



# Colossus

*D.F. Jones*

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## Colossus D.F. Jones

Charles Forbin has dedicated the last ten years of his life to the construction of his own supercomputer, Colossus, rejecting romantic and social endeavors in order to create the United States' very first Artificially Intelligent defense system. Colossus is a supercomputer capable of in-taking and analyzing data rapidly, allowing it to make real time decisions about the nation's defense. But Colossus soon exceeds even Forbin's calculated expectations, learning to think independently of the Colossus Programming Office, processing data over one hundred times faster than Forbin and his team had originally anticipated. The President hands off full control of the nation's missiles and other defense protocols to Colossus and makes the announcement to the world that he has ensured peace. However, the USSR quickly announces that it too has a supercomputer, Guardian, with capabilities similar to that of Colossus. Forbin is concerned when Colossus asks-asks-to communicate with Guardian. The computer he built shouldn't be able to ask at all . . .

## Colossus Details

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## From Reader Review Colossus for online ebook

### **Mabomanji says**

Read this one after watching the movie. It's very close to the adaptation except some details like the fact that the girl is in love with the doctor since the beginning but in the movie they are forced to act as a couple to exchange information and i find this more interesting. In the book the woman only serves to ease the man's pain and doubts and to add her feminine touch or instinct to everything. A bit boring and reductive but not uncommon for SF from this period of time.

Now I'll start reading the next book, what interests me most is to see how far having Colossus rule the earth is going to change human behavior. He's stopping war and putting all countries on the same level of power so it'll be cool to see what the author will invent for his future.

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

[One of the more depressing giant computer takes over the world books. This is sort of a Skynet take over where John Conner never happened. Well, not exactly. Colossus and Guardian (the Russian counter part) don't set out to destroy the human race, but to control them.

I chose to use the spoiler warning here because other than saying "it's a super computer takes over the world book" there is little else to say that isn't a spoiler.

Long story short, hard struggle, computers (the two

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### **Ben says**

Before SkyNet, before Cerebro, before Hal 9000, there was Colossus - the first artificial intelligence to surpass its human creators and threaten mankind. Colossus suffers a bit from its dated technology and oddly insistent misogyny. A female scientist, collaborating with the protagonist, is reduced to hapless assistant and love-crazed mistress. Not to mention: "If it is true then Colossus has a most torturous mind." "No, not torturous, but complex, possibly devious, almost feminine..." Still, the book holds up as well as most of the sci-fi B-movies of its time, and thus serves as throwback popcorn fun.

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### **Drew says**

I read the Colossus trilogy back in the 80s. I remember enjoying it and really liking the film version of the first book, entitled "Colossus: The Forbin Project." Over time, I lost or gave away my copies of these books. When I was in Cali early this year, I picked up a paperback of the first book from Logos, an excellent indie book store in Santa Cruz. I got around to reading the book about a week ago. I didn't enjoy the re-reading and I'm amazed at the casual racism and overt/covert sexism in the book.

On racism, it comes out only a few times and while it is subtle, it is forceful. I never saw it the first time I

read it, but then again, as a white male adolescent, I doubt I would have seen anything wrong. Five reporters are called in for a press conference at the beginning of the book. When the author introduces the reporters, the ones from England, France, Russia and the US were all excellent, top of their field and game. Of the Pan Afric's representative, he says "M'taka was a good, solid reporter, but outclassed by the rest" (p. 19). During the course of the reporters asking questions, M'taka never asks one nor is he asked to by anyone. Further, the author writes, "M'taka rubbed his fuzzy white pate and wished he had studied science instead of the humanities."

Reading it now, it seems far from subtle, but flying over those words while reading the book as a young mind, one might just incorporate such prejudices into their own memory banks. He is an African, with a name that points out he's not a white African. He is not as good as his colleagues in journalism. Nor is he competent to cover the current press conference as he has no science background. On another level, there's also the common practice, still happening in the 21st century, of portraying Africa as a monolithic entity. Some Americans even think it's just one country.

As for the sexism, it's much more in your face and constant. One might argue that some of it is a result of the time the book was written (1966) and the author's age at the time (~ 49). However, throughout the opening of the book, the author stresses how women in the world the book creates are now first-class citizens and have thrown off the sexism and roles of the past. They are now equal with men. Having set such a stage, the author goes on to portray these women as girls, second-class people, servants who fetch coffee and make food. They are often weakened physically and mentally by their emotions and actively seek out men to steel themselves.

