

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

ANNOUNCER: You're listening to the Slice of MIT podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.

JOE MCGONEGLE: This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, Director of Alumni Education. *How to Pass as Human, a Guide to Assimilation for Future Androids* was published in October by Dark Horse Books, illustrated by Pericles Jr. Nic Kelman, thanks for joining me. It's a guide to assimilation for future androids. Why did androids need this book now?

NIC KELMAN: Well, because the android revolution is coming, I guess. I mean, in the story, it's a story of the first android ever created. And it's not really set in the future. It's kind of set in our world today. And he has to prevent human beings from learning of his existence. So he needs to convincingly pass as a human being, which is extremely difficult if you're logical and rational, which he is.

And then, he finds out-- and it's not a spoiler, because it's on the first page-- but that he's going to die very soon. And so he wants to leave a record of all the knowledge he's acquired for future androids so they can do a better job of fooling people into thinking that they're human beings.

MCGONEGAL: You've got a nice play on an omniscient narrator here. He certainly learns more and more about himself and the world as he downloads it. It takes place in a month of his life, a little less than a month, in Las Vegas, Nevada. We've got both a romantic affair here, with a human being, and a search for a father figure, which is a timeless archetype, I suppose.

KELMAN: Well, as you know, there are plot reasons for all those elements, it turns out. But I don't want to give that away. But in terms of from writing the kind of book that it is, you know, Las Vegas seemed like the perfect setting, because it's the most hyperbolic city in the world. You know, you kind of see the greatest extremes of human behavior there.

So it was an interesting setting for him to learn about human beings where he can see, you know, the most extreme situations that humans get themselves into and the craziest situations and the craziest behavior, from a rational point of view. It's kind of the city of the id, right? So for something that functions completely logically and rationally, it's like the best place to kind of be and look at human behavior.

And then, the search for the father figure and the love story are kind of the-- I mean, it's a search for a father figure. But it's also kind of a search for meaning and the creator. I think, you know, that that existential question, like, why are we here, and then, experiencing a romantic relationship are probably the two cornerstones of human existence. So that was important for him to go through as well.

MCGONEGAL: As Zach Deboer, the android, observes we do you think a lot about reproduction as a species. So you include a love plot. I guess it's only natural for a book written by a human. And opposite of love, of course, we wonder will he-- and he wonders-- will he learn to hate. And his creator wonders that. By books end, couldn't help but think of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The book is two parts, Orwellian may be one part, on it, Thompson.

KELMAN: That's funny. And it's true. Nobody said that. And I hadn't thought about that, but yeah I guess that's a compliment too.

MCGONEGAL: I wonder if you'd read a passage for fellow alumni. I have a passage in mind, if you feel comfortable with it.

KELMAN: Yeah.

MCGONEGAL: On page 30, I think this is certainly a scene of being in the office for the first time and the android trying to assimilate to that office setting.

KELMAN: Right. Right. So this takes place at the beginning of the book. And he has been assigned a job by a set of mysterious text messages. And he decides that he should follow their instruction, because they may lead him to solve the mystery of who made him and why. So he is trying to behave like a person in an office. And he's just writing down his experiences here.

So "Topics by percentage of time discussed were, one, 28% their personal lives. Two, 16% their friends, personal lives. Three, 12% other coworkers' feelings at work and as human beings. Four, 8% sporting events or narratives they had watched, read, played. Five, 4% what they had eaten recently. And six, 2% other. This excludes work, which was 30%, and is integer rounded. This will help you correctly balance the amount of time you spend in discussion of particular topics. To determine what to discuss see the rest of this record for the little assistance I can offer.

"After a few days, I tried to imitate this balance myself. But there was something about my execution that was apparently incorrect. I seemed to have difficulty identifying which elements

of these topics deserved focus. For example, one day one coworker asked a group of others if they could believe another coworker, quote, still drove that shitty old Corolla. And this elicited laughter.

"But the next day, when I asked the same group if they could believe another coworker had just begun driving that, quote, shitty new Corvette they did not laugh. Nor did they seem to be interested when I described the shape of the plates during my previous evening's invented meal. The fact that one coworker always attached paper clips to documents at inconsistent angles or the fact that the red part of the spectrum was 63% more frequently in the television program I had watched.

