



Being by Kevin Brooks

INTRODUCTION

Being is the tenth novel by prolific British author Kevin Brooks, who had his first book published in 2002. His well-received novels focus often on teenagers who are outsiders and have to deal with violence and traumatic situations. Influenced by American crime writers such as Raymond Chandler, his novels have a 'hard-boiled' quality to them and don't shy away from confrontational themes despite their young adult audience. Brooks studied philosophy at university and his writing is notable for the way it incorporates philosophical debates and conundrums such as the nature of identity.

SYNOPSIS

Being opens with the narrator, sixteen-year-old Robert Smith, in the waiting room of a hospital, about to undergo an apparently routine examination. He wakes up from the anaesthetic, however, to some sort of commotion over what they have discovered inside him: some sort of plastic and silvery filaments where his internal organs should be. Despite the presence of armed agents from some unknown organisation, Robert is able to escape and goes on the run.

As Robert goes into hiding he agonises over what he has discovered about himself. He has no idea what he is, or if he is even human. He is all alone in the world, a foster child with few friends and no family. Furthermore, the agents who are after him seem to be prepared to resort to murder in their efforts to track him down, and are able to frame him for the crime through the media. In desperation Robert looks up Eddi, a faint acquaintance in London, and enters into a relationship plagued by mistrust with the one person who seems able to help him.

Utilising Eddi's skill as a manufacturer of fake identification they escape together to Spain and start a new life there, finding mutual support that they both previously lacked before it all comes horribly unstuck when Ryan and his agents finally track them down, leading to an awful and bloody finale from which only Robert is able to emerge, once more on the run and once more alone.

WHAT IS ROBERT?

As Robert lies on the operating table paralysed from the anaesthetic, yet conscious and aware of what is being said, he overhears a number of disturbing pronouncements about himself. They have discovered that "*the images from the endoscope...were...not normal*" (p. 11). Robert registers and questions the statement about his deviation from the world of normality. The speakers go on to comment on the unusual composition of his body, which contains "*some kind of plastic*" and "*silvery filaments*" (p. 12). Most disturbing of all is the question from the man he gathers is called Ryan: "*What the hell are you?*" (p. 13). Not

"who are you", but "what". Ryan repeats the question later and Robert concedes that, *"That is the question"* (p. 26).

It would seem that Robert is not human, which is something that strikes him as incomprehensible: *"I'm just a kid with a bad belly. I'm Robert Smith. Whatever you think this is, whoever you are – you're wrong. Listen, there's been a mistake"* (pp. 13-14). But he can't say these words out loud, so they proceed to cut into him to discover more. What they find is *"brown stuff"*, *"moving wires"* and a *"hard, pliable"* shell of some sort that could be *"a body shield"* and that has *"patterning"*, *"like bone structure"* (p. 20) which is why earlier X-rays didn't reveal this incredible discovery.

Somehow Robert is able to see what is in the room even though his eyes are closed, and when he acts it seems to be something beyond his own volition that causes it. He feels *"something electric"* inside himself and he moves incredibly fast. Confused by what is happening, he comments, *"I didn't know what I was doing..."* before adding, *"But something inside me did"* (p. 23). He shifts to the third person in order to describe himself speaking: *"then a voice hissed out of my mouth"* (p. 23).

After he has disabled Ryan's offside Cooper with some blows to the head, Robert reveals something that now seems to fit in with the discovery about himself: *"I've always been stronger than I look. A lot stronger"* (p. 30). There have also been other clues in his past that he wasn't quite normal: *"I am a fast healer. Cuts, scrapes, bruises...I've always healed quickly. Quickly and cleanly"* (p. 60). A social worker noted on his file that Robert was *"undemonstrative and somewhat cold"*, prompting Robert to reflect that *"maybe they'd always sensed something unhuman about me"* (p. 103). What in the past were somewhat inexplicable oddities are now revealed to be the result of his other-than-human or super-human nature.

But what exactly is that nature? Robert forces himself to contemplate the unthinkable as he lies on the operating table forcing the surgeon Casing to stitch him back up: *"If I'm not normal – what am I?"* (p. 32). He doesn't like any of the possibilities that suggest themselves, however: *"The answers were unthinkable: robot, automaton, android, cyborg, beast, machine, alien..."* (p. 32). He then lays out the essential philosophical conundrum of what is it to be human:

"How can you feel the pain if you're anything but a sentient being?

