

Sex Robots & Vegan Meat: Adventures at the frontier of birth, food, sex & death

Jenny Kleeman. 2021. London: Picador.

Had one picked this book up thirty or forty years ago, it could only have been read as a dark, dystopian sci-fi novel (the Preface even opens with the sentence “What you are about to read is not science fiction”). As it was, I found it difficult at times to hold on to the fact it is a work of non-fiction, what *The Times* describes as “A tour of the lurid fringes of the tech world”. Lurid, in fact, doesn’t even begin to describe it.

Jenny Kleeman is by trade a documentary-maker and journalist. The book was five years in the making as she explored efforts in the world of technology “to deliver the perfect partner, the perfect gestation, the perfect meat, the perfect death”. Given that the book itself is over five years old, making the start of her investigations now a decade ago – and with the speed at which technology develops these days – I would imagine, and even dread, some of the things talked about here have come along in leaps and bounds. Despite this, it remains a disturbing but fascinating read, offering a lot of reflection points for anyone approaching it with existential questions in mind.

Divided into four sections (The Future of Sex: The rise of the sex robot; The Future of Food: Clean meat, clean conscience; The Future of Birth: Ectogenesis; The Future of Death: The death machines), *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat* confronts us with technological juggernauts that, if successful, will have a profound impact on how we think about and conduct relationships, what we eat, how fetuses develop and the choices we make around death.

The first section, which investigates the rise of the sex robot, was for me the most disturbing. At times I found myself laughing out loud, but realised it was very much a case of ‘if you don’t laugh you’ll cry’. Kleeman visits and talks to companies that cater to, as she calls it, “the most high-end masturbation on the market”, developing life-like and expensive sex dolls and robots. Long gone are the days when men – and as this book highlights, it is overwhelmingly men who prefer to have a relationship with a life-size piece of silicone – had to be happy with blowing up their plastic partner themselves, only to have her deflate over time. Practically medieval. There are robots being developed that will have a perfectly normal conversation with you and will have synthetic skin that feels like the real thing, and joints that sound like real bones cracking.

The misogynistic thinking behind these dolls is not hard to miss although, naturally enough, the men running the show refuse to see it and will only see what they are doing as a force for good. All the usual arguments are trundled out...they make great companions for people too old, too differently-abled, too shy, too incapable to be lucky enough to be able to form a relationship

with another flesh-and-blood human being. But the supposed ‘pluses’ of sex robots soon get into much more dubious territory. The makers claim they will help reduce domestic violence and the number of rapes and child sex crimes, because rapists and abusers can take their sexual frustrations and play out their desires with sex robots. I could easily spend the rest of the review arguing against this point alone; suffice to say anyone with a gram of knowledge about the mechanics of patriarchal power could appreciate how fatuous and ridiculous such a claim is. But unfortunately, as this book points out, it is an argument being used not only by the industry itself.

What the sex doll industry is really about is a certain type of male attitude to women: here boys, have a relationship with a ‘woman’ who has the perfect body (usually the sort one would find in a porn film), doesn’t answer back, doesn’t nag, doesn’t carry the risk of landing you with unwanted sprogs or STIs, who you can slap about when you’ve had a bad day in the office...what more can a man ask for? Even the very few male dolls available seem to be based on what men believe women want in a physical man.

It is in this part of the book that Kleeman first encounters the world of MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way), a community within the Manosphere who clearly despise women and choose celibacy over having to relate to the opposite sex. Naturally enough, they love the idea of sex robots (charming comments like “Time to replace these c***s with robots!” and “The end of thousands of years of female c*** dictatorships” grace the group’s website). The MGTOWs make an appearance again in the Future of Birth section.

