

¡AY, CARAMBA!

While perusing the June 16, 2010, issue of *O Magazine* at the beauty parlor this summer, I discovered an interesting sidebar on “Four Books to Steal from Your Teenager.” One surprising recommendation was *I, Robot*. Blogger and author of *Shelf Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stopped Reading*, Lizzie Skurnick, wrote “Don’t laugh! If you think Asimov is meant only for thirteen-year-old boys obsessed with computer games, it’s time to look at this classic collection of brilliantly plotted gems that anticipate not only our completely gadget-dependent world but also the philosophical implications of turning our lives over to smartphones.”

This passage is intriguing because it indicates that a science fiction book first published over sixty years ago, and compiled from stories that had begun appearing in print ten years earlier, is still read by computer obsessed teens and their middle-aged mothers. It speaks not only to the longevity of the book, but to Isaac Asimov’s far ranging impact.

That Isaac’s book was essentially the genesis of Alan Parson’s 1977 album, *I Robot*; to some extent the basis for the 2004 film *I, Robot*, starring Will Smith; and the inspiration for iRobot, the successful robotics firm founded in 1990 by Rodney Brooks, Colin Angle, and Helen Greiner, is immediately obvious. To be responsible to any degree for three such disparate entities is remarkable, but the book’s influence on our society, our thinking, and even our language, goes much deeper.

From Helen Greiner to MIT’s Marvin Minsky, researchers in artificial intelligence have been quick to acknowledge their debt to Isaac Asimov’s fiction. Isaac, of course, never did the real work of the cognitive scientist or a software engineer. He didn’t invent a positronic brain, de-

sign an operating system, or create a robotic vacuum cleaner. Instead, he influenced the daydreams of future scientists, engineers, composers, and screenwriters. Isaac’s gift to us was to write entertaining stories about artificial intelligences that could assist, rather than terrify, humanity.

He wasn’t the first to write such stories, just as he wasn’t the first person to publish a work called “I, Robot.” Credit for the title goes to the brothers Earl and Otto Binder who, writing as Eando Binder, published a confessional tale about a sadly misjudged robot, Adam Link, in the January 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*. The Binders’ title was almost certainly a riff on the “autobiography” of Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus—*I, Claudius*—which had come out in 1934. It was Isaac’s publisher at Gnome Press who, in 1950, appended the name of Earl and Otto’s tale to The Good Doctor’s collection of nine robot short stories.

While Isaac admitted to being moved and inspired by the sympathetic Adam Link, it is his book and not the Binders’ robot, nor even Robert Graves’s famous best-seller, that has exerted a stunningly pervasive influence on the twenty-first century.

Isaac was incredibly pleased when the Oxford English Dictionary attributed the word “robotic,” the back formation of “robot,” to his 1941 short story, “Liar!” Some people say that anyone could have come up with that expression, but Isaac was the one who did. He told me that the OED had cited his fiction in two other instances, but that “robotic” was the only word that had become a part of our common parlance. He was quick to add that there wouldn’t have been any back formation if Karel Čapek hadn’t introduced the original term in his 1920 play *R.U.R.*

It seems to me, though, that Isaac's predominant influence on our era has been in the use of I- and i-everything words. I know there was no mention of *I, Robot* or Isaac Asimov when the iMAC was introduced by Apple in 1998. In his introductory demo, Steve Jobs said the "i" represented the "excitement of the internet." Jobs also invoked the words "individual," "instruct," "inform," and "inspire." None of these terms is akin to the nominative singular pronoun, the ego, or the narrator of a literary work as "I" is variously defined in dictionaries. Yet I can't hear the "i" in the names of nascent bits of artificial intelligence like the iPad, iPod, iTouch, and iPhone, and not think of that legendary collection of short stories.

I doubt I'm the first person to write about this coincidence and perhaps the connection has already been disproven. I know that the "i" really is supposed to mean the "internet," because that's what all these little devices do, i.e., they connect to the internet. Seeing a correlation between *I, Robot* and an iPhone may simply be a product of the human mind's need to systematize information, but I'm sure I'm not the only person to make this association. It could even be hinted at in Lizzie Skurnick's remarks about "smartphones."

Indeed, some of the iPhone's competition appears to be toying with the concept. The tiny robot mascot representing Google's Android operating system could be playing off a tacit understanding that the term "iPhone" evokes a robotic intelligence. In some advertising, the Android is referred to as a "robot." If the Android is a robot, the iPhone must be one, too.

Culture continues to evolve. Some new concepts, like the TV show *iCarly*, the comic *iZombie*, or the notion of investing in iShares, seem to skip the Asimov connection and refer directly to Apple technology. Others, like Hasbro's robotic music-playing i-Dog and i-Turtle, may be referencing both. In any case, I, personally, am not sure these constructs would exist under such monikers if Isaac hadn't left an indelible impression on our imaginations first with *I, Robot*. ○