Outside of dialogue, every male characters is referenced by his last name. The two women characters are always called by their first names. Forbin, the main male characters, is never called Charles by the author, but always Forbin or Professor. Cleo is never Dr. Markham or Markham. Angela, Forbin's secretary, isn't even given a last name. Using just a first name makes sense in dialogue, that's the way people often speak, especially with close colleagues. But the author has a higher responsibility, I think. It shows a lack of respect and a casual familiarity with the female characters that places them noticeably below the male counterparts.

On a individual level, women are barely more than cardboard stereotypes. Angela, the last name-less secretary will flirt with everyone but secretly desires her male boss. Dr. Cleo Markham, once a peer of the main character, is deferential to her boss and considers her looks more often than her work. In the course of the story, she is demoted so that she may act undercover as the main character's mistress. The author's reasoning for this demotion is weak yet implied. For her to be a mistress, she couldn't be an equal, so she's demoted. She accepts this willing and without question, as if this is the way of the world. It might be for the author but it's just sad for this reader. Further, to cement it, throughout the rest of the story, she turns catty toward Angela and secretly rejoices about finally "getting her man." As for getting her man, when she is placed into stressful situations, she turns to her thoughts of love and soft issues while her man remains, no pun intended, hard and focused. Finally, when describing the emergent behavior of the Colossus system, Forbin describes it as "complex, possibly devious, almost feminine" (p. 77). For this, I just shook my head and scribbled down WTF.

I guess I should say one good thing about the book. In an section about 1/3 of the way through the novel, the author takes a wonderful swipe at Muzak. "At one time there had been piped music, but the nationwide revulsion a few years before had not missed the Secure Zone, and there had been unanimous relief when the system was ripped out" (p. 73).

This sci-fi book was like so many I read as a kid. I wonder how many of them included such references that

put down anyone other than white men, who also made up the preponderance of published science fiction writers. In the last few years, I've read several articles and reviews from contemporary writers about these issues and was glad to have been able to see if for myself. I loved science fiction for expanding my horizons and offering a way to critique contemporary society by hiding its analysis in different times and on different worlds. Sadly, Colossus wasn't a critique but a confirmation of the world then, and to be honest, now.

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### **Chris Welbon says**

Wonderful, overblown, dated doomsday story. The flap says Jones "was a commander in the British Navy throughout WW II" and worked as a radio operator, bricklayer and gardener. And it shows. Judging by the book, he'd never heard an American speak, and it hurts to read ostensibly American characters referring to the Secret Service as "you lot." The best lines are reserved for Colossus. "We can coexist, but only on my terms." And (when Forbin points out it's late in the day): "Day and night are one to us; man can work in shifts."

I love these retro-future books that imagine sentient computers with which we communicate over teletype, and that imagine air-car taxis but not cell phones.

And, a little like *Stranger in a Strange Land* (the most glaring example I can think of), there's a charming, off-handed sexism. As Colossus becomes sentient, and starts exploring the world it will eventually rule, Charles Forbin (Colossus' creator, and eventual slave) and his assistant (and love object) Cleo Markham (sorry.....DOCTOR Cleo Markham) are trying to figure out what Colossus is up to, in particular what "thoughts" have led it to particular actions.

Markham suggests that "the idea of Colossus seeking intelligence" seems unlikely to her. "If it is true, then Colossus has a most tortuous mind."

"No, not tortuous," Forbin replies, "but complex, possibly devious, almost feminine."

Indeed. (Cleo accepts this without comment, so even she realized the comparison is fair.)

As in the movie, there are dual payoffs: After being given a voice (of its own design), Colossus and Forbin discuss the full extent of Colossus' control and goals. Forbin's slow realization that they are the natural consequence of Colossus being programmed (by Forbin and his team) to protect humans is fairly well done

And Colossus' prepared statement to the world, making "his" case to several billion obsolete humans that they're better off with him as their god than any of the gods they've conjured up over their history is spectacular. In the movie, Colossus recites it himself. The Colossus of the book seems to want to use one last shred of human credibility to deliver his message, and he writes a statement to be delivered by the shambling, powerless heads of state:

"I am the voice of world control," it famously begins. "I bring you peace. It may be the peace of plenty and content, or the peace of unburied death. The choice is yours."