How can you be anything else?

You have lived. You have hurt and bled. You have seen things and heard things and felt things and done things. You have considered yourself. You have a self. A mind, a body, a consciousness. You have memories. You remember things.

Memory is life.

You have lived.

You are alive.

You eat, you drink, you breathe.

You shit, you piss, you fart.

You hurt.

What else can you be but human?" (pp. 32-33)

We find out little more about Robert's nature and his status as human or not-human through the remainder of the novel. It is a question that is, no doubt frustratingly for some readers, left unanswered. We don't know if he is the product of human or alien technology, if he was created from scratch in a laboratory or if he was born a normal child and then

augmented in some way. We don't know the full extent of his capabilities, or how his apparently mechanical parts interact with his apparently organic parts. We don't know who is responsible for his creation and for what purpose, if any, he was created. We don't even know if Robert is entirely in control of his own body and his own actions. All of these points can lead to fascinating speculation on the part of the reader and can be the basis of fruitful class discussions. An interesting creative writing exercise would be for students to write their explanation of Robert: who or what he is, how he was created and why.

What's in a name?

The protagonist's name seems to be chosen for deliberate blandness. Robert Smith is notable for being a completely unremarkable name.

- Is this a decision on the part of the author, in order to suggest that Robert is an "everyman" character, supposed to represent all of us in some way?
- Or is it a name that was deliberately chosen by whoever "created" Robert (if indeed he was created), one that would allow him to easily blend in and not be recognised for what he is?
- Is it just a coincidence that the name Robert is very close to the word 'robot' – is he really Robot Smith?
- And what about the name Smith? It's not just a very common name – it derives from a profession, that of working in metal. Again just a coincidence?

We can also perhaps read more into Eddi Ray's name. An eddy is a circular movement of water, counter to a main current, and Eddi Ray is certainly a character who moves against the main current of society, operating on its margins and outside the mainstream. She is also someone who provides a ray of sunlight, or a ray of hope to Robert, assisting him in his time of need.

What is it to be human?

A good place to begin class discussions is with an attempt to define what it is to be human. The following questions can be used as prompts:

- *"A mind, a body, a consciousness...memories"*. Are these things that Robert lists all it takes to be human? If not (just) these things then what else is required?
- Robert wonders if he is a beast. Human beings are animals but can animals be humans?
- What about robots and cyborgs (part human and part machine)? Can they be human despite being artificially created?
- Robert asks, *"If I was some kind of a machine, a machine that looked and functioned exactly the same as a human being, then how was I to know that I wasn't a human being? If I looked the same as everyone else, walked the same as everyone else, talked the same as everyone else...how was I to know that I wasn't the same as everyone else?"* (p. 74). If a robot is so complex that you can't tell the difference between it and a human does that just mean that it is human?
- What about a form of artificial intelligence that doesn't look human but is contained within, say, a computer? Do you need a body to be human?
- What if future technology allowed you to have your brain scanned and stored? Would the scanned version still be you? What about if it was 'downloaded' into a new body?

- A child that is the product of an IVF procedure has been artificially created in a sense. Is he or she human?
- What about a man with a mechanical pacemaker or an artificial limb? Is he a human or a cyborg?
- Scientific advances seem to lend greater credence to a conception of humans as very complicated machines. If this is the case, are we just more complex versions of robots, made of organic material?
- Centuries ago, slaves were not counted as human beings because of the colour of their skin and people with mental and physical disabilities were treated as less than human and exterminated in death camps by the Nazis. Is it possible to come up with a set of criteria that tells us who is human and who isn't?

What is it to be inhuman?

