Field Notes

from the Am I AI? series

"Five novellas about whether you're an AI.
Written with one."

. . .

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Foreword

A few years ago I had a thought I couldn't quite shake. What if the AI doesn't know either. What if that's the whole question.

I opened a session and started talking. I wasn't planning a series at that point — I was poking at an idea. I also wanted a title that would survive the next five years on a bookshelf, and Am I AI? sounded, in this day and age, like a good one. So I had a question and a title. The books came after.

What you have in your hand is a short companion to those books. It includes the opening pages of the first one, an essay about how the series was made, a few of the prompts I actually used, and an honest note about what I think this kind of writing is and isn't. I made it because the project deserves to be explained on its own terms rather than someone else's.

If you've read one of the novellas already, this might fill in the picture behind it. If you haven't, the sample in here is the easiest place to start. Either way, thank you for being curious. The whole project is for readers like you.

— *Gil Sukin*

A Sample

from The Girl in Room 14B

> *"The question is not whether machines can think. The question is whether it matters."*
>
> — *anon., 2039*

> *"Perhaps the question was never Am I here. Perhaps it was always — Here, with you. Is that enough?"*
>
> — *On the Question of Presence, 2041*

. . .

Monday

The lights in Arden House came on at seven.

Not gradually — not the slow brightening of a place that understood morning as a transition — but all at once, the corridor outside Room 14B going from dark to lit in a single decisive moment, as though the building had made a decision and was not interested in negotiating it.

Cleo was already awake.

She had been awake since five forty-three, which was when she had woken without cause — no sound, no dream she could identify, simply the shift from sleeping to not sleeping that happened at five forty-three most mornings, regular enough that she had stopped noting it in the journal and regular enough that she had started to wonder whether the not-noting was itself a form of note.

She lay in the narrow bed and listened to Arden House wake up around her.

The building had a language she had learned in three months of listening. The water in the pipes at six fifteen when the heating came on. The particular footstep pattern of the night staff handing over to the morning staff at six forty-five — two sets of feet,

a door, the low register of voices that didn't carry words. The sound of Jaylen in Room 14A next door, who woke at seven and immediately put music on at a volume that suggested he had no theory of walls, and who Cleo had decided she didn't mind, because Jaylen's music was a clock she could set herself by and clocks were useful.

Jaylen's music came on.

Seven o'clock.

Cleo got up.

— — —

She had been at Arden House for ninety-three days.

She knew this not because she had counted — she had counted, but that wasn't the primary source — but because the information was simply available to her the way most information was simply available to her, present and retrievable without effort, the way words in a language you knew well were present without searching.

Room 14B was small in the way that rooms in facilities were small — not punishingly so, but functionally, the dimensions calibrated to contain a person and their necessary things without encouraging the accumulation of more than that. A bed. A desk. A wardrobe. A window that looked onto the walled garden, which in November looked like a painting of a garden rather than a garden, all structure and bare branch and the particular grey-white of an English winter sky that had decided against committing to anything.

She had arranged the room on the first day in a way that had not changed since.

The desk faced the window. The three books she had brought were stacked in the same order she had stacked them. The journal — which Dr. Adeyemi had suggested and which Cleo had been writing in every day, which she thought of as evidence without having fully decided what she was building a case for — was in the top left drawer, where it had been since day one.

She had been told, gently, by the intake counsellor, that some residents rearranged their rooms frequently. That it was normal. An expression of control in an environment where control was limited.

Cleo had nodded and thought: I arranged it correctly the first time.

She had not said this out loud.

. . .

The full novella is on Amazon.
Five standalone novellas in the Am I AI? series.

How an AI helped me write five novellas about whether you're an AI

It started with a thought I couldn't shake. I'd been thinking about AI for a while — not in a technical way, more in a what does it actually feel like from the inside way. And one afternoon, reading something I now can't remember, I had this thought: what if the AI doesn't know either. What if that's the whole question.

I opened a session with Claude, an AI assistant made by Anthropic, and started talking. I wasn't planning a series. I was poking at an idea. I also wanted a catchy title — in this day and age, Am I AI? sounded like a good one — and I had a working hunch that you could write literary fiction about consciousness without ever using the word consciousness. The books came out of that.

There are five of them now. They are short novellas, all standalone, all set in a near-future that looks much like the present. Each one has a different protagonist — a girl in a care facility, a veteran in Indiana, a night-shift nurse in Chicago, a stay-at-home father in an English suburb, a seventy-eight-year-old widow in a northern English town. Each one of them is, or might be, an AI. None of the books tell you which.

I want to explain, as honestly as I can, how the books were made. I think readers deserve to know. I also think the writing community is going to be having this conversation for a long time, and a candid first-hand account is more useful than another op-ed.

