Kevin Kelley Interviewed by Rick Kleffel

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Hi everyone. Meet Rick Kleffel. Rick has been interviewing authors and reviewing their books for his NPR syndicate The Agony Column every week since 2002. He will be contributing regularly to Litseen, as either Charles or I will film some of his interviews. This episode Rick interviews Kevin Kelley, co-founder of Wired Magazine, editor + publisher of Cool Tools and co-founder of The Hackers Conference. He is also author of several books, the latest of which is *What Technology Wants*, which Corey Doctorow over at Boing Boing calls "one of the best books I've ever read about technology." (He also, by the way, calls Mr. Kleffel one of his favorite book reviewers!) Check out the interview:

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"… and this, I have to say, is controversial, a minority view in evolutionary biology, but it is a view I find persuasive…"

—Kevin Kelly

For a guy who is rooting about the very depths of creation, a guy who addressing everything from the Big Bang onward, Kevin Kelly is remarkably easy-going. It was a wonderful autumn afternoon when I drove to Kevin Kelly's house, nestled in a redwood canyon in Pacifica to meet Charles Kruger, videographer for Litseen. We gathered our technology and hustled up to the second floor of Kelly's redwood tower.

Kelly was a genial host, and as we cleared away a few books to set up for the interview, he remarked

on the "heavy iron" of my setup. Yes, I admit, I'm a trailing edge technology fan. I have a big, old, clunky Marantz digital recorder. It's as big as my old Teac DAT, but not nearly so heavy, actually. Still, with the big mics, and the iron stands, it is quite a collection of heavy metal. Especially compared to Kelly's handheld Zoom recorder, which does pretty much everything mine does and is about one-sixth the size. Charles' camera is smaller than one of my mics.

But to capture that conversation, you *need* some heavy iron. Kelly is an engaging speaker, and as we journeyed through a shorthand version of what he wrote in his book, I took the time to ask him how he crafted the book as well. For me this is a very interesting literary work, since it uses many of the techniques of science fiction to a very different aim. No, this is not a book about the singularity, and in fact, Kelly even regretted having to use the word; which he did in reference to our acquisition of language, not the rapture of the nerds.

Kelly's original vision of how he hoped to write *What Technology Wants* proved to be very different from what eventually happened — and much more difficult. But that was simply the result of the virtues of asking the right question. The upshot was a much lengthier writing process than he had imagined. It's also a more personal book than he had imagined, and to my mind, that makes it a more enjoyable reading experience. You can hear my conversation with Kevin Kelly by following this bit of literary technology to the MP3 audio file.

In addition to interviews, Rick reviews books. Below is what he had to say about *What Technology Wants*:

Meat Discovers Fire

Kevin Kelly evades your expectations. The gleaming, shiny grid on the cover of *What Technology Wants* suggests an infatuation with gadgets, an empty showroom waiting to be filled with innovation and invention. Instead, he opens with an account of his travels though those parts of the world where not even the twentieth century has arrived. This is a soul in search of the right question, not a soulless search engine overflowing with answers. Kevin Kelly is quite human.

What Technology Wants is bigger, smarter and broader than you expect. It is practically gadget-free. Kelly is unafraid of being wrong; in fact he sometimes seems to lean in the wrong direction deliberately, just to be sure he's keeping true to a larger perspective.*What Technology Wants* does precisely what the title implies; it explores what technology "wants," that is, how our creations have become, to an increasing degree, our creators. It is no longer true that we are what we make; now, we are made by what we make.

Kelly's argument is surprisingly personal at all levels, even though he pulls back for a much larger vision of just what technology is than what is usually implied by the word. For Kelly, "technology" is indeed the gadgets, gizmos, gears and golly-look-at-thats. But those are symptoms, not the disease.

Starting back with the Big Bang—Kelly is nothing if not ambitious—*What Technology Wants* explores what Kelly quickly defines as the technium, which is the self-reinforcing system of creation that results in technology, and Kelly asserts, has its own form of evolution.

For a book that includes the word "technology" in the title, Kelly spends a lot of time talking about what most of us think of as pre-technological and even a-technological times. But Kelly is relentlessly pursuing his larger vision, not of evolving artificial intelligence, but instead, of the innate forces of change at work in the universe at large. He examines progress in all its forms. This is the ultimate work of progressive non-fiction, boiling the term down to its essence and then examining the force at work in all spheres, not just of life, but of existence.

For a book that obviously reaches far, Kelly makes a lot of risky choices. Most readers are going to disagree with one or more of the conclusions that Kelly comes to on his prose journey. But he is ever an agreeable and entertaining guide, and does indeed provide the "Gee-whiz!" moments you desire from his book. He even borders on the offensive, with chapters like "The Unabomber Was Right" and "Lessons of the Amish Hackers." He's not in bad taste, but he is willing to be wrong. He's never controversial for the sake of shock. But, like Wile E. Coyote with a jetpack strapped to his back, sometimes he careens off the edge of a cliff. He's having fun and so is the reader.

What Technology Wants ultimately does answer its own question. It's a satisfying answer, and even if you don't agree with the conclusions, it is a satisfying book to read. Kelly is adept at coming up with the sort of witty similes and metaphors that generally show up in the best science fiction. He puts them to work in nonfiction, and they prove to be up to the task of helping readers understand how our inventions are re-inventing us. Kelly starts the book out with a road trip through the wilderness, and that proves to be an apt metaphor for the book itself. *What Technology Wants* is what readers want when they buy a book with this title; a smart, entertaining journey to the heart of change.

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Stay tuned for more enlightening interviews and book reviews from Rick Kleffel over at The Agony Column. Next up is David Pinchbeck.