It would appear that Robert is something that is not human, and he is described as being somewhat cold and emotionless, yet from what we see of his actions he is certainly capable of a range of very human emotions: compassion, concern, fear and most notably love for Eddi. Paradoxically, it is the people who are hunting him down, Ryan and his crew, that seem like the ones that are really inhuman. They kill innocent people in order to hide their tracks and keep Robert's existence a secret; they are ruthless and cold, displaying few of the qualities that we might think of as defining humanity. This is made particularly evident when Robert is caught by one of Ryan's colleagues, Morris. Trapped in the car with him, Robert outlines the nature of their standoff and then observes his enemy:

"Morris's eyes were blank. Empty and emotionless...almost unhuman...and I wondered for a moment what I looked like to him. Did he know what I was? Did he see me as something else? And then it suddenly occurred to me that maybe he didn't see me as something else, because maybe I wasn't something else to him. I was the same as him. We were both something else – unhuman, unreal" (p. 163).

Robert even goes on to speculate that everybody was the same as him, but Morris's humanity in the technical sense is made all too apparent when Eddi shoots him, revealing nothing but organic nature. The question remains, however:

- Can something non-human be more human than a real human?
- If humanity is defined by being able to express certain feelings and emotions then what is the status of someone who is unable to express them?
- Is Ryan less human than Robert?

OTHER RELEVANT TEXTS

A number of science fiction stories, novels and films deal with the issue of what it is to be human, particularly those that deal with robots and cyborgs. These can be very useful intertextual references, whether read or shown in their entirety or in short excerpts. The most famous of these is Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, based on the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick. The film and novel feature artificially created 'replicants' who are cyborgs that look exactly like humans yet are stronger and faster and only have a 'life' span of four years before they are 'retired'.

The film *Gattaca* depicts a near future world where some people are treated as less than human because they haven't been genetically engineered for perfection as the majority of people have.

Kazuo Ishiguro's recent novel *Never Let Me Go* depicts clones who are raised solely for the purpose of donating their organs to 'real' humans and the action film *The Island* operates on a similar premise.

The stories of Isaac Asimov depict robots that become more and more humanlike as they develop, particularly "*The Bicentennial Man*", also adapted into a film. There are many, many other examples that can be found.

THE TEENAGE CONDITION

If we look beyond the literal interpretation of the novel, in its science-fictional sense, then we can also perhaps read it as metaphorically telling us something about "the human condition", or, even more specifically, "the teenage condition". In this sense the novel can be read as a commentary on what it feels like to be a teenager. Robert is no longer seen as being something atypical, different to everyone else, but rather typical, exemplifying the sorts of quandaries and difficulties that are faced by all teenagers. He's not alone in his doubts and fears because all teenagers are outsiders in a way, marked as different from the rest of society.

The concept of the 'teenager' is a relatively recent one, and it is very much a social creation. Before the Twentieth Century, young people were not seen in quite the same way as a separate category, and it was only by around the 1950s that teenagers really emerged as a part of society in their own right. When they were identified, they were often seen as a 'problem', aided by films of the time such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One*, which depicted teenagers as out of control and rebellious. To be a teenager is often defined as to be in turmoil, physically and emotionally, because of the onset of puberty and the prospect of entering adulthood yet not being able to cope with the responsibilities.

When looked at in this way, what Robert is experiencing is not so unusual. He is shocked and disturbed by what he discovers about his body in a way that could be considered analogous to any teenager undergoing the physical changes of puberty. He asks questions about personal identity ("what am I?") that mirror the sense of uncertainty felt by many teenagers ("who am I and what is my place in this world?"). He feels like he doesn't belong in the rest of society, that he is being shunned by the world around him, a sense of alienation that again is not uncommon. Robert is forced to leave his (foster) parents behind and strike out on his own in the world without support, taking on the sorts of responsibilities and being forced to make the hard choices that many older teenagers have to when they gain independence.

- Is Robert's experience just an extreme version of the sorts of upheavals that many teenagers go through? This question can be used to instigate class discussion or a piece of personal writing.

NEVER TRUST ANYONE

After Robert escapes from Ryan at the hospital and goes on the run, the novel dwells less on the question of what he is and more on the question of trust as he works out an uneasy alliance with Eddi and they escape to Spain together. Trust is one of the central themes of the novel, and it's a matter of particular concern to Robert, as he outlines:

"Whatever I was, I'd lived my life by certain rules.