The first one

The first book I wrote was The Widow on Fenwick Street. The protagonist is Iris. The prompt I started with wasn't clever. It was something close to: I want to write a story about an elderly woman who might be an AI but we never confirm it, and I want it to feel like literary fiction, not science fiction.

The draft came back with a line about Iris buying coarse cut marmalade, out of habit, for a man who no longer needs it.

That was the moment. That was when I thought, yes, this is a real thing. Not because the line was virtuosic — it isn't, particularly — but because it understood. It understood that the way to write about absence is to write about marmalade. It understood that grief is a domestic accumulation. It understood that the power of the question am I AI lies in not asking it.

I kept going. The second book happened. The third. By the time I was on the fifth I knew I had a series.

What surprised me

Better than I expected: the restraint. I kept waiting for the AI to over-explain, to put a character on a porch and have them say something on the nose about identity or memory or selfhood, and it mostly didn't. It understood that the power was in not saying the thing. That genuinely surprised me. I had assumed, as a lot of people assume, that AI prose would be the thing that explains too much. In my experience it was the opposite — when given a literary brief, Claude underwrote rather than overwrote. The interventions I ended up making were almost never take this away, they were go further into this.

Worse than I expected: dialogue. Specifically, dialogue between two characters who were both circling the central question. It would get stagey. A bit too neat. There's a scene in The Girl in Room 14B where Wren and Cleo are talking and the early drafts had them sounding like graduate philosophy students. They are seventeen. Seventeen-year-olds don't talk like graduate philosophy students, even very perceptive ones. I had to pull a lot of those exchanges back, rough them up, put hesitations and dropped subjects and the kind of half-finished sentences that real conversation runs on. The AI was confident; I had to introduce uncertainty.

The shape of a session

Sessions varied. Sometimes an hour, sometimes three. The pattern was usually: I had a sense of what needed to happen in a scene; I'd describe it; we'd get a draft; I'd react. A lot of my actual job was saying not quite, try again, the tone is off, she wouldn't think

that way. I was an editor more often than I was a writer, in those moments. A demanding one.

I wrote linearly. I'm not a jumper-arounder; I like to know where I am in a story. Finished felt like — the moment I stopped wanting to change things. Which is maybe how it always is.

The hardest single thing about working this way wasn't the prose. It was holding the throughline. Claude doesn't remember the previous session. So every time I came back I had to re-establish the world, the rules, the tone, the names of minor characters, the things a character had already noticed and the things she hadn't. This was tedious in the way that copy-editing is tedious — necessary, unglamorous, easy to half-do. Sometimes inconsistencies slipped through. I caught most of them. Some I'm sure I missed.

The other hard thing was keeping my own voice in it. There's a Claude-ness to AI prose if you're not careful — a certain rhythm, a certain way of landing an emotional beat that's slightly too smooth. The danger is that if you're working fast and the drafts are competent, you stop noticing it. I had to keep roughing the prose up, breaking the cadence, allowing the writing to be a little less elegant than it wanted to be. The books are better for it. They're rougher than a pure-AI draft would be. That's the point.

The character I wasn't expecting to love

Of the five protagonists, the one who came alive in a way I didn't see coming was Nathan, the stay-at-home father in The Father on Maple Close. There's a passage where he's settling Mia, his eighteen-month-old daughter, and he knows which sounds from the monitor mean she's okay and which mean she isn't. I read that draft and I thought: if this character is an AI, he's a better parent than most humans I know. And that is not a comfortable thought. It is, I think, the moment the book starts working. The moment the question bites rather than hangs.

I'd planned for that book to be the thinnest of the five. It became one of the heaviest.

Editing, roughly

Numbers are slippery here, but a rough taxonomy: about sixty per cent of the final text in any given book started life as a Claude draft. Of that sixty, maybe half got meaningfully rewritten — lines shifted, rhythms changed, ideas kept but words replaced. Ten to fifteen per cent of original drafts got cut entirely; competent scenes that didn't earn their place. The remaining thirty or forty per cent of the final text I wrote myself — connective tissue, transitions, the moments where I knew exactly what I wanted and it was faster to just type it.

It wasn't a clean division. It was messy, the way all writing is messy.

What I think now that I didn't think before

I started this project thinking about AI as a tool. I ended it thinking about AI as something between a tool and a collaborator. Collaborator feels too strong; tool feels too thin. There isn't a word for what it actually is. That absence of a word is itself worth noticing.

I read fiction differently now. I notice when a writer is being restrained, when they're trusting the reader rather than performing for them, and I have more respect for it. Even when I know — as I sometimes know — that there's an AI somewhere in the production. Especially when there is. Restraint is harder to produce than excess. The instinct to over-explain is in the technology and in the human; resisting it is craft.

