

PRE-PREPARED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Julia Ross, author of *The Laughing Robot*

1. What inspired you to write “The Laughing Robot”?

I loved the idea of robots actually being able to care for people, it seemed such a contradiction and puzzle.

2. How do you think the social care sector might evolve with the integration of AI and robotics?

Slowly and with considerable trepidation. Social care is still at the foothills of realising that AI and robots have a lot to offer. Doctors and the NHS have accepted this already. We have a lot of catching up to do and much of that is because social work is built on relationship work and emotional intelligence.

3. *The Laughing Robot* explores the use of AI in elder care. What are your personal views on this topic?

Different generations are having a huge impact on how we grow old which is why I included Evelyn and Stanley in the mix of baby boomers and their inheritance. Older people are no different from kids and kids glory in enjoying AI. In time of course we all will.

4. How has your experience as the chairperson of the British Association of Social Workers influenced the story?

I love travelling the country and meeting social workers everywhere. They are the unsung heroes of our society. Only yesterday in Wales I met J who told me about how he used ChatGPT to interview kids and play games, as part of building relationships in an assessment.

5. Are any of the AI or robotic technologies in your book based on real developments in the field?

Yes and No, I’ve met some lovely robots but I’ve also let my imagination run away with me, like all story tellers. ‘Notcars’ are an example of the next stage for cars. Inserts into people’s wrists are almost with us. Care Robots are in use in Japan already.

6. The Isle of Wight plays a significant role in your story. Why did you choose this setting?

I love the Isle of Wight. It’s a beautiful place to escape to and write. A wonderful place to imagine the unimaginable and dream dreams.

7. Can you tell us more about your protagonist, Anna? Is she inspired by anyone you’ve met in your social work career?

Anna is my alter-ego. She goes where no-one else I know would go.

8. The novel touches on themes of autonomy and dignity in aging. What message do you hope readers take away from this?

That the current debate on dignity in dying can and should be much better informed about the options and choices in the huge diversity of human life.

9. Can you elaborate on the “Right Way” initiative in your book? Is it inspired by any real-world trends or policies?

I’ll never forget the horror of learning about the end of life Liverpool Care Pathway in the late 1990s. It’s now discredited and began to be phased out from 2013 but only after people were left thirsty and starving as their treatment was withdrawn.

10. How do you think your book might contribute to discussions about ageism in our society?

I hope it might make people think and stop making assumptions about older people.

11. What do you think are the biggest misconceptions about aging and elder care in our society?

Without a doubt that all older people are the same and need and want the same things. They don’t. Some people would much prefer to be looked after by an anonymous friendly machine than have 4 different strangers coming in a day to do intimate things to them.

12. Can you share an example of how your professional experience directly influenced a scene or character in the book?

The episodes on ECT. I learnt recently are now increasing for older women. I vividly recall being part of the team administering ECT in horrendous detail back, holding people down as they convulsed when I was a nurse.

13. If you could have dinner with one of the characters from your book, who would it be and why?

Oh, without a doubt the slick and sophisticated James.

14. What books or authors have influenced your writing style?

I love all Ian McEwan’s books, Nutshell, The Children Act and on robots Machines like me, plus the chapter on Death in Mark O’Connell’s ‘To be a machine’. I also love Elizabeth Taylors works, Anita Shreeve and many of Fay Weldon’s books.

15. What was the most challenging aspect of writing this novel? How do you think your background in social work has shaped your approach to storytelling?

Finding the time is always the toughest part. The Isle of Wight played a huge part in giving me the peace and tranquillity I needed and still need to escape.

16. What are you currently most busy with?

Social work of course as I'm still privileged to be Chair of the British Association of Social Workers across the UK. I often have to think and talk about many of the difficult areas and ways social workers work. One example coming up is the awful impact Covid19 had on so many children. And the growing relationship between humans and robots fascinates me endlessly. We are seeing a rise in people using artificial empathy - by which I mean humans using AI or robots to understand and share their feelings. Teenagers are turning to AI chat bots for therapy and many adults are asking ChatGPT for emotional advice or therapy.

17. Do you have any new book projects coming up?

Of course, always! I'm currently writing about the future world where a young woman becomes taken over by artificial intelligence with disastrous results on her life and those around her.

18. Why do you think *The Laughing Robot* is so relevant in today's society?

Because of the fear that AI and robots are taking over. People worry about the future, especially how robots will work in health and social care, they are nervous, frightened even. Older people and families are also very worried about who is going to look after them when they get older.

19. How do you identify with the protagonist's character and life?

Well, I was widowed when my two children were very young, so there are some similarities and of course I'm a social worker too and I love tech.

20. Apart from a very enjoyable read, what message do you hope that readers will get from reading *The Laughing Robot*?

I hope they will love the story first and then I hope they will think about how we learn to live with the new world of technology and robots. If we don't then we'll get left behind or even worse, tech or the people who create it will take advantage of us.

21. Are there any recent news stories (since publication last autumn) that relate to *The Laughing Robot*?

On my website I've done a few blogs on new techy things. The main news is the Louise Casey Review of Social Care which should be published any day now. I also find the Assisted Dying debate fascinating and was privileged to have a letter published in the Times in September talking about the difference between people committing suicide and those people who want to plan their death.

22. In what way does the book relate to the Isle of Wight? Is this an especially topical issue on the Isle of Wight specifically right now?

Anna and her robot Henry live on the island partly because I think all islands are escapism. Also, there are very high numbers of older people who live on the island and more keep coming to retire there so it is becoming quite a problem.

23. Tell me a bit about your experience at last year's Isle of Wight Literary festival - what was it that you enjoyed about meeting your readers?

Meeting readers is the best thing ever but it can be a bit daunting and even scary, especially when they are experts. Mostly though people love hearing about social work and are becoming fascinated with artificial intelligence and robots and I don't blame them!

24. Finally, what's next for Julia Ross? Are you working on another book?

Of course, always! I'm currently writing about the future world where a young woman becomes taken over by artificial intelligence with disastrous results on her life and those around her.