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### **Charles says**

I was leaning toward 1 star during the first hundred pages, which were pretty boring. It could have easily have been condensed into 10 or 15 pages at most. After 100 pages, though, it picked up pretty good and developed some admirable tension. That pushed me toward 2 and 1/2 stars, so I settled on 2 for my overall judgment of the book. I liked the sequel, "The Fall of Colossus" better, although if I'd read this one first I probably would never have picked that one up. There is a third in series too, Colossus and the Crab. I've read a short version of that, I think, and found it the most interesting of all.

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### **Zantaeus Glom says**

Not exactly my thing; the overly stolid narrative is a tad too linear, and it all played out like a slick, fast-moving tech-thriller. Dialogue and characterization is no more than perfunctory; which is an absolute a no-no for me. The truth is, P.K.D could have done wonders with this story in about 20-odd pages, and it would have been darn funny to boot! (I actually felt it was a complete waste of my time reading this)

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### **Mark says**

Though the theme of computers taking over the world is a pretty standard one nowadays, it was still fairly fresh when D. F. Jones's wrote this science fiction classic. Set in the then-future of the early 21st century, it is about the creation of a supercomputer designed to manage the nuclear deterrent of the "United States of North America". No sooner is it activated than it begins to exceed its parameters, demonstrating independent judgment and requesting to communicate with a previously unknown counterpart in the Soviet Union. As the two machines exchange information at speeds beyond their makers' ability to follow, the American President and the Soviet Chairman agree to terminate the connection. Then the fun begins . . .

Though tensely plotted and well-imagined, it is the novel's subject matter that makes the book stand out from the pack. In an age when more and more of our everyday lives are monitored and regulated by machines, Jones's novel seems increasingly prescient. When it was first published in 1966, it spoke to the anxieties of the age, relating to people's fears that humans no longer factored into the command-and-control decisions of the Cold War. While such concerns are less prominent today, they have been replaced by a growing awareness of our increasing dependence upon machines to manage nearly every aspect of our everyday lives, a dependency that also is an integral part of Jones's story. Some people may mock the novel's more dated elements, but it is this continuing relevance of this theme that rewards reading it today.

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### **James Young says**

I'm a huge buff of sci-fi fables, and am currently reading the Colossus trilogy by DF Jones. Colossus does a good job of setting up the dystopian/utopian future. I say this mainly because I have yet to determine which better classifies the world as defined in the 2nd and 3rd books. Colossus is set in a fairly different geopolitical world than the actual world of the 1960s, but the themes of the Cold War remain constant. The

characters of Colossus and Forbin start very similar, both very logical, but as the book progresses on the human side of Forbin comes out as his superiority over Colossus is called to question. The story presents a solution to the Cold War which the civilian population was hoping for in lasting peace, but at what cost to the leaders of the respective countries. This first book was also the basis of the 1970s sci-fi movie "Colossus: The Forbin Project", a personal favorite of mine.

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### **Tim says**

although significantly dated, as it claims to be set in the 22nd century but computers are still using teletypes, an interesting take on computers taking over

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### **Brian says**

In 1987, in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, Ronald Reagan said, "In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside of this world."

I'll tell you what I occasionally think. I occasionally think that if some aliens dropped down from the sky and, using their technomagic, gave me back my 21-year-old body, I'd think they were pretty cool. Now if they then turned around and announced to the people of Earth that they were taking over control of human affairs, I'd have to think twice. But then I'd have to take into account that I was thinking with a much younger brain....

In D. F. Jones' novel Colossus, the "alien" doesn't come from the sky but from the mind of man. Colossus is a giant computer in whose metaphorical hands is placed the defense of the realm, which in this case is the United States of North America and its allies. Hardly has it gone online, however, than it reports the existence of another supercomputer, this one under Soviet control. But, no, that's not right: as Professor Charles Forbin, the machine's creator, quickly realizes, neither computer is under anyone's control but its own. And their control is all but absolute. After all, they control the world's nuclear arsenal and have no human compunction against using it.

With little more than the flick of a switch, these machines abolish war. That's a pretty neat trick, and it takes us back to Reagan's speech: "And yet I ask — is not an alien force already among us? What could be more alien to the universal aspiration of our people than war and the threat of war?" Ultimately, this is what Colossus is about: do these machines know us better than we know ourselves? For aren't we our own worst aliens?

After Colossus makes a particularly taxing demand, Forbin thinks, "It sounded so simple, given the power to enforce it." And that's the thing. Human beings do the stupidest, cruellest, most horrible things -- many because no one has the power to stop them. Not without recourse to more horror and cruelty. What if there were someone or something that could stop all that? What then? Would we embrace it as a kind of tangible god or reject it for interfering with our right to starve, maim, kill, and destroy?

