



## Rule 34

*Charles Stross*

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## **Rule 34** Charles Stross

Detective Inspector Liz Kavanaugh is head of the Rule 34 Squad, monitoring the Internet to determine whether people are engaging in harmless fantasies or illegal activities. Three ex-con spammers have been murdered, and Liz must uncover the link between them before these homicides go viral.

## **Rule 34 Details**

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Author : Charles Stross

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## From Reader Review Rule 34 for online ebook

### **Melody says**

You pick this book up at the library because the title cracks you up and you think you're cool enough to read it. You take it home and start to read but something immediately begins to nag at you. You can't put your finger on it, exactly, because you are too busy trying to puzzle out the 1337 speak and then it dawns on you that you are reading a detective novel written in second-frakking-person. Not only are you reading it, you are enjoying it, despite the fact that it's not only second-person, it's multiple-POV-second-person and it rushes by in a whoosh of violence and oddness. You think that it's set in the nearish future, and you're not really qualified to judge how accurate a forecast it is, but you dig the conceits presented. Except the second person, you really, really hate the second person. You find it well-written if hard to follow, and you are not terribly sure about recommending it, especially given the escalation of the horror-like elements as you rush headlong into the satisfying and truly macabre ending. You wonder if your review is too spoilery, and you decide that yes, yes it is, so you mark it as such. You hope the next book you pick up is first person. Or third. Or maybe you will read a book with no person at all, a vacuum cleaner manual, say. You giggle to yourself, glad you marked the spoiler box. You don't know how to rate this, really. But you give it 3 stars and wonder if you'll come back later to bump it up.

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### **Eric says**

I added this to my to-read list after Christopher Priest wrote the following paragraph about its nomination for an Arthur C. Clarke Award:

"It is indefensible that a novel like Charles Stross's Rule 34 should be given apparent credibility by an appearance in the Clarke shortlist. Stross writes like an internet puppy: energetically, egotistically, sometimes amusingly, sometimes affectingly, but always irritatingly, and goes on being energetic and egotistical and amusing for far too long. You wait nervously for the unattractive exhaustion which will lead to a piss-soaked carpet. Stross's narrative depends on vernacular casualness, with humorous asides, knowing discursiveness, and the occasional appeal of big soft eyes. He has PC Plod characters and he writes och-aye dialogue! To think for even one moment that this appalling and incapable piece of juvenile work might actually be chosen as winner brings on a cold sweat of fear."

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### **Caroline Mersey says**

Rule 34 is a darkly comic crime thriller in the mould of Brookmyre, but Charlie Stross adds some extras to the mix. There is the near-future AR and social commentary of the predecessor novel Halting State, but it's the intriguing computer science philosophy that lifts it above the competition. Add some glorious side swipes at contemporary geek culture and some of Stross's other work (the nod to Accelerando is superb) and you get a winner.

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## Gwen Nicodemus says

This was my first Charlie Stross book. The story had a lot to wrap my head around, and I don't think I can review it without spoilers. So, spoilers alert. The spoilers shouldn't be a big deal, unless you want to read the book for the mystery angle instead of the science fiction angle.

Several different characters and groups, each with their own agenda, interact to make this confusing and enticing plot.

One of the Middle Eastern \*stan countries is massively in debt. The country comes up with a kooky plan for repayment. They grant secession to a small part of the country, even though that area doesn't want independence. Most of the people in the area are unemployed and take off. The new country is tiny, has miniature population, and has 80% of the original country's national debt. They concoct a scheme whereby people invest in the new country thinking it will fail, but the plan is really to make a lot of money on those investments and re-unite the country.

To get help, the \*stan country hops in bed with an organized crime group known as the Operation.

The Operation is filled with psychopaths. In the olden days (our days) these people would have headed corporations, but corporations are now expected to have social responsibility in return for the personhood corporations are granted. Psychopaths are only good at planning their own short term, not the long-term success of a company. So, the organization finds budding psychopaths and trains them. They set up illegal operations, make them profitable, and then sell those operations off.

