

Being the Other, the Other Being: Masculine Insecurities in Matthew Haig's *The Humans* and Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter*



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In “Why Compare?” David Ferris discusses the “crisis of definition,” which affects Comparative Literature as a methodology with ill-defined boundaries, or, as Ferris refers to it, an “indiscipline” (33). Comparative analysis highlights key factors that may pass otherwise unnoticed in the exploration of a single novel and, so, here I compare two science-fiction novels set in the present and written by male authors of the same generation: *The Humans* (2013) by English author Matthew Haig (b. 1975), and *Dark Matter* (2016) by American novelist Blake Crouch (b. 1978). Haig’s novel is a satire and Crouch’s a thriller but, despite their differences, both address a basic issue of contemporary masculinity: namely, how men can successfully combine the demands of an ambitious scientific career with a pro-feminist family life. These novels could use Gothic horror to narrate how a woman and her teen son gradually realize that their husband and father is a stranger. Yet, both are instead characterized by first-person narrations that use science fiction (in a light vein) to portray a male individual forced to understand how men must function in the contemporary world.

“Caring,” as an aspect of critical studies of men and masculinities, dates back to the mid-2010s. As Karla Elliott explains, “the central features of caring masculinities are their rejection of domination and their integration of values of care, such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality, into masculine identities” (241). In Haig’s novel, a nameless alien learns to be a caring (hu)man by rejecting the behaviour of the uncaring workaholic male it replaces. The family man in Crouch’s novel must defend his well-balanced, caring masculinity from assault by another uncaring workaholic: his own doppelgänger. Both authors use science fiction to endorse a positive masculine model, focused on caring for women and children. Neither author explains, however, why parenting should necessarily involve sacrificing professional careers, though this is the circumstance on which their plotlines hinge. In each case, the birth of a son transforms the lives of at least one parent into a less publicly rewarding existence. Thus, while both novels value family life highly and endorse caring fatherhood, they also express an anxiety regarding the negative impact of parenting for career men and women in competitive societies that offer the parents of young children no help.

Criticizing the Workaholic Man

The word ‘workaholic’ first appeared in Wayne E. Oates’s *Confessions of a Workaholic: The Facts about Work Addiction* (1971) to describe an addiction still lacking an official psychological

or psychiatric diagnosis. For decades ‘workaholism’ was discussed exclusively in relation to men, even though many women might also be categorized as workaholics. Despite this, Yaniv still uses male pronouns in his 2011 discussion of the workaholic’s marital problems, arguing that the workaholic husband perfectly understands the strain that his job places on marital life. The workaholic husband, Yaniv maintains, “makes a choice about how much to work today taking account of the future consequences of this choice,” being perfectly willing to sacrifice family life (108). In contrast, Palkovitz noted a decade before, in 2002, that the patterns linking men and work were changing. For most men, the “idea of career advancement and job stability take on greater importance” once they become fathers (403). However, while those who regard themselves primarily as providers may fall into the trap of workaholism, many new twenty-first century fathers “reported decreased commitment to work” preferring instead the pleasures of caring fatherhood (404).

In *The Humans*, workaholic Andrew Martin is killed when the alien narrator snatches his body. In this gentle satire, Haig hints that the usurping alien can be a better family man than a human male. In *Dark Matter*, Crouch has his happy American husband and father kill, in a vicious way, the workaholic he might have been, another version of himself. Haig and Crouch are very critical of the workaholic career model that makes family life dysfunctional for men and relegates women to a supporting role. Nonetheless, in each novel the author presents a talented woman who has chosen motherhood over her career while the situation of the husbands, both gifted scientists, is different. In *The Humans*, top Cambridge mathematician Professor Martin is a selfish career man, and a disappointing family man, who cheats on his wife, Isobel, and lacks any empathy for his literally suicidal teen son, Gulliver. He seems to be the kind of man who, Yaniv warns, may “find it optimal to take a course that will eventually destroy his marriage” (108). In *Dark Matter*, Chicago physicist Jason Dessen is a happy man; he is in love with his wife, Daniela, in good syntony with their teen son, Charlie, and apparently unconcerned by having ditched his promising career. Still, he frets inwardly as the plot subtly discloses how different his life could have been.

