

Matt Haig

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About this Person

Born: July 03, 1975 in Sheffield, United Kingdom
Nationality: British
Occupation: Writer
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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born 1975, in Sheffield, England; married Andrea Semple; children: Lucas, Pearl. **Education:** Graduated from Hull University; Leeds University, M.A. **Addresses:** Home: York, England. Agent: Caradoc King, A.P. Watt, 20 John St., London WC1N 2DR, England. **E-mail:** matt@matthaig.com.

AWARDS:

Yorkshire Young Achievers' Achievement in the Arts Award, 2009; ALA Alex Award, for *The Radleys*; Nestle/Smarties Prize, Blue Peter Book of the Year Award, 2009, and other regional awards, all for *Shadow Forest*; Prix Utopiales European Youth Prize, 2015, for Valerie Le Plouhinec's French translation of *The Humans*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *The Last Family in England*, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 2004, published as *The Labrador Pact*, Viking (New York, NY), 2008.
- *The Dead Fathers Club*, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 2006, Viking (New York, NY), 2007.
- *The Possession of Mr. Cave*, Viking Adult (New York, NY), 2009.
- *The Radleys*, Free Press (New York, NY), 2010.
- *The Humans*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2013.

"SHADOW FOREST" SERIES

- *Shadow Forest*, Bodley Head (London, England), 2007, published as *Samuel Blink and the Forbidden Forest*, Putnam (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Samuel Blink and the Runaway Troll*, G.P. Putnam's Sons (New York, NY), 2008.

"BOY CALLED CHRISTMAS" SERIES

- *A Boy Called Christmas*, illustrated by Chris Mould, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2015.
- *The Girl Who Saved Christmas*, Canongate Books (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2016.

JUVENILE FICTION

- *To Be a Cat*, Bodley Head (London, England), 2012, Atheneum Books for Young Readers (New York, NY), 2013.
- *Echo Boy*, Bodley Head (London, England), 2014.

NONFICTION

- *Humans: An A-Z*, Canongate Books (Edinburgh, Scotland), 2014.
- *Reasons to Stay Alive*, Penguin Books (New York, NY), 2015.

Stories have appeared in the anthologies *Haunted* and *Exquisite Corpse*. Author of the novella *The Ghost Walk* and of screenplays. Contributor to the *Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *Independent*, and *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Sidelights

Matt Haig worked in marketing when he first got out of school, and his talent for public relations let him to start his own marketing company and write several well-received books in that field. However, Haig's creative streak eventually held sway over his practical side, and he made the shift to fiction. His fascination with family dynamics led to his first adult novel, *The Last Family in England*, as well as later novels such as *The Possession of Mr. Cave* and *The Radleys*. Turning to younger readers, Haig has also produced the award-winning "Samuel Blink" fantasy titles.

Samuel Blink and the Forbidden Forest takes aim at an audience of both children and adults. First published in Britain as *Shadow Forest*, the book features a recently orphaned protagonist and his sister who have been sent to live with an aunt in Norway. Despite strict instructions to stay out of the dark and mysterious forest near their aunt's home, the children are drawn into the woods one by one and face both good and evil in their attempts to return home. In a review for *Kidsreads.com*, Norah Piehl described the book as "a sparkling juvenile debut by a writer who understands how children think" and "a superb, briskly plotted fantasy that will appeal both to kids and to his growing numbers of adult readers."

Samuel Blink and the Runaway Troll, according to *School Library Journal* reviewer Tasha Saecker, is "just as delightful" as the first Samuel Blink book. This time around the children are about to start school and must be careful to keep their knowledge of the Shadow Forest a secret. At the same time, they become unexpected hosts to Troll-Son, who has run away from the Betterer, an adult troll who coerces the young ones in his charge to adopt more human behavior. Samuel and Martha succeed in hiding Troll-Son and in fending off Mr. Myklebust, who has commercial designs on the forest. Saecker admired the book's blend of fantasy and humor, as well as its quirky characters. A writer for *Kirkus Reviews* offered a similar assessment, describing *Samuel Blink and the Runaway Troll* as an "above-average fantasy."