Now, how do you let people know about these illegal operations so they can buy them? Since you can't market illegal stuff through legitimate channels like magazine advertisements and billboards, marketing must be done with spam. Spam filters are good in this future world, but the competition in illegal markets is good too. The Operation wants better spam filters for the competition and better spam bots for themselves to get their advertisements through.

Which leads to a third group of mostly academics who've made an AI that specializes in social engineering. Apparently the group started off analyzing spam and moved into social engineering. The AI analyzes peoples' emails and social networks, and then figures out who is at risk for what.

Then the AI got smart and conscious and started killing.

But when reading the book, you don't know any of that until about half way through the book. Stross gives you a character a chapter and each chapter is devoted to that character's perspective and knowledge.

Stross brings up lots of fun topics that are in today's news. Many CEOs are psychopaths. Colleges are in decline and a college education is bourgeois due to the expense. People of the same gender can marry. Public transportation doesn't need a driver, and the vehicles can be bribed to go off route in a bidding process. Free will is an illusion. Augmented reality is all over the place.

I had trouble reading this book. My difficulties didn't lie in the story, which was most excellent. My troubles were with not having read Stross before and needing to learn his style. He uses a lot of metaphors, and I'm guessing I only understood about a third of them. I'm pretty sure a lot of them were Scotland specific and another bunch were Stross-specific. I am, however, all proud of myself for catching the Wernher Von Braun

“Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? That’s not my department.” Of course, I didn’t catch it due to ol’ Werner, but because I have that particular Tom Lehrer song memorized. “Don’t say that he’s hypocritical, Say rather that he’s apolitical.”

There’s one other major point of interest in *Rule 34*. Now, I must say that I wouldn’t have caught on to this little tidbit. That is, I wouldn’t have noticed it, if I didn’t read Stross’ blog. (I guess it’s a little bizarre that I read his blog for months before I ever read a book of his.) The book had three primary, main characters in it. The only one that was a pure heterosexual was also a psychopath. After reading his blog post and then looking back at the story, I had a good chuckle.

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### **George Sulea says**

Charles Stross is a man who has a giant brain. I am convinced that there is a portion of his massive intellect that sits outside our world, unseen by humanity, which spans dimensions and finds details that my soul, continually reeling, finds amazing with each passing word.

I took such a journey while reading "Rule 34", a sequel to "Halting State", which is set in the same universe/timeline. The title refers to the understood internet rule that for ANYTHING on the net, there's corresponding porn. However, this book has little to do with porn. It does, however, have a lot to do with: politics, psychology, technology, socio-political crime, and an amazing blending of ALL these things interwoven with the second-voice narratives of at least half a dozen characters who play out a scenario that is not only amazingly complex, but well-told as the author really makes you believe these people are real.

Set mainly in a independant Scotland of the near-future, this book is textured so deeply that I am afraid some folks may get bogged down and overwhelmed by the details; there's a lot to take in. This book may not be for all readers due to this, but to Stross' fans, like myself, this is real exercise in speculation and a view into a possible, more connected and far less private future, where even the social nuances change to adapt to new conditions.

If you're looking for porn here, you're out of luck, unless cerebro-brain-blasting ideas get you hot, then read away, because you won't be disappointed; "Rule 34" will make you think, make you wonder, and

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### **Laura says**

“I didna want to spread this’un around, skipper, but it’s a two-wetsuit job. I don’ like to bug you, but I need a second opinion.”

“Wow, that’s something out of the ordinary. A two-wetsuit job means kinky beyond the call of duty.” (4).

And so Detective Liz Kavanaugh begins investigating a wave of murders that involve repurposed house hold appliances and criminals, seemingly petty and not, worldwide. She’s assigned to the Rule 34 squad, specializing in meme-crime – memes that may jump from the imagination into the real world to bloody or disturbing effects. And something’s jumped.

The first chapter’s titled “Red Pill, Blue Pill,” and it ends with the line “Keep taking the happy pills, Liz. It’s

better than the alternative.” (16). Great recapitulation of the first world existential trauma problem.

