

Simon Ings, “As If: fiction's modelling of minds – playing with dolls”

Abstract: Humans have been modeling themselves for as long as they have been modeling anything. (Young female chimps in Uganda treat their favourite sticks like dollies. The oldest actual doll we've found is 4,500 years old, from Khakassia in eastern Siberia). Through such models, we try to understand ourselves. And the more accurate our models, the likelier it is that we will confuse them with ourselves; and model our behaviours on theirs.

Fiction, itself a form of model-making, is uniquely suited to exploring the relationships we strike up, or may in the future strike up, with models of various sorts: automata, robots, digital agents, machine learning systems and the rest. But fiction is not merely a tool for investigation. It is itself a system which models human behaviour and experience. It is not mechanical. It is not computational. Understanding what fiction actually is provides us with powerful alternatives to computational theories of mind.

Simon Ings is the author of eight previous novels and two works of non-fiction, including the Baillie Gifford longlisted *Stalin and the Scientists*. His novel *The Weight of Numbers* had him chosen Man of the Year by Arena magazine (which promptly folded). He was the arts editor of *New Scientist* magazine. Now, from possibly the coldest flat in London, he writes newspaper reviews and works on a book about writers and power, due out from Bridge Street Books in 2025.