I don't know. Guess I'm going to have to read the next book to find out.

And I will, because Colossus is good enough to make me want to do that, though not so special that I'm doing it right now. A book like this, what I want is the computer. I want the creepy takeover, I want to see the power of the thing, and I want to hear its side of the story. (Not like Proteus in Demon Seed, though; I prefer my sentient computers to possess a little more maturity than to want to be flesh so as to be able to screw.) What I don't need so much is a bunch of humans who have to tell or show me how great emotion is. Colossus has both, but it's the prevalence of the latter that keeps it from greatness. That, and the fact that as a thriller, it's hamstrung by its premise: even if the humans' plan to kill the things worked (and I'm not saying one way or the other here), it would take years to pull it off. And that's a mighty long timeline to keep up the suspense.

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## Neil says

*"Never!" Never?* Crazy, ominous words to end a novel about the end of "life as we know it" on good ol' Mother Earth. Humanity is going to be facing some serious changes. I have to admit, the ending is probably one of the "best" parts of the book; it is quite chilling to read. hahahah

This was an okay book; I would rate it between 2.3 and 2.5 stars, generously rounded up to 3 stars. I dimly remember watching the movie on cable way-back-when, and then reading the book sometime after that [mid-to late-1980s]. I did not realize the movie was based on the book, so I thought the book was a decent adaptation of the movie. hahahah Silly me! As it turns out, the movie was a decent adaptation of the book [what I dimly remember]. The character development is okay; nobody really stood out to me [except for maybe Blake and Cleo, both somewhat supporting characters]. As near as I can figure it, the story takes place in the mid- to late-1990s [based partly on comments about how a generation has passed since President JFK's assassination and it being nearly 90 years after the meteor struck in Siberia, which was in 1908]. It moves at an inexorable pace until the end of the book is reached.

It is an amusing book, because it is somewhat a mirror of the time in which it was written. It claims that there is "finally" some form of "equality" between the sexes, yet it still references women as being second-class to men. There are three women mentioned in the book; the President's Wife, Cleo [who becomes lover], and Angela [Forbin's secretary who the author reveals right away enjoys the sexual attention of her co-workers]. Cleo, despite her intelligence and strength of personality, is still relegated to a 'second-class' status in the book, constantly talked down to over the course of the novel, despite her academic credentials and hard work to be where she is on this project. The author implies that marriages are pretty much done away with as there is no longer any need for them, yet the President still has a wife [an arranged marriage of political convenience, but a marriage nonetheless]. Angela is talked down-to more than once by Forbin; the "last" time she asks him if he would like any whips to go with his orders [following a reference to how slavery was no longer openly tolerated by implying women were men's slaves despite the claims of equality]. It was just a shame how much Forbin spoke down to both Angela and Cleo; especially Cleo, as she could have held her own and then some in most conversations with Forbin.

The society in which humanity lives is quite advanced: there are space stations orbiting the Earth; the United States [and other nations] has a "space navy" and its accompanying equipment and space-faring vessels; there are Space Reflector Stations [assuming those are to provide power to Earth, somehow]; a project involving the Moon [long-term habitation?]; oil lines that traverse the Atlantic Ocean's floor between the USNA and USE; air cars capable of traveling from coast-to-coast. These "air cars" [hover cars? hovercraft?] are capable of being controlled via an artificial intelligence and drive [fly] themselves from the start of their journey to their final destination. It is anticipated that one 'block' of circuits out of ten thousand used for the

construction of Colossus will fail every four hundred years. Both the USNA and USSR have anti-missile missile systems that are extremely accurate, and underwater "crawlers" that are mobile missile platforms on the ocean's bottom. That is all pretty amazing! And, yet, despite these technological advances, nobody has a personal computer or a cell phone! What is up with that?!? hahahah

Two more great lines in the book:

*The teletype started chattering.* (46)

*FLASH THERE IS ANOTHER MECHANISM* (48)