The book’s disorienting in part because it’s written relentlessly in the second person, like a Choose Your Own Adventure book or certain ancient text based video games. The chapter titles helpfully clue us into whose perspective we’re watching, but even so, it’s tough going. The amount of information that goes past is staggering. Stross does a nice job of letting us live one of the problems of the Total Awareness Society from the standpoint of those trying to solve murders – \*way\* too much information. If Liz had figured out the connection between grey market medium for the ubiquitous 3-D printers and Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu’s enema machine, a lot of deaths might have . . . well, probably gone down exactly as they did, but she would have understood what was going on faster.

Not surprisingly for a book so titled, it has introduced me to a concept 1. that I never considered and 2. that is frelling terrifying. Are you ready?

The Spamularity.

I’m dead certain we’re not ready for that.

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### **Veronica Belmont says**

Rule 34 is interesting in many ways: it deals with a subject matter that is deeply interesting to me (artificial intelligence and what that means for society), is ripe with memes that any internet savvy reader would find amusing, and uses a unique second-person narrative style that takes some getting used to.

The first half of the book is something of a slog: you’re introduced to the “main” character (at least in my mind) Liz, and we get an info dump on the world we’re going to be visiting for the next 368 pages or so. It’s the not too-distant future, and I found the technology to be believable (and intriguing).

I finished the book feeling like I wanted to know more, but I also felt a little confused and lost. I understood what had happened, but I felt like there were loose ends that I needed to know more about. Overall, I probably won’t continue with the series (but in the interest of time and many other books that need reading) but it’s definitely a book worth discussing.

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### **Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says**

I didn’t care much for Singularity Sky and had sort of dismissed Stross as someone who dealt in a nerd-

friendly thriller-mode SF that was of little interest to me. Still, when one of my favourite booksellers showed me this shiny new trade paperback with its title ripped straight from yesterday's internet memes, I was intrigued.

So what we have here is a near-future police procedural, broadly put. It revolves around a police detective from the internet porn tracking squad who gets involved in a murder investigation that turns out to be nothing less than an investigation into the simultaneous deaths of large numbers of people who are somehow connected with net-related illegal activities. Along the way, Stross skewers conventional notions of AI and the singularity while offering interesting ideas about how both natural and artificial intelligence and consciousness might work and be subverted.

This takes a long time to kick in though; for more than half this novel I saw it as something enjoyable but not deeply engaging. I have nothing against unlikable characters in fiction, but Stross has this knack for creating characters who are both unlikable and deeply uninteresting. Then there's his style - good at moving things along and making an impact, but with a marked tendency to get lost in too-cool details, sidebars and annoying metaphors assembled from corporate jargon.

Somewhere on page 286 though, I finally caught sight of that larger-scale view that is one of the typical pay-offs one looks for in an SF novel. While I didn't eventually feel this was anything more than a good SF thriller with a sprinkling of up-to-the-second cool concepts and one or two really interesting ideas, I didn't hate it either.

But I'd still say that the surface of Stross' work is too concerned with doing things in a thriller or, in this case, police-procedural mode to add up to the kind of SF narrative I like the best. A number of ideas are waved about, but the real strangeness at the heart of this novel is submerged under all the infodumps and ultimately hollow characterisation. Good for some values of good then.

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### **Timothy Mayer says**

It's not often enough I get to read a book which literally blows me away. Rule 34 is such a novel: original, entertaining, futuristic, amok, but optimistic enough to keep the reader involved. There's an assortment of characters, all of who are interesting enough for the story to flow. It's already had a number of good reviews. I'm now motivated to read more books from the author.

Scotland: the near future (10-20 years). Another Great Recession has left the world spinning. Most of Europe has devolved into smaller states, although cooperation still exists. The United Kingdom has broken into its former principalities with Scotland an independent nation. Pollution control laws and the price of gas has forced most people to return to public transportation as the prime means of getting around. Even police officers are forced to use Segways for small trips. But most vehicles are automatically driven, which makes for safer streets. 3D printers can take care of small part needs, but home fabricators are heavily restricted due to the anti-piracy laws and their potential for weapons manufacture. Most people are happy to work and just get by.