"The only comfort during this period was these interactions between humans indicated they understood each other as poorly as I understood them. Why would they need to discuss their own social interaction so much if they did not need to dissect, analyze, hypothesize, and comment on them in front of other humans who could then confirm or deny their suppositions?"

MCGONEGAL: That's a treat. Thank you. That'd probably get the loudest guffaw from me. Apologies to Ricky Gervais. It's *The Office* from the android's point of view in *How to Pass as Human*.

Plenty of your MIT education would work in this book, maybe even back to your high school and your elementary education as well. Tell me about some of the research involved. The book alternates between a narrative of Zach's journey to self-discovery and a field guide for androids, written by Zach, for future androids. In the field guide, there's just extensive research. And I wonder if all of this research is based on studies you've read.

KELMAN: That's also an excellent question. And it's something I do like to point out to people. You know, I did actually do a fair amount of research for the book, looking for the most interesting kind of cognitive or sociological studies that I could find and then sort of integrating them in here.

MCGONEGAL: You mentioned that a medical study, where human scientists recently determined if a patient is told the medicine is more expensive, it improves the effectiveness of that medicine. You don't have to provide footnotes in a novel, but that could be footnoted.

KELMAN: Yeah, I mean, you know, that was the thing is like, in a novel format, it was fun to just find the stuff that was the most fun and not get too dogmatic about how formally it had to be presented. And it was a good format to be able to just pull out some of the most interesting

things that I've read over the last few years about the way that we think and behave and just sort of throw them all together, without having to get too much into them. And then, I was also looking for stuff that had been corroborated by multiple studies. It was actually a lot of work.

MCGONEGAL: Graph, figure 7.2, money donated to attempting to decrease specific causes of death versus the actual number of deaths and we spend all our money on breast and prostate cancer, but much less so on suicide and traffic accident.

KELMAN: Yeah, exactly. Also true. I mean, there's a lot of factual information in there, or certainly information that came from real research.

MCGONEGAL: Curious what an android would think of a young man attending the nation's most elite schools and mastering the English language, just to write a book imitating a droid imitating a human.

[LAUGHTER]

KELMAN: I think-- I don't know. That's a good question. I think he would be-- I don't know what he would think of that. I guess at the end of the book, he sort of comes to the conclusion that human beings would be much better off if they behaved more like androids and less like human beings, which is possibly--

I mean, look, you know, this is this for an MIT audience. And honestly, I think, for the most part, an MIT audience is going to appreciate this book more than anybody else, because most of the people that I knew in school, including myself, could've used this guide book. Because you know, it's a place full of ultra rational people who struggle with thought processes that aren't based on data.

MCGONEGAL: And very ordinary experiences, like going to college and living in a city.

KELMAN: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's every day you're just constantly confronted with anomalies.

MCGONEGAL: On page 109, you have a definition of a writer from Zach's point of view, of this self-loathing-- constant sense of failure at translating the fictional worlds in their heads into words creates a self-loathing. Have there have been times in your writing career when you felt as skeptical about being a writer?

KELMAN: Oh, yeah, every day. I mean, multiple times every day for the last 20 years. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's funny. I just finished a script yesterday and had lunch with a couple

screenwriter friends. And they're like, oh, congratulations. And I was like, thanks, because I'm in that phase where I can-- because I just finished it. I was like, it's great. Like, I'm going to celebrate now, until I reread it. And then, I'm going to start feeling terrible and depressed about it, because it's going to be awful.

And you know, they laughed, because, like, that's exactly the way it is. It's a constant coaster ride of, like, oh, I did something. I finished something. I put something on the page. It's complete. And then, you look at it and you feel like it's awful and you're never going to get it to where you want it to get to. And then, you crash. And then, you start working on it again. And then, you feel better. And then, it goes up and down like that constantly.

MCGONEGAL: Another definition later in the book, the men dedicated to their own interests at the expense of others, the ones willing to destroy to get what they desire succeed far more easily and far more often than those who put others before themselves than those who create. A dark opinion of the writer's place in the world.

