Galatea 2.2 by Richard Powers
Switch Staffs on May 1 1996

Galatea based on the concept that computer can gain self awareness

The basic premise of Galatea 2.2 is based on the concept that a computer can gain awareness of self -- whether that is what we intended or not. Richard Powers (our fictitious protagonist) is a writer who returns to his alma mater after living abroad. His station as humanist-in-residence at the university allows him to run into Philip Lentz, a cognitive neurologist of unreserved character. Powers is soon enticed into collaborating on a project to model the human brain, using a computer-based neural network. Their chief goal is to feed this thing (a later version of which gets named Helen) enough information to enable it to pass a comprehensive exam in English lit. OK. Out the door the book falls a little short on the technical angle of things. Ultimately, we don't care, and it works to the benefit of the plot. Why? Because, this is not so much a story about how one can configure a computer to interpret meaning, as it is about how we assimilate information in general. And truthfully, that accounts for only about one third of the book anyway. Powers is really more interested in giving us his personal story, since he's the one with the all the required love and tragedy. He manages to weave the all the characters, including the precious Helen, together in a way that gives us insight into human consciousness. If you are looking to find out more about configuring your network for brilliance, this might provide food for thought; not much more. However, if you are intrigued by the cognizant human brain and how we associate information with emotion you will not be disappointed.

::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Staffs
:: Curator's Statement - Mar 27 2003
:: Douglas Engelbart Transcript - Mar 25 2003
:: Marisa Olson Transcript - Mar 25 2003
:: Peter Lunenfeld Transcript - Mar 25 2003
:: Jan Hauser Transcript - Mar 25 2003
:: Margaret Morse Transcript - Mar 25 2003
:: Oliver Grau Interview - Mar 10 2003