*Never believe anything.
Never back down.
Never get used to anything.
Never trust anyone who offers to help.
Over the years, I'd expanded that last one into never trusting anyone at all, but the basic principle was still the same: charity stinks."* (p. 111)

As Robert makes clear, it is not just because he is on the run from a shady organisation that he has issues with trusting people. Abandoned at birth, he is an orphan who has gone through a succession of foster homes: *"a couple of years here, a couple of years there. I'd never spent more than a couple of years anywhere"* (p. 103).

He is particularly unsure about trusting Eddi, however, and for good reason. He has gone to her for help, but she is not someone reliable. She is a criminal who has gained much of what she has by betraying her boyfriend, getting him sent to prison so she could run the illegal business herself. She then does immediately betray Robert, drugging him with the intention of handing him in and then shooting him in the arm when he breaks out of his drugged stupor. Despite this, he has nowhere else to go and needs her help in order to avoid detection, and they end up in a situation of mutual dependence, neither trusting the other but needing them in order to stay safe. The dilemma for Robert is in how much he opens up to her:

*"Did I tell her the truth?
Could I tell her the truth?
Or did I have to lie?
That's what I had to think about now.
Truth or lies."* (p. 174)

In the end he compromises and tells her partial truths, still not revealing what he is, but telling her the other details of what has happened to him. Gradually they do begin to trust each other as they begin their new lives in Spain, although doubts remain for Robert when Eddi goes to Granada to try to raise money through a drug sale and doesn't return on time. When she does return, however, they fall in love and they can finally trust each other fully, although still Robert does not reveal what is inside him until it is too late and Ryan catches up with them, leading to Eddi's death.

The topic of trust can generate many interesting discussions or pieces of writing:

- Who is the one person you trust more than anyone else?
- Who do you trust the least?
- Do you trust the government?
- Do you trust your teachers?
- What about other professions, like doctors, lawyers, etc.?
- Is it possible to get by in the world if you don't trust anyone?

WHAT IS REAL?

Robert is frequently concerned by what is real and what is not. What has happened to him, what he is, seems too fantastical to be part of the real, mundane world. He eventually comes to doubt his own senses:

*"I wondered if I was going mad.
I knew it was possible."*

This whole thing, everything that was happening to me...it could all be some kind of delusion. I could be imagining it all. Maybe I had killed Casing in a frenzied attack and this was the only way I could cope with it – by making it unreal, by making it something else...by making myself something else. I didn't know if that was possible or not, but I'd seen enough therapists over the years to know that I couldn't dismiss it.

It wasn't impossible.” (p. 96)

This sense of radical doubt that he feels extends to wondering how much of his life has been genuine, if all of his carers had been in on some sort of plot to observe this inhuman creature to see how he developed. Later in the novel Robert extends the sense of doubt to the reader, turning the question around:

“Have you ever seen inside yourself? Do you know what's in there? Think about it. Imagine it. You don't know what's under your skin, do you? You think you do. You think you've got all the usual stuff – heart, lungs, stomach, liver – but how do you know?

You don't.” (p. 217)

This ability to doubt our reality touches on a very famous philosophical problem, as outlined by the philosopher René Descartes. In attempting to find a foundation for knowledge, something that he could be absolutely certain of, he proceeded to eliminate all things that it was possible to doubt, either because our senses are unreliable or we are being deceived in some way. He was left with just one thing: the fact that there was someone there doing all this thinking meant that he must exist, or, as his famous dictum put it: I think, therefore I am.

This problem is illustrated in a number of films, such as *The Truman Show*, where Truman exists in a world that, unbeknownst to him, is entirely artificial, with all of his friends and family merely actors. *The Matrix* also depicts a world that appears real but is shown to be merely virtual, a deception planted in the brains of humans hooked up as power sources for machines. *Dark City* explores a similar scenario, of an artificial world that is reset every night, along with its inhabitants. How do we know that we are not in the Matrix? How do we know that we are not like Robert? We assume that we are completely normal, but then so did Robert before he was revealed to be otherwise. The following questions might generate interesting discussions or pieces of writing:

- If we are living in the Matrix, or something similar, then what is the real world like? Describe a possible scenario.
- If you suspected that everyone in your life was merely an actor playing a role, what could you do to reveal the truth?
- How would you react if you discovered that what you thought was the real world was not real at all?