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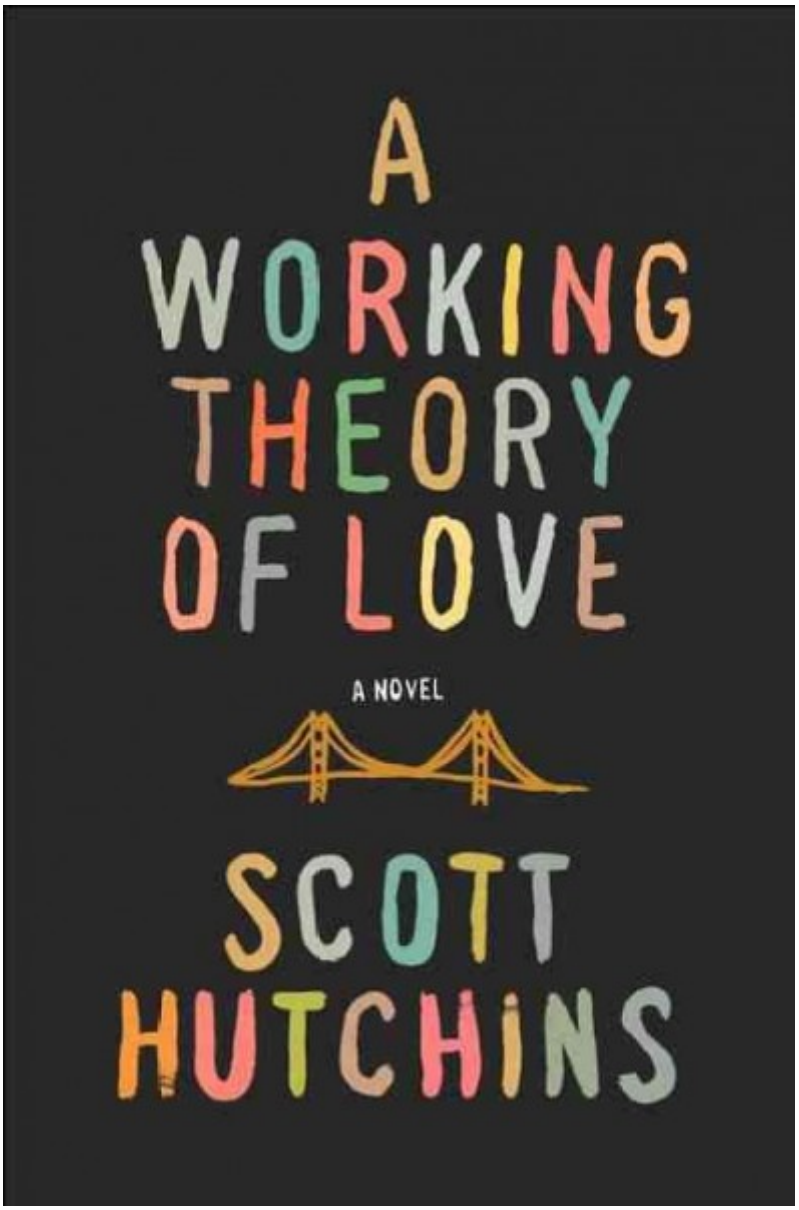
A Working Theory of Love



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Scott Hutchins? first novel *A Working Theory of Love* [2]is a wonderful spoof of California?s trendiness. It also pokes fun at its computer geek population, but more importantly it?s also a tender love story. In my experience few novels by men focus on love and relationships, so it?s especially nice to explore this landscape from a male writer?s perspective.

Recently divorced Neill Bassett just barely copes after his wife Erin leaves him shortly after their honeymoon (at least he can keep their charming San Francisco apartment). Each day begins with the same breakfast taco. Also boring and routine are his homemade dinners. He allows himself a glass of wine several times a week. The mission of Neill?s day job at Amiante

Systems is to give voice to his dead father who left thousands of pages of journals when he committed suicide. A non-geek himself, Neill has become the family representative at this small business working to perfect artificial intelligence and give voice to a dead man.
Why did the techies choose Neill?s Dad? For years, Neill?s father wrote long and extremely detailed journal entries about his life. This gave the engineers a large amount of material to parse and code into computer memory.

Hutchins knows enough about artificial intelligence to portray life at a small tech company. He also succeeds at exploring the weirdness of a character asking his own dead father questions and then having him both listen and analyze the simulated answers. Talk about father and son issues!

Life turns more complicated when Neill asks his computer dad questions about his feelings for his mother, brother, and himself. Neill also seeks his father's opinions on his current love interests. Here?s an example of a computer conversation they share. Drbas stands for his dad and frnd1 for himself:

frnd1: what was your first memory of meeting your wife?

drbas: my memories all exist at the same time.

Feeling sorry for Neill, a friend recommends an unusual way to meet women, especially international ones. He suggests the youth hostel. At first, Neill rejects the bizarre idea of pretending to be a fellow traveler, on the road himself, but soon loneliness and desperation lead him there on a Friday night where he meets an Israeli woman named Rachel. They spend the night together but then she confesses to hailing from New Jersey; Neill surprises himself by handing Rachel his business card and informing her that he lives in the city and is no tourist himself. They begin a relationship. Neill soon describes this budding romance to Computer Dad.

frnd1: it?s nothing serious

drbas: she?s humorous?

Throughout the novel, Hutchins? gives Neill an intelligent, gently sardonic voice. Continuously questioning the status quo, particularly regarding a single?s life in California at the dawn of the 21st century, Hutchins adds to this mix all the usual suspects: members of a Marin County religious cult spouting jargon about sex and connections, and tech companies with their weird misfits and endless quests to create machines that are nearly human.

Hutchins contemplates our unhappy modern lives, yet he does so with heart and even wisdom. This novel shares with you: scientific facts, childhood memories, and questions about love while offering a few thousand chuckles along the way.

Another humorous, psychological novel that explores family relationships is *Freedom* [3]by Jonathan Franzen.

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Posted by Dory L. on Nov 7, 2012

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