Hooked: A Thriller About Love and Other Addictions

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Description

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Matt Richtel’s *Hooked: A Thriller About Love and Other Addictions*

Review by Tara Fechter


I found that in spite of Matt Richtel’s *Hooked* being, at its core, largely focused on the sudden disappearance and purported re-appearance of the main character's deceased girlfriend, the novel makes several interesting notes on technology and our rapidly developing relationship with all things digital.

The author, like the novel's protagonist Nat Idle, is a reporter based in San Francisco. While Richtel focuses on technology and communications, however, Idle is a medical journalist, wrought with the memory of his presumed dead girlfriend, Annie, years ago.

Annie was, by all accounts, a princess in the Silicon Valley. With a venture capitalist father with a niche for founding online start-up businesses, Annie felt the next big step for capitalism was the elimination of human labor in favor of computer automation. [1] Nat finds himself caught in the mix of both corporate and personal secrets Annie hid from him, culminating in her disappearance and presumed death. Only after Nat receives a note written in Annie's handwriting instructing him to leave a café—which promptly explodes with him outside—does her death look less and less likely.

Before the ragged journey to find this woman begins, however, Richtel aptly sets the tone we are to take regarding technology—it is evolving, it is not always friendly, and it is here. There are several references to other forms of information distribution as being "old", with the Internet a far superior means of communication. [2] Few would argue that the Internet makes information travel quicker, but there are many examples
on how it is not necessarily highly accurate. There was a time when people believed that if a story was printed, it was true. Why else would it be in the paper? Today's generation has an inherent distrust of what they read—which is often justified.

This distrust of technology is not limited to information, however. Richtel notes that most of us rely daily on electronics we, or at least the vast majority of us, could not fix. [3] It was not so long ago that most individuals in the developed world did not regularly carry cell phones or owned home computers. Now it appears that we cannot live without them. I have known students to be late to class because they forgot their cell phone in their apartment, or peers who are completely lost without their BlackBerry, forgetting meetings and appointments. I myself get precious little work done if my computer is not working. To rely so heavily on something the average individual knows so little about is more than disconcerting.

We also explore the characteristics of computer addiction and the human-computer interaction. The term "computer addiction" has been in existence less than 20 years, which means that potential treatment for such an affliction has been in effect far less. [4] Richtel adds a twist to the stereotypical gamer glued to his console, or the programmer neglecting family and friends. His form of addiction is subtle, without the knowledge or even consent of the "victim." It is easy to fall into this model created for us, with our established distrust of technology.

While the novel's description of this new digital era could be viewed as a "cautionary tale," the conclusion seemed too clean, wrapped up in a bow, for me to feel sufficiently frightened by the possibilities presented. As Richtel pointed out earlier, much of the inner workings of technology are intimately known by only a handful of programmers and techies, leaving the "rest of us" to its mercy. On more than one occasion, Nat is able to take personal command of the direction of this technology, a direction I find more literary than truthful.
As a fiction novel, I found that Richtel's first book rang hollow on occasion. I did not feel invested in Nat's numerous precarious predicaments, real or perceived, and had difficulty identifying with characters in the novel. Portions of the plot were predictable, with the exception of some very notable twists, and Nat's vision of Annie is, at times, tiring and repetitive. If, instead, the novel had been devoted to Richtel's vision of the future of business and technology, I would have found myself much more engaged.

In spite of its flaws, Richtel paints a dark portrait of the future—a future that should be considered seriously by everyone. Without revealing the grand finale of the novel, I find it necessary to point out a particularly favorite incarnation of addiction presented in Hooked:

Characteristics of the "illness" entail frequent, compulsive multitasking, and a pressing urge to fill life with stimulation or distraction. Sufferers feel bored in the absences of something to do, and tend to seek out a focus, an activity, even an intense discussion—the kind of emotional spur that Freudian thinkers would refer to as drama. [5]

Were this printed in a medical journal, I would find it prudent for many of us to check in to our local hospital.

Endnotes

[1] Richtel; p. 80
[2] Richtel; p. 7, 10
[5] Richtel; p. 287