

*Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro (2021, Alfred A. Knopf)

Klara, a robot “Artificial Friend” (AF), is the narrator of this remarkable book by Kazuo Ishiguro, the author of *The Remains of the Day* and many other fine novels. In Klara’s world, robots have been made to take over so many human jobs that if children are eventually to work as adults in any of the few remaining middle-class occupations, they must be genetically altered, “lifted,” to be unnaturally smart. Genetic alteration has its risks, of course, and some of the children fall ill with strange ailments from which a few recover but many die. So families with children are faced with a dilemma: to lift or not to lift? The lifted children, tutored separately in their homes over their smart-phones, form what amounts to an exclusive caste, and are provided with AFs to keep them from being lonely.

Klara’s charge, a girl named Josie, lives with her divorced mother, an attorney, in a rural suburb of an unnamed American city. Her only neighbor is her best friend, Rick, a gifted boy whose mother decided not to have him lifted. Josie is ill, and Klara does her best to help her recover and to maintain her affection for the increasingly outcast Rick. But Klara’s understanding is limited by her programming. She is solar-powered, and believes that the sun is a caring God. She is extremely perceptive and can learn through experience but there is much she doesn’t know or understand about the world around her. However, Josie’s mother comes to feel that Klara could replace Josie if Josie dies, a calamity the mother can’t face.

So in a fascinating and moving way, this novel asks what it means to be human. As Rick’s mother wonders, should Klara be treated as a person or a vacuum cleaner? On the other hand, is there any part of Josie that Klara can’t duplicate, given a new casing that looks exactly like her? The novel also goes beyond the individual. Ishiguro’s achievement in entering into the mind of a robot, which extends to her careful English, so different from spontaneous human talk, becomes a critique of 21st-century Western society. Might a robotic mind like Klara’s be an improvement over Capitalist man’s? Then again, should the astounding new developments in artificial intelligence we’re hearing about even now be stopped? Elite college education is already such an advantage today that some affluent parents are willing to cheat and bribe to get their children “lifted” into prestigious colleges: should we be rethinking “meritocracy”? Meanwhile homeless people, like Josie’s brilliant but “replaced” father, are to be found wandering around our cities any day of the week, the rejects of a heartless economic system that Ishiguro’s novel calls into question.