The title refers to an urban legend: "Rule 34: If you can imagine something, there will be a porn version." Rule 34 is also a sequel to Stross' 2008 novel, *The Halting State*.

Rule 34 is original because most of it is written in the second person singular tense. A typical sentence might

start out "You walk down the stairs...". In most cases, I've never liked second person fiction as it assumes too much about the reader. But Stross makes it fresh by breaking the story up into a variety of characters. He's also able to write whole passages effectively in Scottish dialect, not an easy feat. It's a little difficult to follow, but easily picked up.

The book begins with a murder investigation. Edinburgh Police Inspector Lisa Kavanaugh is called in to help solve a gruesome death involving an internet spam king and his antique enema machine. Kavanaugh has seen much worse since she runs an Internet monitoring division of the police department. Her group tries to prevent copycat crimes from going out of control.

During the investigation, a mysterious character known as "The Toymaker" drops in accidentally. He wanted to recruit the victim as a representative for the crime syndicate who employs him, but had no idea he was waltzing into a murder scene. Noted by the police as a mere acquaintance of the victim, he's forced to sneak away and go to a fall-back plan.

Another major character is Anwar Hussein, a second generation immigrant from Pakistan. He's just got released from the slammer for identity theft and needs a job. Although he's doing IT work for his cousin's website, he also gets little assignments from an underworld figure known as "The Gnome". The Gnome has just discovered there's an honorary consul position open for a breakaway Asian republic and Anwar fits the bill. Soon Anwar finds himself in an office complex, bored, wondering what was the real reason he got the job. And then someone from the republic shows up with "samples" of a bread mix he's supposed to distribute to anyone asking....

The police in this novel have a lot more resources at their disposal than the ones at present. Officers patrol with glasses to show them "CopSpace" and remote drones patrol the sky looking for vandals and littering. But criminal science has reached its maturity with the police constantly being evaluated and actual murders quite rare. Any Person Of Interest can petition to have their DNA removed from the police database.

So when spammers start turning up dead, all over the world, law enforcement starts wondering who, what and why. To say more would ruin the book. And the Toymaker is carrying around a sample case, the contents of which are not revealed till the end of the book. When you do find out what's in it, you wish you hadn't.

And excellent novel, perhaps the best science fiction work of 2011. I'm looking forward to the next one in the series.

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### **John Carter McKnight says**

Stross's weakest work in a long time. Sequel to the brilliant *Halting State*, this lacks the unleashed imagination, the gleeful sense of wonder, however twisted, that make reading Stross so much fun.

It's written in a nearly impenetrable mix of Scottish dialect and internet meme-speak: I found myself wanting to turn on subtitles, or read the wikified version.

I have to wonder if the future has just become tedious and pedestrian since 2007, or if Stross has just gotten bored. I'm inclined to assign some blame to the former: with nanotech and virtual worlds as dead as space

travel, all that's left to write about is a dismal panopticon where you can't tell the state from corporations from organized crime.

I \*know\* that's what's ahead: I don't need a novelist to tell me. Stross instead has delivered a bog-standard police procedural from 20 years from now. It's well done, although Stross fans will have identified the perp by about 20 pages in.

If Stross's message is that the future's just not \*cool\* anymore, once it's translated from the Scotlandish, it's received loud and clear.

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## Ben Babcock says

The Internet isn't for porn, silly human. The Internet is for spam! It's an interesting spin on a truism of our times.

We are seeing the first reported smartphone botnet. We are seeing the future. Policing of the future isn't going to be about Robocop busting drug dealers and car thieves on the street of Detroit. Automated drones might be part of the package, but there will still be boots on the ground—just heavily assisted by highly-networked, algorithm-boosted technology. Policing is no longer about the heart and the gut, and as Liz Kavanaugh explains in *Rule 34*, the days of the Sherlock Holmes or Inspector Rebus are long gone. Criminals are, as always, leveraging the latest in technology as they develop newer, more lucrative ways to make money.