Neither Haig nor Crouch imagine their scientific male geniuses (for this is what Martin and Dessen are) being capable of combining professional success with a rich family life. For both, the arrival of a child at an early stage in their careers is a major crisis that forces them and their partners to make crucial choices. Palkovitz stresses that in dual career families, “work/family issues” are “central to the everyday functioning of men, women, and children,” yet the burden of choice still falls on the women’s shoulders, as Haig and Crouch show (418).

Andrew’s wife, Isobel, abandons her own career to be a mother and to support her husband’s career, later taking up teaching. When the alien impostor tries to grasp the concept of marriage, since “Where we are from there are no names, no families living together, no husbands and wives, not sulky teenagers, no madness,” it finds itself at the receiving end of Isobel’s deep disappointment (95). “Glory is what motivates you,” she complains. “Ego. You want your name everywhere. Andrew Martin. Andrew Martin. Andrew Martin. You want to be on every Wikipedia page going. You want to be an Einstein. The trouble is, Andrew, you’re still two years old” (70).

Isobel also complains that her husband has never been a good father—“You’d fly off the handle about anything that got in the way of you and your work”—and laments that she sacrificed her own career (182). The alien concludes that Isobel, a historian exploring “woman’s place” in history, has failed to protect herself from Andrew’s workaholism: “the irony,” the alien writes, is that she “placed herself in the margins voluntarily, giving up work for family, because she imagined that when she eventually arrived at her death-bed she would feel more regret about unborn children than unwritten books. But as soon as she made that move, she had felt her husband begin to take her for granted” (208).

In *Dark Matter*, the unexpected pregnancy of Jason’s girlfriend, Daniela, makes them abandon their dream careers—hers as an artist, his in quantum physics—to become teachers (like Isobel). Daniela was a promising new artist but, Jason notes, “Then came life. Me. Charlie. A bout of crippling postpartum depression” and “derailment” (3). Daniela is now a private arts tutor to middle-grade students, whereas Jason teaches quantum mechanics to undergrad physics students at their local community college. Ryan, a former college roommate and, according to Jason, his “successful other,” angers him by insisting that Jason could have “changed the world” if only he had “stuck” to his path (10). Annoyed, Jason replies that “We can’t all be superstars like you, Ryan” (10). Later, Jason acknowledges to “Jason2,” a version of himself from a universe in which he pursued his career, that “My life is great. It’s just not exceptional. And there was a time when it could have been” (34). He claims that his ambition “died of natural causes. Of neglect” after baby Charlie was conceived, as Daniela and he “were having fun, but it wasn’t love” (34).

Jason was then twenty-seven and in a career in which scientists usually peak by thirty. The “major medical issues” from which baby Charlie suffered put Jason in a quandary: “Daniela needed me. My son needed me. I lost my funding. Lost my momentum. I was the young, new genius for a minute, but when I folded, someone else took my place” (35). Jason claims that he does not regret having formed a family with Daniela and Charlie, yet Crouch’s choice of a multiverse narrative indicates that he still needs to convince himself. As Robert Vogt notes, multiverse narratives “provide a causal frame by depicting the consequences for the characters’ lives in the different actual worlds. As a consequence, the recipient can compare and evaluate the different trajectories” (117). This is what Jason does obsessively and compulsively as he explores his many possible lives before determining that he wants to be primarily Daniela’s husband and Charlie’s father, not the workaholic doppelgänger that tries to supplant him. In contrast, it never occurs to Andrew Martin that he could have been less selfish and more caring, which is why, ultimately, Haig replaces him with the alien.

Man’s Mid-Life Crisis

As noted, *The Humans* is a satirical text with a gentle sense of humour. Its main predecessor is Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), though Haig’s novel is not “Pythonesque,” as M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas label Adams’s work (104). These scholars stress, somewhat unfairly, that *Hitchhiker* is a “work of high silliness” which offers,

nonetheless, “a great deal of social satire,” though they doubt whether it is “a parody of social satire rather than social satire proper” (104). They also claim rather dogmatically that Adams’s work is “more a parody of science fiction than science fiction proper” since it treats the genre’s “staples... with anything but respect and seriousness” (104). The same criticisms may well be applied to Haig’s novel, though both *Hitchhiker* and *The Humans* are more insightful than their easy, very English sense of humour suggests.

