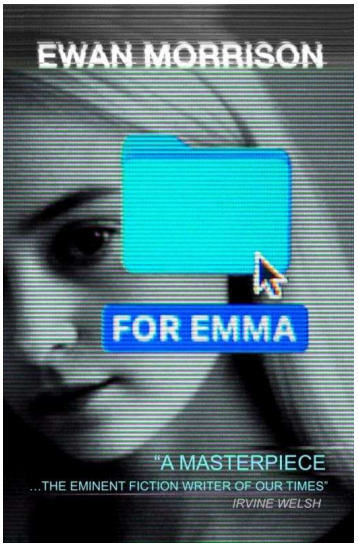
‘For Emma’, by Ewan Morrison

Review by Martyn Colebrook



Ewan Morrison’s novel is a bold and daring exploration of the age of AI. It begins with a note from an editor who has received a cryptic email link, supposedly sent by the therapist of Josh Cartwright – a San Francisco bomber who struck on 1 October. Unsure whether the email represents a joke in poor taste or a serious cry for help from a figure of public notoriety, the editor hesitates for a few days before finally opening the link. What the editor finds is a file ‘that comprised sixty four low resolution home clips, shot on a webcam of an out of date laptop, and made over thirty days from the 1st of September to the day of the bombing’ (p. 8). A more concerning aspect is that the contents appear to be a video diary recorded in the month leading up to the bomb attack.

The novel we read is an edited version of Josh’s video diary to his daughter, Emma. Though presented as fiction, Morrison taps into the substrate that is the crackdown on civil liberties for possession of material which could prove incendiary and contentious, as experienced by the editor who has suffered consequences for engaging with this archive.

The ’Emma’ of the title (book and metatext) is Emma Henson. A gifted child with an advanced understanding of science and the world around her, Emma completes a PhD in Neurophysics and moves into a promising career as a young bio-scientist at BioSys Inc., a near-future corporation developing tech and AI

which bears a striking resemblance to the Neuralink experiments so prominently featured in Elon Musk's business ventures. Her death becomes the catalyst for her father's descent: Josh decides to exact revenge against the CEO responsible for Emma's death, 'tak[ing] him with me when I go', and sets about preparing to carry out a bomb attack.

It is here where Morrison deviates into darker and murkier territory. Josh believes his actions will 'save the children of the future' (p. 10) and spends a significant amount of time in the novel re-examining how he might have been a better or more responsible father to Emma and thus prevented her death. Pushing further than the conventional futuristic revenge thriller or cyberpunk novel, Morrison re-introduces Emma's voice into the narrative – she interacts with and advises her father as he undertakes his mission.

Josh first hears Emma when commiserating on what would have been her twenty-seventh birthday, which finds him hospitalised as a consequence of his uncontrollable alcoholism. Following his unsuccessful attempt to remain sober upon his release, Josh reflects on his repeated failures to prosecute Biosys for their role in Emma's murder. This is where he convinces himself that a personal retaliation, towards the CEO, is the most appropriate response and thus days 30 and 29 set the scene for his intended suicide bombing.

The reader is told that Emma suffered a workplace fall following an anaphylactic shock, and this is ultimately positioned as the cause of her death. A series of obstructions, obfuscations and cover-ups allow BioSys to 'dump the traumatised bodies of their nano-tech, bio-implant experiments into the State healthcare system, [having] them processed through overrun ER departments with well-placed fragments of fake diagnoses' (p. 43). The meticulous research that Josh undertakes to identify the agencies involved in this cover-up brings him into contact with a cast of characters who fit the archetypes of a cyber-thriller (the cover-up-savvy doctor, the nervous and paranoid tech whistleblower). This is not a criticism; rather, it shows how well Morrison understands and works within the reader's expectations of the plot and narrative.

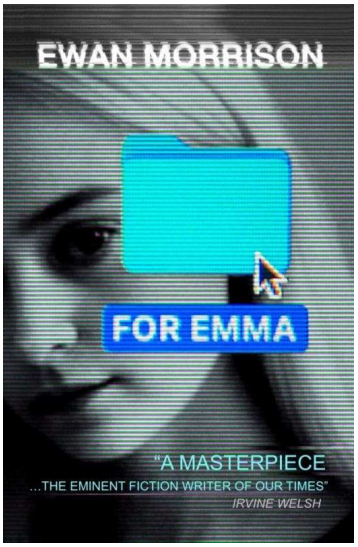
A further complexity that adds emotional depth is the divorce between Josh and Emma's mother when Emma is young, with Josh insisting that he is leaving 'your mother, not you'. The reader encounters several painful and awkward scenes in which a drunk, drugged or dishevelled Josh appears at family events, and his

inner conversations with Emma begin to seep into his interactions with friends and relatives. We become the prime witnesses to the descent of a grieving father into a militant, possessed and emotionally broken man, unable to distinguish between his 'life' (having abandoned the trappings of conventional functioning) and his quest for revenge, and haunted by the ghostly words of his daughter.

During this hellish and macabre progression – from self-medication through alcoholism and substance abuse, to hallucinations and full-blown mental illness – Morrison ensures that the reader must question whether Emma may still exist in an ethereal or electronic form, and whether Cartwright is crafting his own suicide note under the aegis of personal vengeance.

This is a novel deeply reflective of our times: a prescient, incisive and razor-sharp commentary on the contemporary geopolitical landscape and on the entanglement of corporate malfeasance with the personal retributions sought by those left behind. I have long followed Ewan Morrison's career, from his debut *The Last Book You Read and Other Stories* (2008), through to his survivalist post-Covid novel *How To Survive Everything* (2021), and now his ventures into hyperreality and AI. This is not only his most mature novel in terms of thematic exploration and style; it is also his most polished. If this does not win a major prize, then the world has gone even more bloody mad than it is already attempting.

For Emma is published by Leamington Books



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