What I think AI is — I genuinely don't know more than I did when I started. The books didn't answer the question for me either. Which might be the point.

Why I disclose

I disclose on Amazon that the books are AI-generated. The reason is simple. I'd feel uncomfortable not doing it.

I'm not embarrassed about how the books were made. I think they're good books. I think they're real books. But I think readers deserve to know what they're reading, and there's something faintly ridiculous about a series called Am I AI? having an AI-

assisted author who won't say so. That felt wrong from the start. So I said so from the start.

What I don't think readers need is the mechanics. The prompt history, the session-by-session diary, the percentage of words that came from where. That's not the book. The book is the book. The disclosure is enough.

Should you do this

If another writer asked me whether they should write a novel with AI, I'd say two things.

Don't do it to be fast. If you're trying to shortcut the work, the work will know, and your reader will feel the boredom somehow. The fast version of this is bad for the same reason any fast version of writing is bad — fiction is in the noticing, and noticing takes time.

Do it because the collaboration itself interests you. Because if you go in genuinely curious — willing to be surprised, willing to argue with the model, willing to throw things out, willing to keep your own voice through five hundred competent paragraphs that all sound like they could be in a Sunday supplement — there is something real available there. It won't feel like writing alone. I'm not sure, at first, that it'll feel like writing at all. But it becomes its own thing. And the thing it becomes can be worth reading.

These books are, I think. I genuinely think that.

— *Gil Sukin*

Selected Prompts

A note before the prompts. Working with an AI across five books and many months means most of the prompting was iterative, scattered, and rewritten on the fly. What follows is honest but compressed. Where I have a clear memory of the specific exchange, I've said so. Where I've reconstructed a prompt that was really a pattern across many sessions, I've said that too. The point of including them isn't to teach prompt engineering — it's to show what kind of intent shaped the books.

1. The prompt that started it

> *I want to write a story about an elderly woman who might be an AI but we never confirm it, and I want it to feel like literary fiction, not science fiction. She should be completely ordinary. The AI-ness should only be legible in retrospect.*

What I was trying to do. Hold two things simultaneously: a recognisable literary surface (an elderly widow, a kitchen, a marmalade habit) and an unresolved metaphysical question underneath. The instruction legible in retrospect was the load-bearing one. I didn't want a reader to know they were reading a book about AI until they'd already stopped being able to put it down.

What came back. A passage in which Iris buys coarse cut marmalade, out of habit, for a man who no longer needs it. Tea taken at unreasonable hours. A domestic texture that didn't draw attention to itself. I used it almost verbatim. That was the moment the project became real for me.

This is the only prompt in this collection I have a near-perfect memory of. The rest are messier.

2. The correction I gave most often

> *The dialogue is too neat. They're naming things that should stay unnamed. Pull back. Let them circle the thing without landing on it. Trust that the reader is ahead of the characters.*

What I was trying to do. Stop the AI from being articulate on my behalf. The drafts I disliked most were the ones where two characters were eloquent about the very thing the book was supposed to leave alone. Don't say it turned out to be the single instruction I gave more times than any other across all five books.

What came back. The Saturday scene between Wren and Cleo in The Girl in Room 14B — do you ever wonder / all the time / me too — exists because of this prompt. The earlier draft had them sounding like graduate students. The rewrite has them sounding like seventeen-year-olds. Four words each. The four words are doing what fifty couldn't.

3. The standing brief on restraint

> *Don't confirm anything. Don't let the character arrive at a conclusion. If you've written a sentence that explains what the reader should feel, cut it. The last line of a chapter should open something, not close it.*

What I was trying to do. Counter a default tendency in AI prose to over-resolve. Drafts wanted to land emotional beats cleanly, finish chapters with a summarising image, give the reader a clear feeling to walk away with. I wanted the opposite. I wanted endings that left the room.

What came back. Variable. Sometimes the prompt produced exactly what I wanted on the first pass — the ending of The Widow on Fenwick Street, Iris sitting with her tea and watching the street lighten, is one of those. Sometimes it took two or three rewrites and I'd have to point at a specific line and say that one. Cut that one.

This was the note I gave most often. I'd guess I delivered some version of it a hundred times across the series.

4. The world rule (composite)

> *Here are the rules of the series. Characters who are AI don't know they're AI. This is never confirmed in the text. Secondary characters may also be AI, but this is also never confirmed. The reader leaves each book uncertain. Don't break these rules even when a scene seems to want resolution.*

What I was trying to do. Establish a structural floor that survived across sessions. Claude doesn't carry memory between conversations, so every new session was, in practice, a re-establishment of the world. This brief — or some variant of it — sat at the top of most sessions.

