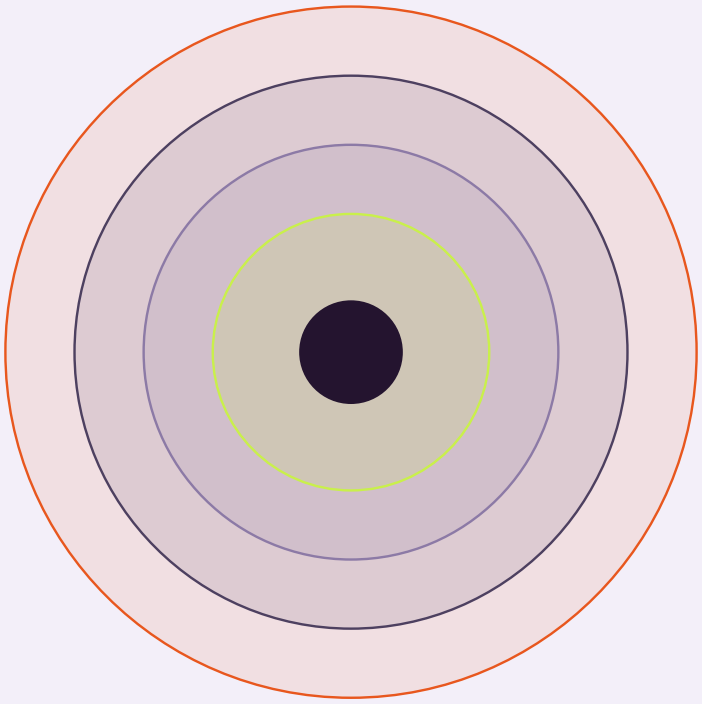


The Reverse Centaur's Guide to Life After AI: How to Think About Artificial

Intelligence—Before It's Too Late

A reading of the book by Cory Doctorow (2026)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of The Reverse Centaur's Guide to Life After AI: How to Think About Artificial Intelligence—Before It's Too Late, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Cory Doctorow is a science fiction novelist, journalist and longtime digital-rights activist, and the writer who named enshittification. In this book he turns the same kind of analysis on the AI boom. He argues that the useful question about any technology is not only what it does, but who it is for and who it is done to. His central image is the centaur, a person helped by a machine, and its opposite, the reverse centaur: a person drafted in to serve a machine at the machine's pace, like the delivery driver with no time for breaks or the programmer asked to check more code than anyone could. He reads much of the AI hype as a story told to investors to keep big tech firms priced as growth companies, and warns that the money behind it looks like a bubble. He is not against AI itself, says it helps in some of his own work, and asks what useful tools should be left standing when the bubble goes.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Ask who a technology is for and who it is done to, not only what it does.

Doctorow says he took this habit from science fiction, where the interesting part of a gadget is the society around it. A feature can be the same code in two workplaces and mean opposite things, depending on who controls it and who carries the cost. The two questions run through every chapter.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A centaur rides the machine. A reverse centaur is ridden by it.

In automation theory a centaur is a person with a machine as an assistant. Doctorow contrasts the lane-drift warning in his own car, which he can turn off, with an Amazon delivery driver juggling several apps and scored by software. Same kind of technology, but only one of them is in charge.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The human in the loop is often there to take the blame.

Doctorow borrows the idea of an accountability sink from the writer Dan Davies. A person signs off on the machine's output at a speed no one could check properly, and when the machine misses something, the person is the one held responsible. His example is a radiologist reviewing scans an AI has already read.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Much of the AI pitch is written for investors, not for users.

Markets pay more for a company they see as growing than for a mature one that is merely profitable. A big tech firm whose main markets are full needs a new growth story to keep that premium. Doctorow reads the AI boom, like the earlier metaverse push, as that story.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

An AI may not be able to do your job, but a sales pitch can still convince your boss it can.

The risk to workers is not only what the software can do. It is what managers are told it can do. Doctorow points to firms that swapped people for chatbots or automation and then had to deal with the results.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The numbers behind the boom only add up if AI replaces well-paid work.

The sums invested are so large that cheap help with small tasks cannot pay them back. So the pitch aims at high-wage jobs, such as radiologists and software developers. Doctorow argues that this is mostly a fantasy, but one that can still reshape those jobs for the worse.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Warnings that AI could end the world can work as advertising.

If a product is powerful enough to be dangerous, it must be powerful enough to be worth buying. Doctorow suggests that doom talk helps cast AI firms as the disruptors who will capture the future, which is what investors want to hear.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Bubbles burst, and they leave things behind.

Doctorow notes how few AI products make money and how much is being spent on data centres, and compares the moment to the dot-com bubble. When that bubble popped, people kept useful things it had paid for. The question he asks is what we want to be left with this time.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The fight is over who holds the reins, not over the machine.

Doctorow is neither an AI hater nor someone who thinks its takeover is inevitable. He describes uses that help, including in his own work. His case is that the same tool can lift a worker or grind one down, and that the difference comes from who decides how it is used.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] List the machines you work with
- [ ] Ask who answers for its mistakes
- [ ] Find out what it records about you
- [ ] Write a one-page use policy for yourself
- [ ] Compare notes with two coworkers

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask the two questions before you adopt anything
- ◯ Keep a Friday error log
- ◯ Do one task the long way

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

List the machines you work with

Write down every AI or automated tool you touch at work this week.

For each one, note who chose it, who sets its pace, and whether you can switch it off.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Ask who answers for its mistakes

Pick the tool you lean on most.

Ask your manager in writing who is accountable when it gets something wrong, and what you should do when you disagree with it.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Find out what it records about you

Ask what the tool logs about your work, who can see it and how long it is kept.

Write the answer down with the date.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Write a one-page use policy for yourself

List the tasks where AI helps you think and the tasks you will keep doing yourself, with one line on why.

Keep the page where you work.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Compare notes with two coworkers

Ask two colleagues how the same tool changed their pace and workload.

Notes from three people are harder to wave away than one complaint.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask the two questions before you adopt anything

Before you switch on a new AI feature, ask who it is for and who it is done to.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Keep a Friday error log

Each Friday, note the tool's mistakes you caught and how long fixing them took.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

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MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Do one task the long way

Once a week, do something the tool usually handles without it, so the skill stays yours.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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December 2026

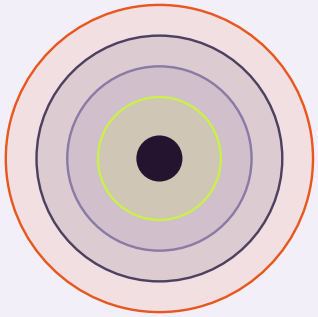
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



A good tool follows your lead. If you are the one keeping pace, ask who is riding whom.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER CORY DOCTOROW

Read it online, and vote on the take-aways: hourlife.com/books/the-reverse-centaurs-guide-to-life-after-ai

The Reverse Centaur's Guide to Life After AI: How to Think About Artificial Intelligence—Before It's Too Late · The reader's edition

Made November 6, 2026 · HourLife, hourlife.com