On the other hand, although she is discussing multiverse narratives, and *The Humans* is not one, Marie-Laure Ryan’s “notion of counterparthood” is useful for close analyses of Haig’s novel (659). By concentrating “on the personal relations of characters to those individuals who are at the same time themselves and somebody else as well as on the plot possibilities that these variations create,” Haig’s exploration of ‘counterparthood’ allows us to see Andrew Martin from the alien’s point of view as an alienated man, pun intended (659).

In *The Humans* and *Dark Matter*, the two couples are in their early forties and have been in their relationships for long periods of time: twenty years in Andrew and Isobel’s case, fifteen in Jason and Daniela’s. The novels narrate, then, a sort of mid-life crisis, perhaps more conspicuous in the case of the English couple. In the report that the alien is addressing to his fellow Vonnadorians, he notes that Andrew is forty-three, Isobel forty-one, and their son, Gulliver, fifteen. Andrew, as I have noted, is killed instantly when the alien, who arrives on Earth using anti-matter, occupies his body and mind. The impostor has been sent by its superiors, the Hosts, to prevent Professor Martin from announcing his resolution of the Riemann Hypothesis, as this would fast-forward human progress in ways the Vonnadorians distrust. The professor’s new oddball behaviour is attributed to a breakdown caused by overworking, though it results from the alien’s many difficulties in navigating human life. The body-snatcher, for its part, is resisting its orders to murder all who might know of Martin’s mathematical breakthrough. The alien refuses to kill Isobel and Gulliver, though it does murder the rival to whom a boastful Martin had communicated his discovery. Taking in the many certificates of distinction in this man’s office, the alien feels “thankful to come from a place where personal success was meaningless” (89).

As the alien starts begins to value Isobel and Gulliver on its own terms, it discovers that Martin was totally focused on his career, that his wife was unhappy but unable to divorce him, and that Gulliver could not cope with being the son of a genius. Enjoying the pleasures of caring for the boy and of being cared for by Isobel, the alien decides to become fully human, since “No one in the universe cared for me” (127). An attack by a second murderous alien sent by his superiors, however, forces the impostor to disclose its real identity. Gulliver welcomes the revelation with relief. As the alien reports, the boy “seemed to accept me as an extraterrestrial life form far more easily than he had accepted me as a father” (264). Isobel, though, is crushed by the loss of her suddenly romantic husband. After this episode, Haig sends the alien abroad, still posing as Martin. Yet, being a comedy, *The Humans* ends happily. When Gulliver invites his ersatz dad back home, claiming that Isobel misses their life, the alien asks whether she misses the original or the alien

Martin. “You,” Gulliver replies. “You’re the one who looked after us” (289). In this way, the alien’s caring masculinity is celebrated and Andrew Martin’s workaholic, ego is dismissed for good.

In *Dark Matter*, Jason2, coming from a universe where Jason rejected fatherhood, Daniela underwent an abortion, and Jason built the box granting access to the multiverse, is successful but lonely. He starts envying the modest life that Jason and Daniela enjoy with their son, Charlie. As Jason comments, “If I represent the pinnacle of family success for all the Jason Dessens, Jason2 represents the professional and creative apex. We’re opposite poles of the same man, and I suppose it isn’t a coincidence that Jason2 sought out my life from the infinite possibilities available” (265). Jason2 kidnaps Jason and, wrongly assuming that he will be thrilled to take his place as a single, selfish career man, swaps lives with him. In fact, Jason is devastated and only uses the box to get back home and terminate his usurper.