Of course, no exposé on the sex doll industry would be complete without talking to the consumers of these products, and Kleeman does not disappoint. We meet Davecat and his three ‘companions’: Sidore Kuroneko, a Face4 RealDoll and his “lovely wife of sixteen years and co-conspirator”; Elena Vostrika, a Russian-made 2012 anatomical doll; and finally Miss Winter, a Chinese-made doll he purchased in 2016. All are present for the Skype interview with Kleeman, and they apparently all live happily in a polyamorous relationship.

It was a bleak and saddening experience reading about Davecat. There are clearly a lot of people out there who find relationships with real people just too hard and would prefer to create their own fantasy ones in which they have complete and unquestioned control. I found it hard to believe he could truly believe his interactions with inanimate, silent pieces of synthetics had any genuine merit. But as sex robots become more ‘real’ and animated, such delusional thinking will only be given added currency.

Of course, things have already moved on since the publication of *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat*, and we now have a situation where people are having relationships with AI companions. What it all amounts to is that it is becoming easier to avoid authentic human interaction and relationships,

and only time will tell what the cost of that will be for society.

The second section of the book, *The Future of Food*, focuses on efforts to create synthetic meat. Feeding 8.3 billion people is a huge task, and how we currently go about it is without doubt unsustainable. Particularly problematic are the meat and fishing industries. Kleeman opens this section by presenting to us on a plate the huge costs to the environment and our health that result from our hunger for meat and fish. It makes uncomfortable reading. If things do not change soon, we are – if not already – in big trouble. The section then examines the ‘clean meat’ industry, lab-grown meat which supposedly does not harm animals, but as this book points out, even that is stretching the truth.

What is interesting about this science, is that it takes the view that all of us, even vegans and vegetarians, hanker for anything that tastes like animal flesh. Kleeman was surprised to find that even some vegan advocate groups are supportive of these efforts. One of the developers, who claims he is a closet vegan, envisages the “end of veganism” as synthetic meats become more palatable, as if this was a desirable outcome.

I could almost buy the argument that synthetic meat will be more environmentally friendly and humane than live animal farming, but already at this point in the book – and I’m not even halfway through – I cannot but help worrying about whatever upsides these technologies will claim to offer us, the downsides are always going to overshadow them.

We need to eat in order to survive, but most humans have become so disconnected from the natural world that we have very little understanding or appreciation of just how far removed food production itself has also become from it. Are any of us really going to care what is happening with these Frankenstein ‘meats’ if push comes to shove and we have to eat it? The descriptions of the methods used to develop these ‘in vitro’ meats are stomach-turning. But then, it is fair to argue that when it comes to thinking about meat, the overwhelming majority of us have a wonderful capacity to disassociate from thinking about what happens to the animals some 78 percent of humanity consume (only three percent identify as vegan). So, if I am really hungry and I am presented with a slab of lab-grown meat, am I going to think about growing mouse scar tissue in foetal bovine serum or the amount of salt and sugar required to make it edible? I suspect that even if we make animal meat a thing of the past, the same cognitive disassociation is going to be required in order to stomach it.

Naturally enough, Kleeman gets to try some of the products on offer and the word ‘bland’ is bandied about quite a bit. This particular industry clearly has some way to go before it has any chance of success in convincing a carnivorous world it no longer needs animal meat, and I would be interested to find out how much further it has come along since publication.

The third section, *The Future of Birth*, explores the ethics – or lack thereof – of surrogacy and ectogenesis (gestating babies in artificial wombs). “Pregnancy is barbaric. If there were any disease that caused the same problems, we would regard it as a very serious disease indeed.” Thus declares one Dr Anna Smajdor, a bioethicist at the University of Norway, who has published the papers ‘The moral imperative for ectogenesis’ and ‘In defence of ectogenesis’. She dubiously argues that the development of the science can free women from having to endure painful and dangerous pregnancies, and the reproductive process would be more fairly distributed with men, thus creating a more equal society. Yeah, right.

