

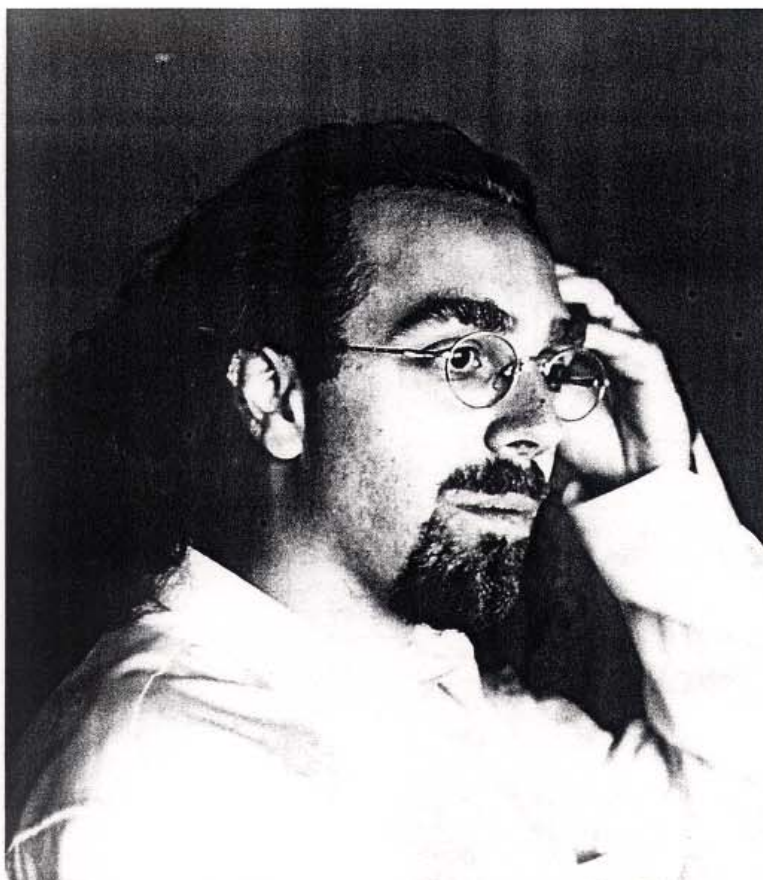
written by **Steven Jenkins** photographed by **John Francis Deyto**

"I'M A ROMANTIC BY nature. I like to tackle problems that most people don't have any idea how to solve. I try to think creatively, on the fringe," bright-eyed computer wonk and fledgling fictionist Astro Teller tells me, brushing back his shoulder-length mane of frizzy hair at a bustling outdoor café in the heart of Silicon Valley. As professed by this 26-year-old grandson of Edward Teller, inventor of a little thermonuclear device called the hydrogen bomb, such zeal for exploring the unknown might be cause for stockpiling the basement with canned peaches and tuning into the emergencybroadcast station. Lucky for us that Teller, unlike his infamous grandfather, is more interested in digital daydreaming at his artificial-intelligence lab than in blowing up stuff real good.

Teller may just set off a literary explosion, however, with the publication of his debut novel *Exegesis* (Vintage), a gripping techno-thriller that moves like a stolen '65 Mustang down the information superhighway. Imaginatively presented as an authentic, top-secret document gathered by the National Security Agency, *Exegesis* traces the strange, sad story of Alice Lu, a brilliant, emotionally unstable Stanford University grad student whose thesis project, an Internet information-retrieval program named EDGAR, mysteriously takes on a mind of its own. Filled with hip references to weird science, unexplainable phenomena, computer hacking, conspiracy theories, and *The X-Files*, Teller's novel should show up any day now on Fox Mulder's nightstand, right next to a framed snapshot of Scully looking skeptical.

Although Teller is only a few months shy of earning a doctorate in artificial intelligence from Carnegie-Mellon, there's nothing ersatz about the smarts with which he has written this cautionary tale of academic espionage and technological codependence. Told entirely through the '90s lexicon of e-mail messages, traded between the increasingly bewildered Alice and the erudite, all-too-human EDGAR, Teller's provocative novel examines the meanings and potentials of artificial intelligence in an era when the term is no longer a high-concept oxymoron (just ask Garry Kasparov). Much like Radiohead's current art-rock opus *OK Computer*, *Exegesis* ponders the zip-drive zeitgeist of our gigabyte culture with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation.

Downing a cool soda while rhapsodizing the poetics of Greek drama, Frankenstein's monster, and microprocessing, Teller applies his own exegesis to *Exegesis*. "I consider the book to be



The Man Machine

a parable about the responsibility of the scientist to something that he or she creates, which is analogous to a parent's responsibility for a child," he says. "The bulk of our culture believes that scientists should be held responsible for everything that happens through the technology they develop, good and bad."

"We live in an anti-knowledge, anti-science environment, which is odd because we're so technologically advanced," Teller continues. "At the same time, as a culture we're always fantasizing about the future. Around this time last century, people were excited by Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which was read as a description of the near future. *Exegesis* represents an update of that idea."

In writing his thoroughly contemporary novel, Teller also drew inspiration from such visionary works as *Pygmalion*, *Frankenstein*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Flowers for Algernon*. "As a literary geek, there's no way

I could have written *Exegesis* without being very aware of our culture's classic artificial-intelligence stories," he says. "Even the Jesus story—and I choose to believe it is a story—is about something created by humans that's essentially inhuman." Whether or not readers choose to interpret EDGAR as a Christ figure, Teller's ghost in the machine does emerge as one of the most unlikely champions of independent thinking in fiction since HAL 9000 sang "Daisy."

Despite the novel's alarming prophesy of mechanized mutiny and software rebellion, Teller hopes that *Exegesis* will not be read as an anti-science diatribe. "I think we should go nuts creating knowledge through technology," he says with persuasive enthusiasm, "but we have to be careful." Pausing to consider his daunting family legacy,

Teller admits that "My view of the responsibility of the scientist has been heavily affected by my grandfather. Now I've chosen to work in a field that might lead a large segment of society not to like me, just as they didn't like my grandfather for what he did. The religious right definitely gets upset about artificial intelligence, but I think it's a great way to humanize technology."

With plans to continue his research in the wonderland of artificial intelligence while also pursuing an ink-stained writing life, Teller is primed for cybernetic and literary discovery. "Good scientists generally do lots of other things besides spending too much time alone in the lab," he says. "Writing stimulates my interest in life, keeps the creative juices flowing."

Keep those juices flowing, Astro. But please, stay away from the hydrogen.

