



# Almost Human: Making Robots Think

*By Lee Gutkind*

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**Almost Human: Making Robots Think** By Lee Gutkind

**A remarkable, intense portrait of the robotic subculture and the challenging quest for robot autonomy.**

The high bay at the Robotics Institute at Carnegie Mellon University is alive and hyper night and day with the likes of Hyperion, which traversed the Antarctic, and Zoe, the world's first robot scientist, now back home. Robot Segways learn to play soccer, while other robots go on treasure hunts or are destined for hospitals and museums. Dozens of cavorting mechanical creatures, along with tangles of wire, tools, and computer innards are scattered haphazardly. All of these zipping and zooming gizmos are controlled by disheveled young men sitting on the floor, folding chairs, or tool cases, or huddled over laptops squinting into displays with manic intensity. Award-winning author Lee Gutkind immersed himself in this frenzied subculture, following these young roboticists and their bold conceptual machines from Pittsburgh to NASA and to the most barren and arid desert on earth. He makes intelligible their discoveries and stumbling points in this lively behind-the-scenes work.

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Gutkind (*In Fact*) spent six years as a self-described "fly on the wall" at Carnegie Mellon's Robotics Institute, watching a group of scientists—mostly grad students—try to develop human movement and decision-making capabilities. The machines he encountered came in a variety of shapes and sizes, from dog-shaped toys programmed to play soccer to a Hummer equipped with sensors that enable it to drive itself. As that Hummer indicates, the institute's research isn't confined to the lab: Gutkind follows his roboticists to abandoned mine shafts and the northern edges of Chile, where they use the world's driest desert to test machines developed to find signs of life on the surface of Mars. Gutkind's reporting captures the individual quirks of the scientists—like one researcher who only shaves on Sundays to save time during the week for his research—but his low-key tone can mute the excitement of their successes, especially given the fail-fix-try-again nature of most of their projects. Yet even though his story lacks the drive of books like *Soul of a New Machine* or *Hackers*, it gives a solid sense of what's going on in the field. 15 illus. (Mar.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Creative nonfiction guru and seasoned immersion journalist Gutkind observes that just as computers changed the world in the 1990s, robots will "transform technology" in the future. To find out who is behind the growing robotic surge, Gutkind spent six years observing life at Carnegie Mellon's Robotics Institute, a "hypertechnological pressure cooker," where work is frenzied, frustrating, "inspiring, compelling," and addictive. Gutkind presents vivid profiles of roboticists, including graduate students, the "strong and vital force" behind the group's innovations. Audacious pranksters, shy geeks, and wry wits, they fall into rivalrous groups, the engineers versus the "code monkeys." Scenes at the institute alternate with entertaining reports on RoboCup competitions (soccer is an excellent mode for robot testing) and dramatic accounts of an ambitious project in Chile's Atacama Desert, a stand-in for Mars. Creating autonomous robots is a daunting task that arouses renewed appreciation for the fact that "a human being is the most sophisticated system in the universe." Gutkind's incisive and provocative dispatches from the robotic front will help prepare us for the next machine wave. *Donna Seaman*

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Review

An in-depth glimpse into the exciting, if embryonic, developments in one of the world's leading robotics laboratories. -- Lawrence Krauss, Ambrose Swasey Professor of Physics and Astronomy, and author of *The Physics of Star Trek*

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