Surrogacy is an ethical minefield, let alone growing babies in ‘biobags’. It is hard not to see how this very lucrative industry reduces women’s bodies to simple vessels in which to carry a foetus, which as Kleeman digs deeper into the birth industry, we learn to nobody’s surprise that is the view of some men anyway. By some in the industry, it is quite chillingly seen merely as ‘outsourcing’. In reality, it “is the most physically, emotionally and legally messy form of third-party reproduction” (p188).

An overview is provided of this industry; it is not just a matter of a woman carrying a baby for someone else, and it is most certainly a service that only the most privileged can afford. “Money talks. If you have money, you’re going to have a baby,” says Dr Vicken Sahakian, a little too matter-of-factly. He runs fertility services for high-end customers. He discusses the concept of ‘social surrogacy’ – people who want children who are genetically their own but don’t wish to be inconvenienced by pregnancy – as if he were talking about what he had for breakfast.

Already big companies pay their female staff to freeze their eggs so their work life is not interrupted; Kleeman poses the questions of how far off we might be before they offer surrogacy as an option. This is but one example of how surrogacy raises more questions than it answers.

But it is when Kleeman focuses on ectogenesis we really enter the realms of dystopian science, if only for one factor: what it says about the ‘purpose’ or ‘use’ of women. As with everything covered in this book, the industry itself can only see the ‘good’ elements of the science. They speak hopefully of allowing babies born too prematurely the chance to continue to gestate in synthetic wombs. And Kleeman herself points out some of the other benefits for women unable to conceive. But as I continued to read, the one underlying theme that emerged time and again is what ectogenesis means for women, and the meanings proscribed to them.

Over the years I have heard from some female clients how once they bore children they were landed with the label of ‘mother’, and the sense of their own individuality was buried or downgraded. For many, it was a price worth paying, but at some point that wanted their individuality another

chance to thrive. For centuries, the doors of power have been closed to women, their only purpose to produce male heirs and keep the human race going through procreation. Kleeman explores how reproductive rights are under siege across the world, and does not have to dig too deep to unearth more misogynistic attitudes to the whole matter, and the final chapter of this section explores the problem.

The final section, *The Future of Death*, considers the development of 'death machines' and the notion of rational suicide. As Kleeman points out, the push to allow euthanasia in many Western countries has given even more power to doctors and psychiatrists, for it is often only with the approval of such 'experts' can the right to die exist. This at a time when people's trust in experts is at a pretty low ebb. However, there are groups, such as Exit International, which claim to help put the power of choosing when and how to die back in the hands of the individual.

As humans have become more remote from nature, so too have many of us become more remote from death, at least in many European countries and similar. We can go years before experiencing the death of loved ones, even grandparents; infant mortality rates are very low; medicines and treatment keep death at bay even for those with life-threatening conditions; and unless you are unlucky to live in a region of conflict, war is something that happens to other people.

Nonetheless, even though it is happening later, death still comes upon us. And extended life expectancy comes with its own problems, not least of which is the possibility of living with chronic health conditions for a very long time. Concepts such as 'dignified death' have come to define how we do think about our lives ending, and right-to-die advocate organisations exist in many countries, most of which deny people that right.

I do believe we should have the right to organise the timing and the way of ending our lives if we so choose, but this final section left me wondering if death 'machines' really do provide us with that autonomy. Certainly euthanasia laws don't. I couldn't help feeling that people the 'industry' claim to be helping are actually being manipulated and preyed upon.

As Kleeman points out, "almost every suicide method imaginable is either painful, or unreliable, or undignified, or prolonged, or puts innocent bystanders in danger" (p266). So finding a 'good' way of dying is not easy. Nembutal is the closest thing to making dying seem like going to sleep. Though a controlled substance, it is widely available and is the drug used to put pets to sleep and what Dignitas gives to its clients.

