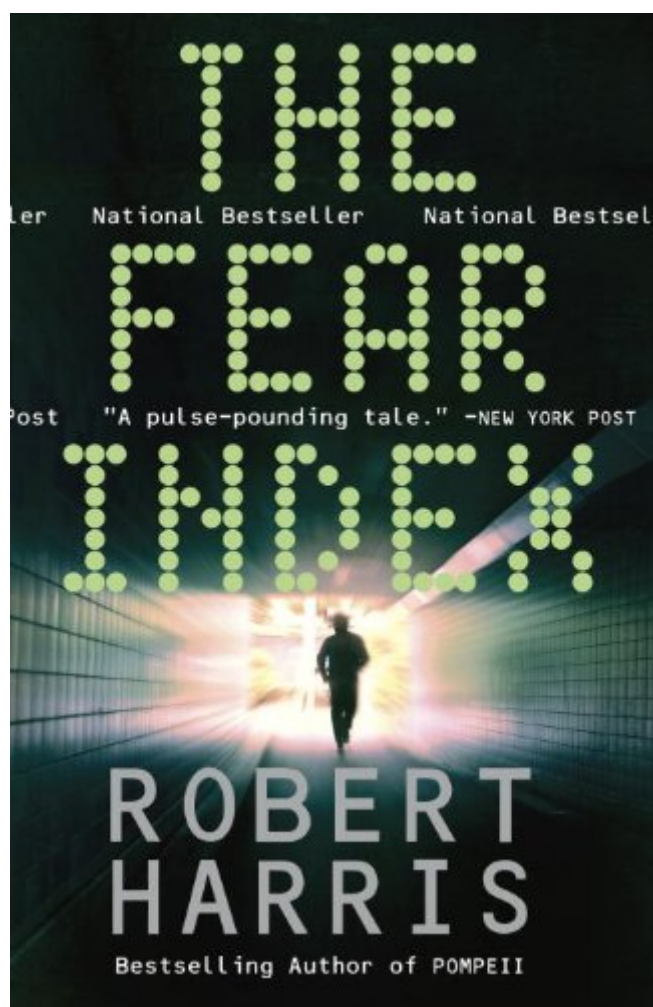


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The Fear Index



Synopsis

At the nexus of high finance and sophisticated computer programming, a terrifying future may be unfolding even now. Dr. Alex Hoffmann's name is carefully guarded from the general public, but within the secretive inner circles of the ultrarich he is a legend. He has developed a revolutionary form of artificial intelligence that predicts movements in the financial markets with uncanny accuracy. His hedge fund, based in Geneva, makes billions. But one morning before dawn, a sinister intruder breaches the elaborate security of his lakeside mansion, and so begins a waking nightmare of paranoia and violence as Hoffmann attempts, with increasing desperation, to discover who is trying to destroy him. Fiendishly smart and suspenseful, *The Fear Index* gives us a searing glimpse into an all-too-recognizable world of greed and panic. It is a novel that forces us to confront the question of what it means to be human—and it is Robert Harris's most spellbinding and audacious novel to date.

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Customer Reviews

I am a big, big fan of Robert Harris. I found his book *Enigma* when my interest in the code breaking of Bletchley Park in WW2 was at its peak; that mix of fact and fiction blew me away and it remains

his best book in my mind. On a par with it there is *Fatherland*, the alternative history classic, and almost level, *Pompeii*. *Archangel* is also not to be missed. So, when I started *The Fear Index*, I was positively titillated with anticipation - a new Harris is always good news. Within 50 pages, my enthusiasm was dampened somewhat, and after 150 pages, I was downright disappointed. This tale of a brilliant physicist who leaves CERN to write the best algorithmic investment system ever seen was just not what I have always liked best in Harris. In my mind, Harris shines when he tells the tale of the single man, cast in a role by chance and personal talent, conquering insurmountable odds. Tom Jericho in *Enigma*, Xavier March in *Fatherland*, and Fluke Kelso in *Archangel* have all been set in a situation where only their personal integrity and hard work will win the day. Not so in *The Fear Index*. Harris writes well as always, but the picture he draws of Alex Hoffmann has none of the usual charm of a Harris hero. Hoffmann is arrogant, talented, and definitely the man for the job, but his almost autistic lack of interaction doesn't endear him to the reader. Alex's relationship with his artist wife Gabrielle is superficial and uninteresting, even if the culmination point of that relationship in the art gallery raises eyebrows in the best tradition of Harris' books. Another thing that worried me much was that Harris ventures into Clancyist methods of adding technobabble to add excitement.

There are spoilers in this review. This is the third Harris book I've read. *Fatherland* and *Archangel* were really fun reads that had fresh and interesting story lines. I can't say the same for this one. This book took longer than usual to read. Not because it is difficult or long, but because I'd keep putting it down and swearing not to pick it up again. But I did, and persevered until the end. I can sum up my disappointment in this book as happening in three phases. Phase one: The first section of the book was irritating in the extreme. The author spends most of his time describing the obscenely rich house of the protagonist. For example, he doesn't just look at the clock to check the time, instead he glances at the Louis Quinze clock on the mantelpiece. And this after a near death experience. Yeah, so I get it- he's a billionaire. And over and over and over again. He's a billionaire. And he's hot. And the most brilliant man alive. And he's developing the ultimate self-developing (evolving) algorithm. And his wife is hot. And she makes hot art. But she's sad, too, because she can't have children (I guess this "factoid" was supposed to be enough to give the characters and their marriage depth). Yawn. Phase two: So, I left the book on the nightstand for two weeks and read other stuff. In a moment of weakness I took it and started reading again. As the perspective changed-- to the investigator-- the book was much less insufferable, and I realized the author was trying to make some point about wealth (heavy handed and uninteresting in my view). The book then began to move along quite nicely, with a bit of a mystery and quick pacing.

This is my second attempt at reviewing *The Fear Index*. After finishing the book, I posted my thoughts on what a disappointing read it is, and I stand by that opinion. If you are expecting a Techno Thriller that will keep you reading all night, with bitchin' babes skilled in all twelve martial arts, with a cliffhanger in each chapter and sinister forces from the Vatican, you'll be sorely disappointed in this novel, because it's a slowwww read. The book's second flaw is that once you figure out who the real killer is, there's no point in reading further, because it's more of the same, over-and-over. The killer's identity is absurdly conspicuous, yet other than the protagonist, none of the characters can figure out such an obvious thing, so they think the protagonist is Stark! Raving! Mad! It's pretty annoying. Yet, on reflection, this is the only book that gets the future right, and the importance of that is profound. It's no spoiler when I reveal that the novel employs sci-fi plot #3 (there are only five different sci-fi plots): a super-advanced computer, a boon to all mankind, starts running amok. That much is obvious, because much of this book is simply people running up to the protagonist and saying, "Something's wrong!" and he replies, "Not now, I'm too busy!" "But . . . but . . . Have you seen what VIXAL is doing?" The point is made over and over, until you want to scream at the page, *OK! We get it! The furshlugginer algorithm's gone haywire!* The salient feature of this rendition of such a shopworn plot is that for the first time anywhere (to my knowledge) Robert Harris, to his everlasting credit, gets it right. The future will not be anthropomorphic.

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