KELMAN: Yeah. It is. It is. I mean, look, I'm definitely a cynic. And I mean, first novel, *Girls*, was kind of all about that sentence you just read. Yeah. I mean, look, you know, it's a conversation I had with, actually one of my best friends, who is from MIT and has been my best friend forever and is in business and tech and has been quite successful.

And I'm constantly having that conversation about whether you can be successful in business and still be a nice person. And he is a nice person, but he often brings the conversation up with me when somebody else screws him over. And he thought that they were his friend or, you know, he thought that he could trust them. And you know, it's interesting.

MCGONEGAL: There's not a lot of brand placement in the book, I noticed. I wonder what Zach would make of Google, Alphabet and/or internet.org, you know, don't be evil. What chapter would Zach write about the way tech companies might also have philanthropic arm to help the world create?

KELMAN: You know, I mean, that's an incredibly complicated question. I mean, I guess I'd like to believe that behavior on the part of companies is altruistically motivated. But I mean, I honestly think that it's a PR thing. I mean, it's actually very, very interesting, as a creator, to talk about Google, because they've done such a staggeringly good job of convincing everybody that they're the good guys. And I have this same conversation with my friends in tech all the time, talking about net neutrality and all this kind of stuff.

And on the creator's side of things, the writers, the musicians, the artists, all the people who actually make these things and want and need to make a living off them, if the rest of the world wants to continue to see those things produced, you know, we're getting screwed by the internet. You know? It's like, the internet has destroyed the music industry. It's destroyed the publishing industry. It's destroyed the movie industry in the last five years.

And it's strange, because then everybody turns around and says oh, but the studios are making more money than they ever have, which is partially true. It's more complex than that. But the creators are making less money than they ever have. And it's not the fault of the studios. It's not the fault of the music companies. It's not the fault of the publishers. It's the fact that the internet has made it impossible.

You either make nothing or you make a fortune. If you're lucky enough to be one of those viral books, viral songs, viral movies, then yeah, you make a lot of money. But there's no middle class anymore. So you end up with only the lowest common denominator material being most successful, whether it's *Twilight* or *Fifty Shades of Gray* in publishing or the next terrible superhero movie in movies or the next Taylor Swift song in music.

Then, you have a company like Google, who presents this very altruistic front. And everybody thinks of them as the good guys. But in my mind, they're just another corporation. I mean, Apple is a good example too, where people have started to realize that they're not necessarily the world's friend. But certainly, from a PR perspective, they did a good job of presenting themselves that way. So I'd like to think that it's generally altruistic. But I sort of feel like it's probably more a very smart PR exercise.

MCGONEGAL: Customers who bought *How to Pass as Human* on Amazon also bought Ali Almosawi, Ann Leckie. I see Brian Vaughan here. Where do you put yourselves in this algorithmic cannon?

KELMAN: That's a funny way. I have to take a quick look here. There's amazing stuff here. I mean, you know, *Ancillary Justice* is great and *Saga* is, obviously, enormously popular. No, it's great company here.

MCGONEGAL: And tell me about what else you're reading right now.

KELMAN: Right now, I am alternating between *Anna Karenina*, which I've never read, and the book called *Prince of Thorns*, which is a kind of low fantasy *Game of Thrones* type book.

MCGONEGAL: What's in the next book going to be?

KELMAN: You know, I sort of have been wanting-- I've spent the last few years writing screenplays, which have so much input from other people and even if it's your idea, ended up being a different animal than you wanted to set out to create. And it felt so good to write this book, that was just exactly what I wanted it to be, that I'm actually thinking about writing a fantasy novel next, because I have an idea for one. And I just always enjoyed the genre. I just thought, you know what? I'm just going to do that, because it'll be fun. So that's what I'm thinking about right now.

MCGONEGAL: *How to Pass as Human, a Guide to Assimilation for Future Androids*, by Nic Kelman, class of '94. It is available from Dark Horse Publishing. Nic, thanks for joining me.

KELMAN: Thanks so much for having me, Joe.

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]