The 'machines' Kleeman learns about are not exactly user-friendly. Exit International, for example, provide information on an 'Exit Bag': basically a kit whose components include a plastic bag, some tubing and a nitrogen cylinder. The Australian founder of Exit, Dr Philip Nitschke, who has quite

a dodgy reputation when it comes to assisted suicide, claims to have even developed a contraption you can download and build with a 3D printer. And there is the rub: because of the legal dangers and complexities of assisting suicide, most of the machines being developed are expected to be used by the person her or himself.

And another problem Kleeman touches on, but I feel should have given more consideration to: if an effective machine or method to kill ourselves painlessly is developed, what is to stop the state or unscrupulous individuals taking advantage of it? I couldn't get the Carousel from *Logan's Run* out of my head.

The takeaway from this final section, for me, is that choosing to end one's own life will always be complex, no matter how much right-to-die advocates try to find 'simple' and pain-free solutions. Because our relationship with life, and thus also death, is complex, ever-changing and certainly never free of suffering, no matter how many self-help gurus, therapists, happiness industry charlatans or the likes of Exit International will try to tell us otherwise.

Sections one, three and four all raise many questions about our bodily existence, and how our concepts of physicality are being challenged by technology. What exactly are our bodies for and who has control over them? Where does bodily autonomy begin and end? And then there is issue of how we perceive others' bodies, and by extension their purpose and their use to us. I would be surprised if these were questions on Kleeman's mind when she wrote *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat*, but it provoked them in me as the reader.

The overall style of the book is chatty and light, and many of the characters Kleeman interviews too often come across as either eccentric, simply 'entrepreneurial' or even that they genuinely believe they are helping the progress and survival of humanity. But one doesn't have to scratch the surface much to find something much more sinister underneath. What is clear to any thinking person is that they have either not thought about or, worse, care about the huge existential questions such radical technologies will mean for humanity, and the people at whom the technologies are aimed. Perhaps Kleeman decided to take a more phenomenological approach to the issues explored in *Sex Robots and Vegan Meat*, but I feel a much more rigorous critical examination of the existential dimensions would not have gone astray.

Another aspect this book considers is that none of these technologies come cheap. The danger in this becomes quickly apparent; it is going to make the divide between the have and the have-nots (or perhaps it is more appropriate to say cans and cannots) even wider. After all, wealth and fame are what truly drives those companies and individuals pushing these

technologies, and their market will be those wealthy enough to afford it. The rest of us plebs will, in the meantime, just have to put up with relationships with actual people; food that nature (on the whole) provides us; children that have a physical connection with mothers right from the moment of conception; and just waiting for the knock on the door from the Grim Reaper when it so chooses. Hmm...perhaps there are some advantages to not having more money than sense.

In her Preface, Kleeman asks “If we can have babies without having to bear children, eat meat without killing animals, have the ideal sexual relationship without compromise, have a perfect death without suffering, how else will human nature be changed forever?” It is a good question, but perhaps an un-answerable one – and one she does not really make much effort to try to answer. Because as this book makes clear, even with the best intentions, we can never determine the long-term outcome of new technologies. If we consider the history of every new technology humans have developed, right from the most primitive hunting tools and the invention of the wheel, we can quickly see it always has a profound effect on what is means to be human, and how much change, good and bad, they bring to societies, cultures and the planet itself.

In some ways, as an examination of the underlying misogynistic thinking present in the Future of Sex and the Future of Birth sections are a useful gateway to Laura Bates’ even more disturbing but excellent *Men Who Hate Women* (2020), a book I would recommend to all and sundry. And on that note, I will end with a quote from DT1726, a MGTOW Kleeman talks with online, to highlight the high cost humanity could be facing if these technologies continue to go down the routes they are taking:

Sex dolls and artificial wombs will put women in their place for sure. Their only merits are the ability to make babies. Sex dolls will stay beautiful forever and much safer investment [sic] than a real woman. Artificial wombs will make women disposable just as men are. They could save our civilisation. Lots of women will die, that’s my conclusion.

(p253)

If that sort of thinking does not constitute an existential threat, I don’t know what would.

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