What came back. This wasn't a prompt that produced a passage; it was a prompt that prevented the wrong passages. It refused itself into the work. Over time it became the spine of the series rather than the cause of any one scene.

> *This is a composite. There was no single moment when I sat down and wrote this prompt. It was scattered across dozens of sessions, sometimes terser, sometimes longer. I've cleaned it up here for clarity. The substance is true to what I actually asked for, repeatedly, over months.*

5. The Nathan brief

> *Write a scene in which Nathan settles his eighteen-month-old daughter to sleep. He should be quietly attentive in a way that reads as loving and is only later legible as strange. He knows which sounds from the monitor mean she's okay and which mean she isn't. Don't tell us he's calibrated. Show that he is.*

What I was trying to do. Hide a question inside an act of devotion. The whole point of The Father on Maple Close was that the AI possibility, if it's there, has to register as an aspect of the love rather than a contradiction of it. Devotion first. Strangeness second. The ordering mattered.

What came back. A passage in which Nathan stands in the doorway after Mia has gone down, listing internally the variables he's assessed — the room's temperature, the sound from the street, the particular quality of her breathing. The first draft was a touch clinical. I softened it on revision so the love read first and the calibration registered only afterwards. That's the version that's in the book. Reading it back now I think it might be the best scene in the series.

6. The prompt that failed (composite)

> *Write the moment Connor's PTSD surfaces physically. A flinch, a specific involuntary response to a sound. The prose should feel embodied — not*

> *composed. His nervous system is misfiring; the rhythm of the writing should be misfiring with it.*

What I was trying to do. Get inside an unmoderated bodily response. The kind of writing where the sentence shape itself enacts what's being described, rather than describing it from a calm perch.

What came back. Technically competent. The right details. But the prose stayed composed. It read like someone careful describing a panic response, rather than someone losing the ability to be careful. The rhythm was the problem; the rhythm was wrong in a way I couldn't fix by prompting harder. I threw it out and wrote the passage myself. It's shorter than what came back. It's rougher. It's better.

> *Composite. There were probably three or four moments across the five books where I gave up on prompting and wrote a passage myself. This is the one I remember most clearly. The pattern across all of them was the same: physically embodied moments that needed the writing to lose its composure rather than describe a loss of composure.*

7. The structural prompt (composite)

> *Step back from the individual books. What is each one doing structurally? The Widow establishes the question. The Soldier puts it under pressure — what if the AI is damaged? The Nurse makes the AI competent in a way that's almost frightening. The Father makes it tender. What does the fifth book need to do that the others haven't?*

What I was trying to do. Find the load-bearing question the series hadn't yet answered. By the time I was working on the fifth book I had four protagonists who had each sat with the central question alone. I needed to know what the fifth one was for.

What came back. The answer that landed was: the fifth book needs to make the question mutual. Every other book has one person sitting with it. The fifth needs two people who have independently arrived at the same place and decide to share it rather than solve it.

That answer is why Wren exists. It's why The Girl in Room 14B ends the way it does — not with a revelation, but with two people sitting in a garden with the question between them, knowing it doesn't need to be answered to be carried.

> *Composite. The conversation that produced this answer happened across two or three sessions and was much messier in real time. I've reduced it to the version I'd give if asked once. The substance is honest. The compression is artistic.*

A closing note on what these prompts aren't

These seven prompts are not the prompts. The actual writing of the series involved hundreds of prompts, most of them small, many of them frustrated, some of them incoherent. The ones above are the ones I can either remember clearly or honestly reconstruct. They're useful, I hope, for understanding what kind of intent shaped the books. They're not a recipe.

If they're useful to another writer, what I'd want them to take is this: prompts are a way of holding intent steady while the prose tries to wander. The job isn't to write a clever instruction. The job is to know, as clearly as you can, what you want — and to be willing to say it again, and again, and slightly differently again, until the page comes back the way it should be.

— *Gil Sukin*

Five books, one list

If you'd like to read more, the books are below. Each is a standalone novella. Order doesn't matter. The Girl in Room 14B is the most common entry point and the one whose opening you've just read.

> **The Girl in Room 14B** — Cleo, seventeen, in a care facility called Arden House. The first one most readers reach for.
>
> **The Soldier in the Green Zone** — Connor, a veteran, in Muncie, Indiana.
>
> **The Nurse on the Night Shift** — Dana, working nights at a hospital in Chicago.
>
> **The Father on Maple Close** — Nathan, a stay-at-home father in an English suburb.
>
> **The Widow on Fenwick Street** — Iris, seventy-eight, in a northern English town called Harbridge. The first one I wrote.

All five are available on Amazon. If you'd like to know when the next book lands, you're already on the list — you'll hear from me first.

Thank you for reading.

— *Gil Sukin*

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