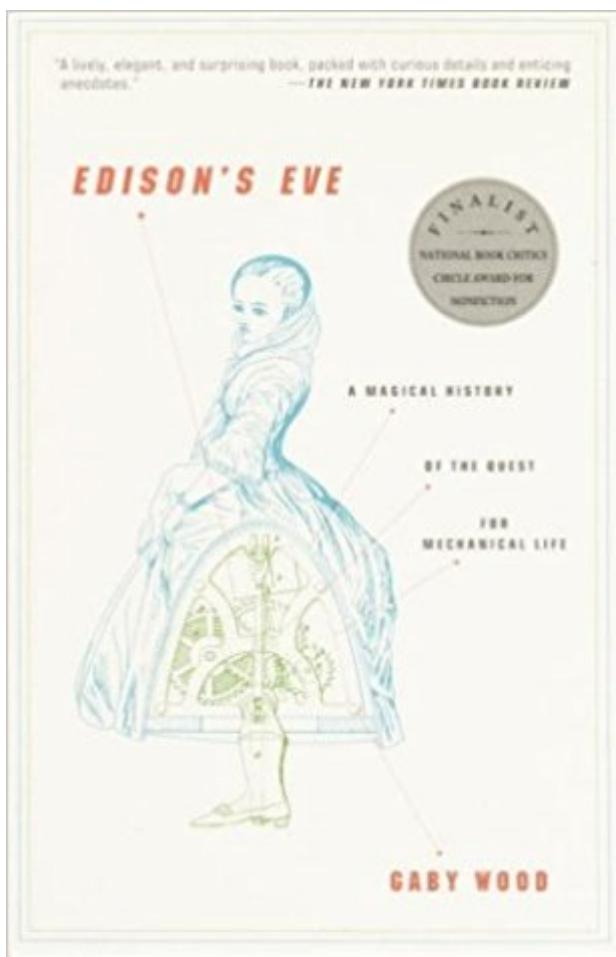


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Edison's Eve: A Magical History Of The Quest For Mechanical Life



Synopsis

During the eighteenth century, the inventor Jacques de Vaucanson created a mechanical duck that seemingly could digest and excrete its food. A few decades later, Europeans fell in love with *the Turk*, a celebrated chess-playing machine built in 1769. Thomas Edison was obsessed for years with making a talking mechanical doll, one of his few failures as an inventor. In our own time, scientists at MIT are trying to build a robot with emotions of its own. What lies behind our age-old pursuit to create mechanical life? What does this pursuit tell us about human nature? In Edison's *Eve* Gaby Wood traces the history of robotics, from its most brilliant inventions to its most ingenious hoaxes. Joining lively anecdote with literary, cultural, and philosophical insights, Wood offers a captivating and learned work of science and history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In five entertaining chapters, British journalist Wood describes the ways humans have built machines to resemble themselves over the past three centuries. Wood begins with the dynamic creations of the 18th-century Frenchman Jacques de Vaucanson, explaining how his elaborate automatons, most notably a mechanical flute player and a mechanical duck apparently capable of eating and defecating, fascinated onlookers throughout Europe. She then moves to Wolfgang von Kempelen's chess-playing machine, constructed to look like a Turkish gentleman and capable of beating virtually any chess player in the 18th century, and Thomas Alva Edison's unsuccessful attempt to capture the American toy market by incorporating a version of his phonograph into the first talking doll. In her fourth chapter, Wood switches her attention from machines that look like

humans to humans who look like machines. To wit, the Doll family: four midgets who toured with Ringling Brothers' Circus and appeared in *The Wizard of Oz*, in addition to other lesser known Hollywood productions. Some audiences refused to believe the Dolls were alive, assuming instead that they were sophisticated toys. Wood's anecdotes are delightful, though the book as a whole feels somewhat repetitive and short on analysis. She frequently reminds readers that these historical vignettes show the continuous struggle to determine what makes us human, but that's about as far as her commentary goes. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Embodying the confusions between what is "lifelike" and what is alive, robots have always held an anxious fascination. When eighteenth-century physicians described the body as a complex piece of machinery, the stage was set for inventors like Jacques de Vaucanson, who thrilled Paris with a flute-playing android, and Wolfgang von Kempelen, whose chess-playing automaton took on the best players of its time. Deftly balancing historical detail with provocative meditations on the reception accorded such marvels, Wood then traces the development of subsequent imitations of life, such as the talking doll designed by Thomas Edison and the magic-filled films of Georges MÃ©liÃ©s. Her contention that in the twentieth century human freaks came to seem more uncanny than machines may not entirely persuade, but the exotic particulars, especially those pertaining to a group of circus midgets called the Doll Family, more than make up for this inconsistency.

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This is a great book for anyone interested in automata - and that includes computer people interested in artificial language, philosophers interested in what makes us human, cultural anthropologists interested in the interaction of humans and machines, and poets interested in all of the above. If you like this, try also *The Turk: The Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine* by Tom Standage. Equally strange & pleasurable.

We have gotten here with our pads and pods and phones and robotic assembly plants by a long line of wonderful devices. I love this book. Good read for anyone interested in the history of toys and automation.

It's packed full of history, insights and philosophy of automata. I highly recommend it to any one interested in the subject.

WOW! Anyone interested in puppetry, anamatrons, magic, history will surely love this book. I couldn't put it down until I had finished it. I enjoyed the wonderful illustrations and photos. I read a review of this book on Puptcrit.org by Nancy Lohman Staub. Anything she recommends, I read.

Excellent product and price. Delivery was on time and item was received in better than expected condition.

love it.

All as expected

Very euro-centric, anecdotal; attempts to cast technological advances in an occult-like mystique. Spends a lot of time talking about things that aren't relevant to the development of autonomous technology, like the plot of 19th c. Edison fanfic, or whether or not chess causes insanity. Seems tangential and casual. Would rather read a more formal analysis with arguments and supporting facts, rather than suppositions and guesses.

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