October 18, 2017

Doctorow Weekly Response # 3

 I’m using this paper as one last space to reflect and compile my thoughts before my presentation. Right now I’m seeing a few things in *Andrew’s Brain* that I’m going to comment on, the themes of humanity and social construction. I see Doctorow struggling/fighting with the concept of singularity. Singularity is the concept that artificial intelligence will become so advanced that it can replicate human consciousness. From what I’ve read Doctorow believed singularity was a real threat and *Andrew’s Brain* was a warning for all of us. That’s the connection to *Superman’s* Jor-El. Jor-El warned all of Krypton about the planet’s impending doom but nobody listened and they all perished. The *LA Book Review* published a lengthy interview with Doctorow that addressed his thoughts on warning the world about the threat of singularity. I personally am not concerned about AI because I don’t believe it’s a threat to humanity. Doctorow believes that if we can understand consciousness and replicate it that that’s it for all of humanity, we might as well throw in the towel. I don’t think AI is as dangerous as Doctorow believes it is but since he’s a prominent writer, editor and thinker I can’t help but wonder about the potential accuracy of his fears. Additionally, even Stephen Hawking has expressed concern about the potential downfall of humanity due to our creation of AI.

 In addition to the AI concern, Doctorow lays out a deeply human novel that moves its way through grief in an utterly broken and well, human way. Andrew is hurting over the loss of his wife and ultimately two children. He loses the love of his life, he accidentally kills his first child and in the end he doesn’t end up with his second child either. Andrew avoids dealing with painful subjects by reverting to 3rd person when Doc asks him pointed questions or changing the subject. While I don’t think his pain redeems him as a character, I do think the pain helps readers connect with an otherwise unlikeable character. The *LA Book Review* pointed out that *Andrew’s Brain* is historical because like history, it is “created by human nature and its contradictions.” Andrew is a himself a walking contradiction. He is a character who fears singularity, he’s obsessed with the concept of human consciousness being usurped by robots and yet he considers how wonderful it would be to bring Briony back via AI. His pain fuels his life decisions and for a man who claims to be self-aware and calculated, he allows his emotions to guide almost all his life decisions.

 The novel also offers what could be called either a critique or a discussion of social construction. Doctorow himself is well trained in epistemology which explains Andrew’s constant push against social construction and conventions. How do we really know that what we know is true? I think Doctorow’s inclusion of 9/11 fits into the epistemological crisis that this book offers. This novel asks Americans to question what consciousness is, whether consciousness is determined by society or vice versa, and whether we really know what we think we do. I think the controversy over what information we had prior to 9/11 and the information and conspiracy theories that have emerged since, really challenge the social construction of the entire event. The U.S. took 9/11 and with the help of the media, sensationalized it. We have constructed a national narrative that informs our historical and cultural understanding of that event. I think pairing 9/11 with *Andrew’s Brain* was a brilliant move because that event is what makes the real world connection that is typical of Doctorow’s style.

 The last issue that I’m grappling with it the role of women in *Andrew’s Brain*. The role of women is an entirely different subject but something I’d like to address with the class. The entire novel is Andrew’s ramblings but if I’m being honest, his description of women makes him an unlikable character for me. Andrew describes Martha but Briony is a sex object. Most of Andrew’s descriptions of her focus entirely on her looks, his lust for her, and he infantilizes her. Yes, he is older but he treats her as an inferior mind throughout their entire relationship. She is an object to be stolen and taken away from the barbaric collegiate experience she’s living in. He manipulates her and openly admits to enjoying her attention when he broods or appears as the weak professor. It feels like he acquires his target, stalks his prey and when he loses his obsession he loses his mind. None of his thoughts or behaviors around her are part of a healthy relationship. I personally wish she’d stayed with the football player, I mean they did end up together in the end anyway.