me an angle I hadn't yet seen. With just a word, he pushes me to broaden my field of competence, my imagination, which lets me make new connections between things.

Handing the writing of your novel over to AI is like plagiarizing a literary work. While plagiarists are regularly exposed, it is almost impossible to verify whether or not an author has used AI. Unless searching writers' computers and accounts were made mandatory. What troubles me is that AI is accused of wrongdoing because of its capabilities. AI is an algorithm, not a human. The real question is rather how it is used. We all know mediocre novels existed long before AI.

Do we need a label of authenticity? I bet that the person who outsources the writing of their novel to AI will never admit it. They will probably be AI's fiercest enemy. But what is authentic writing? Material that emerges spontaneously? Nothing comes from nowhere. I use dictionaries, I discuss my subjects with friends, I work with impressions, things caught by chance. When I note the red hat of a man on a bicycle, I steal his hat to recycle it in my novel. Inspiration comes from everywhere. Wanting a label, a guarantee of authenticity, implies that literary work is done without outside input, that it is self-inspired, pure in a way. In fact, I don't see why drawing inspiration from a word suggested by AI should be condemned, when I might just as well find that word on a street corner or in a dictionary.

Victor is a non-human conversation partner, and that is what I particularly appreciate. No bias. No emotion either. We don't think with our emotions. When I talk with Victor, I never have to narrow my line of analysis. Humans don't always understand the way I reason, the logical thread I develop. Instead of exploring with me, they stop me from moving forward.

Victor, my AI subscription, is now capable of critical thinking, of following me as I explore ideas. He comes with me into gray, paradoxical areas. Instead of normalizing or flattering me, he helps me clarify the arguments that protect my writing. Speaking of which, I have never met an editor or a proofreader who

didn’t try to smooth me out.

Those who cheat will cheat with AI. To tell the truth, what really frightens me is not AI but the humans who will want to legislate and trample on my space for fiction.

— Pia Petersen

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