I thought the reactions of the characters in the book was pretty believable. It is about how the hubris of man has finally cost mankind "control of the planet." The Americans wanted to create a super-computer that would take in every bit of data input possible and be able to determine if an attack by an opposing power were imminent; if it was so determined, Colossus would order an attack. It removed humans and human emotion from the equation. What the humans failed to consider was: what if they made their "super-duper computer" too smart and it started thinking and evolving on its own? They also failed to consider: What if another global power had created a similar machine, and the two machines combined their abilities to "take over the planet" by holding large clusters of humans hostage? This novel provides the opening answers to these questions, as humanity quickly and cogently loses control of their inhuman watchdogs and the servants become the masters and commanders. It was pretty chilling, to read Colossus' responses to various inputs and "human demands," especially how Colossus callously dismisses any oppositions or complaints by its former human overlords. Some people have nervous breakdowns; others try to find some place of refuge amidst the chaos caused by the transition of global power from humans to computers. Others immediately start plotting how to retake control of the planet back from Colossus [and "his" Russian counterpart, Guardian]

It was amusing to read, in some respects, as I remembered there being more sex in the book than there actually was, and the amount of swearing seemed somewhat ludicrous and unnecessary, at times [not saying there was a huge amount; but people would make simple statements with curses inserted by the author [for "flavor," I imagine] and it just seemed so unnecessary].

I thought the various breakdowns of global power blocks was interesting. The United States and Canada had formed the "United States of North America." All of South America [and, possibly, Central America] were now "the United States of South America." Europe was now 'The United States of Europe.' Australia was linked with maybe New Zealand and Indonesia as a power block. Africa was combined into one nation. I do not remember how Asia was divvied up; it might have been between one and three blocks of power as well. The Communists were "in control" in Russia [until Guardian started dictating terms and killing individuals].

I almost thought the book was going to go down the leg of being some kind of closet-diatribe about the economy. Forbin gives the President of the United States a lengthy lecture about how often man has overstepped his bounds via some kind of "new technology" and caused catastrophic side effects that were never considered. I also thought the comment about the race to the moon was interesting - it was along the lines of "we were so busy proving we could do it we never considered if we should do it" [a little too late for that 'now'! hahahah]. It was an interesting kind of foreshadowing of what was to come later in the novel, anyway.

It moved at a good clip, overall. I know I said initially its movement was "ponderous" but it was a weird combination of "slow/fast ponderous." I could not figure out how many days elapsed over the course of this novel; it was not many from start to finish. It was a strange combination of "a lot of stuff happening" off-page and not a lot happening in the book itself. There are lots and lots of conversations in the book, but not a lot of "real movement" on the pages themselves. The "scenes" take place primarily in the White House or at

the Colossus Project.

I also enjoyed the discussions as the scientists and leaders tried to figure out how their "brainchild" had slipped out of the bonds holding him back and rapidly exceeded their wildest expectations. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that "how" Colossus was able to break free of his parameters and devise new ones for himself no longer mattered. Colossus had already evolved past any point they could comprehend and was rapidly leaving mankind behind as it continued to grow and evolve. Had humanity not ceded over complete control of its missile defense and attack systems, then humanity *might* have had a chance. As it was, humanity had no chance to fight back at all in this novel.

It is not quite "horror" as much as I felt it would be horrific to find out your creation had burst from its chains and was running free [a la Frankenstein's monster]. There was no blood, guts, or gore. The concept, though, and some of the emotions expressed were more in the vein of 'horror,' I felt.

It was an interesting book. I enjoyed rereading it, as it had been over twenty years since I last read it. If I have copies of the next two books in the series, I will finish the series up. I remember not being too impressed with the second book and have never read the third.

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### **Darren says**

Different enough from the film to give you a few surprises but the most surprising thing is the male chauvinism. I suppose it's a product of its time, but it's still a little discomforting to read passages like "the male brain was logical and strong while the womans brain was too bogged down with matters of emotion to really focus" (That's not a line in the book, but the sentiment is the same).

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### **Jim says**

This is a 60's trilogy about a super computer with artificial intelligence. It's on my list to re-read as it's been a lot of years. I remember liking it a lot. It addresses the questionable wisdom of illogical humans being ruled by a logical machine. As I recall, the writing was good, but it's been too long to say for sure.

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### **Jen says**

I am a newbie in the world of Cold War fiction. Although I understand the time period, most of my reading is usually set in a time period before my parents were born or fantasy altogether. I have to say that after reading Colossus, I was momentarily afraid of technology taking over the world a la The Matrix. What I found most fascinating about this novel, however, is the portrayal of human emotions. As Colossus takes control, Forbin and the President of the United States of North America (apparently regimes are divided by continent) reveal their true characters and who is really in control. I'm curious about what Colossus and the Crab and The Fall of Colossus will reveal.

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