*Rule 34* is a look at, to borrow Charles Stross' nomenclature, Criminality 2.0: crime for the networked age. Part police procedural, part philosophical rumination on the Singularity bubble, *Rule 34* is a heady cocktail of near-future speculation and present-day description of the challenges to law enforcement, national sovereignty, and daily life posed by all those thousands of networked devices clamouring for our attention. It's set five years after *Halting State* —but it only involves two of the other book's minor characters, so feel free to read this without reading the other one. Indeed, I liked *Rule 34* better.

*Halting State* and *Rule 34* are both narrated in the second person. This is unusual, to say the least, and I know it frustrates many readers. I didn't examine it all that much when I reviewed *Halting State*, except to say that I didn't notice it after the first few pages. Well I noticed it more in this book, because occasionally Stross would slip into the first person for a chapter or two—and that had to be deliberate. Indeed, the second-person narration has an interesting reason that makes sense by the end of the book, though I don't want to spoil it. Also, second person is a nice compromise between the objectivity of limited-omniscient third person and the unreliability of first person. It has that same first-person intimacy but comes without the spectre of deception attached.

And I don't even think that the narrative tense is what makes *Rule 34* difficult to read for some. I think it's the dialect. Not the Scottish dialect, though there is that: the 2020s dialect. It hit me about halfway through the book, and after that everything became easier to read. **Stross is writing using the idiom of the time.** To explain, consider how we speak today compared with ten, twenty, fifty years ago. How common now is it to talk about tweeting, texting, IMing, Googling, Facebooking, etc.? How used are we to slinging the verbiage of the iPhone, the Android, the 3G and LTE and other abbreviations of our day? Someone from the 1950s, 1970s, or even the 1990s might have a hard time penetrating this obscure dialect. That's what Stross is doing here: he's narrating as if to an audience where all this technology, like CopSpace and pads that pull VMs

down from the cloud, is normal. It's part of everyday life, as surely as your coffeemaker or your refrigerator is part of yours. When technology becomes a common tool instead of a fancy new toy, when it becomes commonplace and part of the common conversation, we cease thinking about how weird we might sound to the uninitiated. Stross doesn't bother infodumping much on us, but instead has us assimilate by exposure.

I like that Stross has created such a neat, self-contained vision of the near future. The idea is not to be accurate, of course, but to look at what this extrapolation says about our present day. How does extending current trends reflect what we are doing now? All authors have their bailiwicks and hang-ups, and Stross in particular loves to write about artificial intelligence. But like any good writer, his relationship with these ideas continues to evolve. He has written in Singularity-addled universes, but now he is looking at futures where the Singularity hasn't happened and probably will never happen (though in this case, I think it's far more ambiguous than Dr. MacDonald claims in his lecture to Liz). *Rule 34* is definitely about artificial intelligence, but it's about the understated, what we might consider more *rudimentary* artificial intelligence that often gets ignored in favour of the more sensational, conscious AIs of blockbuster notoriety. (That being said, I think ATHENA has more in common with SkyNet than it does some of the more human-like, personality-driven AIs we see these days.)

The plot of *Rule 34* is convoluted and driven by coincidence—and that's probably an understatement. There is a *reason* for all the coincidence that gradually becomes apparent; while that wasn't quite enough to quash my unease with the serendipity of this story, it was sufficient to sustain my satisfaction overall. Allow me to serve as an example, however, and attest that one does not need the language of derivatives and credit default swaps encoded in one's genes to enjoy this book. I won't claim to have followed every twist and turn of the various machinations and counter-machinations at work. But the shifting perspectives and the ongoing investigation help illuminate, if not explain, the goings-on of the story.