When the usurper, Jason2, starts his new life as Jason, he tells Daniela that being almost run down by a car has scared him, and now he thinks all moments of life are precious, which justifies his new behaviour. Daniela is perplexed but welcomes the change, believing it refreshes their marriage: “They haven’t been *unhappy* these last few years, quite the opposite. But it’s been a long, long time since she felt that sense of giddy love that effervesces in the pit of your stomach and spectacularly upends the world” (81, original italics). As for Jason, as he continues his frantic efforts to return home by exploring more and more alternative universes, he is consumed by jealousy:

It’s one thing to be lost in a world that’s not your own.
 Another thing entirely to know you’ve been replaced in yours.
 That a better version of you has stepped into your life.
 He’s smarter than I am, no question.
 Is he also a better father to Charlie?
 A better husband to Daniela?
 A better lover?
 He did this to me.
 No.
 It’s way more fucked up than that.
 I did this to me. (167, italics in original)

Following Max Tegmark’s theorization of the four levels of the multiverse (see his volume *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*), Joseph Gelfer and Joseph Organ develop (in their witty, tongue-in-cheek article “Quantum Masculinities: Doing Gender with Max Tegmark’s Mathematical Universe Hypothesis”) the thesis that:

First, masculinities are infinite given the infinite nature of the multiverse, and that those masculinities may follow different histories that share our same laws of physics (Level I multiverse) or may follow different histories and take on different localized laws of physics (Level II multiverse). Second, superposition functions as an interesting analogy (albeit not

extendable very far) for explaining why masculinities can simultaneously be in different and/or contradictory states. (221-222)

Revealing in their conclusion that “quantum masculinities do not contain a shred of science,” Gelfer and Organ (who appear to be two versions of the same scholar), maintain that quantum masculinities “offer a scenario for describing the possibilities of multiple masculinities that is at least novel, and potentially ‘true’ by the standards of external reality” (225). For them (for him?), the superposition of multiple masculinities is “clearly farcical” but also a useful instrument “to describe the often contradictory and paradoxical variables that arise when discussing masculinities” (225). It might be argued that femininity is also in a state of superposition, and that both femininity and masculinity must now incorporate the non-binary into that state, but Gelfer/Organ’s hypothesis makes sense not only of Crouch’s multiverse narrative but also of the simultaneous position of modern masculinity inside and outside toxic patriarchy.

After Jason manages to restore family life after eliminating the impostor, Daniela and Charlie accept his revelation that they have been living with Jason2 (for a month) with mild puzzlement. Jason interrogates his wife about the differences between him and his other self and, although Daniela avoids giving any details, she eventually apologizes for having enjoyed the romantic moments and the sex. Absurdly, Jason believes that her ‘infidelity’ is annulled by his own night of sex with the celebrity artist she is in another universe, even though Daniela is never intentionally unfaithful as he is. After enjoying sex again together, Daniela insists to Jason that he is not replaceable: yet despite the reassurances of wife and son that Jason2 was not a better man, a certain doubt lingers. Since Jason’s family never distrusted this other man, it appears that Jason is replaceable. Jason may have been temporarily robbed of his life but Jason2 is, on the whole, a good enough replacement, as if the original Jason’s roles as husband and father were just performances and not an expression of a deeply felt identity.

Interestingly, the key to the endless search for a better universe for the family unit is Charlie, who has until this point had a rather limited role. Alexandra Macht writes in *Fatherhood and Love* that “boundaries in relationships are created and dissolved by paying attention to emotions; it is in this manner that emotional reflexivity is important to the process of constructing emotional borders” (43). Considering his own emotions, Jason realises that the only way to get rid of the many Jasons trying to access his own world, after he kills Jason2, is to trust his son, hoping that Charlie will choose a better universe. About to open the door in his father’s box, the teen boy looks, Jason notes, “as brave and strong as I’ve ever seen him,” and is finally “a man” (37). The world he chooses, full of light, promises to be the right one.

Conclusions: Promoting the Good Family Man

To sum up, Haig and Crouch use science fiction to reject the workaholic male genius who refuses to be a good family man. Martin is replaced by an alien who is better at performing human masculinity than he ever was. As for Jason, by killing Jason2 he eliminates his workaholic self and regains his lost happy family life. Crouch, though, cannot wholly erase the impression that this

man is replaceable because he can never prove that Jason is unique. Ultimately, whether a man is selfish or caring, his choices may make him vulnerable. In Haig's and Crouch's novels, the 'other being' embodies the choices not taken and men's struggle to combine professional ambition and a rewarding family life. It is, therefore, important to highlight science fiction's contribution to the discussion of these male anxieties and to the endorsement of a newly detoxed masculinity.

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