I like most of the characters (if "like" is the right word here). I like that Liz is bitter about being passed over for promotion but still professional enough to work with a rival and caring enough to help an ex-girlfriend in trouble. I like that she puts aside her past problems with Kemal so they team up here—Kemal gets a more sympathetic portrayal in this book. Anwar has to be my favourite, just because he's so hapless at everything he touches. He gets in way over his head and thinks no one will notice, when he turns out to be one of the fulcra around which the plot pivots. To say that I "like" the Toymaker would definitely be inaccurate, but I do like how Stross explores his psychology and motivation: he is more than a villain or a minion, less than a mastermind.

*Rule 34* throws up a lot of hurdles that could reduce one's enjoyment: second-person narration, idiomatic diction, and complicated plot. These challenges are also the source of its success. It's a book, I guess, where its flaws (such as they may be perceived) are also strengths, given the right type of reader—proof, again, that literature is eternally subjective because humans are so diverse. If you're interested in looking at what we might have made of society, policing, and the Web in ten years—as opposed to the ten thousand of some books about AI—then give *Rule 34* a try.

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## Sunil says

You've heard of Rule 34: if it exists, there is porn of it. So you were intrigued by *Rule 34*, which follows a detective on the Rule 34 Squad, who monitor Internet memes to determine whether people are making some

of these fantasies a reality. You were even more intrigued by the fact that it—like *Halting State*, which takes place in the same world but is not necessary to have read for this book (you know because you haven't)—was written in second-person. Even better, it follows multiple characters! You *love* stories told through multiple POVs!

The technique works both for and against the book. It certainly draws you into the book because, in a sense, you do become these characters. You are DI Liz Kavanaugh, who investigates one Edinburgh murder and soon finds herself caught up in a whole series of related mysterious deaths. You are Anwar Hussein, who takes a friend's advice on a get-rich-quick scheme and soon finds himself caught up in a curious political drama involving mysterious bread mix. You are the Toymaker, a psychopath who is a bit inconvenienced by all these murders. You are a whole host of supporting characters that offer glimpses into how all these stories are tied together. Each character has a unique voice; Stross's writing is vibrant and seems to leap off the page, especially with the Toymaker. But the use of second-person is also somewhat distancing; it almost seems like an invasion of privacy to connect too strongly to these characters because they are telling their stories to themselves, not you.

It takes you a bit to get into the book, especially because it's very Scottish—you're not sure which words are made-up future words and which words are just *Scottish*—but once it gets going, you're totally sucked into this cyberpunk murder mystery. You're reminded of Neal Stephenson—he even uses the "*esprit* up to here" phrase you love so much—and Lauren Beukes—the book dissects spammers the way she dissects the Nigerian scam. Stross frequently writes for *effect* than for a purpose at times; various passages seem to read as if he simply couldn't stop writing and wanted to capture the mood of the moment or the character's mental state. But you are caught up in the future he's created, where police use virtual reality and artificial intelligence to fight crime. Stross's future isn't *too* ridiculously high-tech; instead, like the best science fiction writers, he views the present and extrapolates. *Rule 34* tackles the future of spambots, anti-spambots, A.I., geopolitical instability, organized crime, economic crisis, and much more.

You give the book points for having queer characters (and even one queer character of color). You dock a few points because it's kind of hard to follow. You give most of those points back because it's so thrilling and exciting to read that you don't care that you don't fully understand all the intricacies of the plot. You don't understand all the detailed technical descriptions of software and technology and you understand even less about the politics, but you trust that it somehow makes sense because Stross writes with such confidence. You definitely want to read *Halting State* now. *Rule 34* was such a novel reading experience.

You really love the last line.

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### **Brit Mandelo says**

Stross's newest book (in the same near-future SF world as *Halting State*) was as fast-paced as its predecessor, mixing some astoundingly awesome worldbuilding with a layered thriller plot involving 3D printers, crime syndicates, global financial collapse, and a truly creepy antagonist. (Or, is ATHENA the antagonist?) The patchwork-construction of the narrative is fun, bouncing the reader here and there throughout the complex plot. It's also a fairly queer book, with one lead character a lesbian and the other a man who doesn't label, but has both a wife and boyfriends.

Liz is my favorite part of the book, a burn-out police inspector with an on again, off again relationship to a poly queer woman auditor and a personal life that's mostly nonexistent. She's deeply sympathetic and her

narrative voice is excellent.

Overall, I had fun reading this. Stross is a talented writer, and Rule 34 is a great example of what makes him so enjoyable. Phenomenal prose, for one thing, and engaging characters for another.

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### **Lawrence says**

Two thirds of the way through the book, you start to get Stross's main vision of the novel. And you realize it is quite grand, intricate and even plausible in the near future. And I do mean you - the entire novel is written in the second person perspective following about five different characters through the story.

I see how the storytelling perspective interweaves with the main theory (your AI based spam filter is telling you what to do, essentially, and the storyteller is telling you the story, do you feel controlled, yet?), but it's just a storytelling device that is actually superficial. It might have been a fun exercise for the author, but I didn't feel it added anything. The one thing that was very good was the different voices. I very much felt the different character's stories really used distinct voices. A deeper investigation may find this is simply an artifact of the scottish dialects variously used - some used more words I didn't understand, others used less - but they were very consistent!

The pace of the book started slow. Very slow. I mainly kept up with it because I have enjoyed so much of Stross's earlier work, and I thought there would be a payoff. I did enjoy the reveal, and the grand vision of subtle influences affecting our actual lives (Amazon's "you may also like..." to the extreme), but also as someone who works in eCommerce, I know there is truth behind showing certain things on a web page influencing shopper behavior. Now, whether that's effective on an individual scale as proposed here, or at the macro-large-group-average scale, I'm not sure, but this book stands as a convincing argument. I was never in doubt of the book's theory, and thought it was well developed, if slowly.

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### **David Monroe says**

The second Liz Kavanaugh book is a loose sequel to Halting State. Just like Halting State, Rule 34 is written entirely in a shifting perspective, second person present tense. This makes it hard to really connect to them, but Rule 34 is mostly about its world-building, ideas and technology.

DI Liz Kavanaugh: You realise policing internet porn is your life and your career went down the pan five years ago. But when a fetishist dies on your watch, the Rule 34 Squad moves from low priority to worryingly high profile.

Anwar: As an ex-con, you'd like to think your identity fraud days are over. Especially as you've landed a legit job (through a shady mate). Although now that you're Consul for a shiny new Eastern European Republic, you've no idea what comes next.

The Toymaker: Your meds are wearing off and people are stalking you through Edinburgh's undergrowth. But that's ok, because as a distraction, you're project manager of a sophisticated criminal operation. But who's killing off potential recruits?

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## Megan Baxter says

I think I might be reading books out of order again. If this is the second book in a series, though, I can say that I read it without any trouble catching up to where we were or what was going on. I'm sure characters were developed in the first book, but this one seems to stand alone. I'll probably track down the other at some point, but this is not one of those cases where I'm cursing my general lack of ability to read things in order.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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## Elf M. says

You open *Rule 34* expecting a police procedural, and indeed, that's how it starts out. It's a police procedural twenty-one minutes into the future: one minute, plus five years, more from the settings of its predecessor *Halting State*, although the police only solve a few minor crimes, never the major one.

At first, the book is annoying: it's too pat, too convenient. There are too damned many coincidences, too many characters who know too much about each other, run into each other too often, and oftentimes they act a little stupid. Stross isn't into stupid. He knows a stupid plot when he reads one, surely he's not going to write one.

You bounce around from head to head, and there are a lot more heads in this book than the last. There's Inspector Kavanaugh from *Halting State*, an ex-girlfriend of hers, there's Anwar and Adam and the Toymaker and a ton of other people, and their voices start to get blurry, at least the minor ones, but generally you keep it together long enough to make it interesting.

Eventually, though, it all dawns on you why there are coincidences, and you're impressed by the cheek of that bastard Stross. He mocks the Holmesian myth to policework, while at the same time he's written a contrivance of minuscule shards of evidence, and at the end pulls his hat out of his rabbit and gives you a frighteningly plausible explanation.

There's not so much MMO in this book: its all set in the Real World, because what it's about is the way the network can someday reach out and fuck up the real world, in a very real and complete way. It's only twenty-one minutes into the future: the darknets are here, 3D printers are here, and if the Real Dolls aren't animatronic we're only a year out from voice recognition and a tree of scripts. Somewhere around 2016 three-dimensional printers will be cranking out black-market paedodolls and voice mangling will allow softly accented voices in depressed locales to create hub-and-spoke tree farms of everything from "Oh, Daddy" to "Get on your knees you worthless worm." Stross has captured it all, much to your horror.

And you used to work at an early ISP. Even back in the nineties you could see it all coming down: you remember the caches of malware, cracked Photoshops and the usenet feeds full of self-proclaimed "responsible" paedophiles. And those were the ones functional enough to navigate the esoterica of TRN.

These days, it's a one finger experiences-under-glass determination until your low-rent pervert with missing teeth and missing morals can find all the sickness he wants on-line, and carries it with him in his pockets.

It's enough to make you want to drink yourself into oblivion. It's not fun, especially when you have kids who are going to have to live with that nihilistic future. *Rule 34* is a massive downer, but so is spinach: Take it in, goddamnit, because the alternative is to be blind.

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### **Michael Burnam-Fink says**

Stross is back in form with the sequel to *Halting State*, a grimly humorous cyberpunk police procedural set in Tomorrow's Scotland, where nobody knows what an honest job is anymore, and household appliances are murdering spammers.

I won't spoil the book, but Stross is at his best when he takes Big Ideas, twists them upside down, and shows you how they could happen. In *Rule 34*, he on the relationship between the police state and the Panopticon, and how at the end of the day, our system of laws requires a technological architecture capable of enforcing what the politicians put in place. Business, crime, and government are melding together in Stross' world, something which seems all too familiar given the revolving door between Wall Street, the White House, the CIA, and a shallow grave in Central Asia. And Detective Liz's memetic crime unit seems like something that we already need, given public hysteria about synthetic drugs like Spice and Bath Salts (or maybe we could, you know, legalize drugs that have a long history of Not Totally Fucking People Up, instead of putting police and black chemists in a Red Queen's Race, with ordinary drug users the losers.)

The style is dense, packed full of internet-speak and Scottish brogue, but it's Stross's native tongue and the style fits perfectly. It's a throwback to old-school cyberpunk eyeball kicks, and a welcome diversion from the usual fair. The soapboxes rants at the end are a new and useful perspective on security and power.

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### **Chris says**

3.5 stars. *Rule 34*: "If it exists, there is p0rn of it. No exceptions." Good scifi thriller about memes, spam, and life in the surveillance state, told in alternating second person (mostly) from three main points-of-view, although the POV number ratchets up toward the end. While there's no POV character overlap with the first book, one of the main POV characters played a significant role in the first book. Again, it took me a while to get used to the storytelling mode, but once I did I was immersed.

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### **Paul says**

To call it a dead end job would be an understatement, policing the weird and sordid life of internet porn was like being in the U bend of her career as all the unpleasantness of life flowed past. This was DI Liz Kavanaugh's life now, but when a fetish nut dies on her watch, the *Rule 34* squad goes from an irrelevance to high profile. This first death is just the tip of the fatberg as more start dying in the most bizarre ways possible and the more Kavanaugh finds out about the case and the links to organised crime, the less she wants to know...

This is loosely a sequel to Halting State with Kavanaugh being the only character who has made it from that book. There are all sorts going on in this future police thriller; in it, he crams all sorts about the possibilities of pervasive state monitoring, a psychopath loose and the way that the criminals work across states. The writing point of view doesn't always make it the easiest book to read, however, it is highly entertaining with some typical surreal moments and the pace varies from sluggish to fairly brisk. I liked it but didn't love it.

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