Haig's first novel, published in England as *The Last Family in England*, was later published in the United States as *The Labrador Pact*. Its narrator is Prince, a Labrador dog whose owner, Adam Hunter, has taken the dog to the vet to be put down. As Prince waits in the vet's office he recounts the

events that brought Hunter to the decision to euthanize him. Prince admits that he has violated the pact among Labradors to devote their lives to the protection of their human masters, but explains that the Hunters are a difficult bunch. Adam is conducting a sizzling flirtation with a young aromatherapist; Kate, his wife, has a complicated past with the aromatherapist's husband; and the couple's teenagers, Hal and Charlotte, are behaving with typical teen angst and rebellion. As Prince strives to honor his pact, things spiral out of control and dead bodies begin to accumulate. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* found the novel "a little heavy-handed and ... gimmicky," but added that readers would likely find Prince a sympathetic character. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* also acknowledged Prince's charm but felt that the book's plot is repetitive and thin. *The Labrador Pact*, wrote the reviewer, is "by no means a failure, but Aesop and Orwell did it better."

The plot of *The Dead Fathers Club*, Matt Haig's first novel to be released in the United States, was inspired by William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and shares a parallel story line: young Philip's recently murdered father has returned as a ghost to implore his son to kill the man who murdered him--his own brother. Michael Cart described the novel in a review for *Booklist* as "darkly witty and delightfully clever," with a protagonist "whose honesty and innocence, which shine from every sentence, are utterly captivating and heartbreakingly poignant." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor lauded Haig for "re-imagining a tragic masterpiece with such wit, force and--yes--originality." Joshua Cohen, writing for *Library Journal*, found that Haig "neatly sustains the Hamlet parallel."

In *The Possession of Mr. Cave*, Haig presents a tale of a mild-mannered antiques dealer driven to extremes after the accidental death of his teenage son, Reuben. Years earlier, Reuben's mother was killed by robbers, and Terence Cave had illogically blamed Reuben for the tragedy. Now he focuses all his attention on Reuben's twin sister, Bryony, whom he obsessively tries to protect and control even as she begins to assert her independence.

The book, according to a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor, "channels Keat's language and Beethoven's harmonies, in a disturbed orchestration of overprotectiveness and paranoia." Describing *The Possession of Mr. Cave* as "overwrought," a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* commented that the novel could have offered an original twist on its theme, but "unfortunately devolves into a heavy-handed study." For London *Independent* contributor James Urquhart, however, "Cave's grotesque zeal commands the reader's almost voyeuristic attention, and delivers an enthralling addition to the literature of demented protagonists."

The Radleys is a domestic drama about a loving family who happen to be vampires. Seventeen years earlier, Helen was engaged to her now husband, Dr. Peter Radley, when his dashing brother Will secretly whisked her away to a "vampire conversion" night in Paris--resulting in the birth of Rowan. Peter and Helen decide to live as normal people and not tell Rowan and his younger sister, Clara, about their vampire heritage. They move from London to the suburb of Bishopthorpe, where they abide by the precepts of the "Abstainer's Handbook," a guidebook for vampires who do not want to live the traditional vampire life. Unfortunately, the children, abstaining from the blood they do not know they need, suffer from nausea, insomnia, weakness, and unpopularity at school. Rowan is troubled by nightmares, and Clara, a vegan, is not getting the nourishment she needs from meat. One night, however, Clara is attacked by a drunken classmate. Her fangs emerge, her thirst for blood is aroused, and she discovers her vampire nature. Helen agrees with Peter that the time has come for them to disclose their heritage to the children. They consult with Will, a practicing vampire who storms in and indulges in all the usual cruel but exciting vampire behaviors the couple have protected their children from for many years, precipitating a family crisis.

Overall, *The Radleys* was greeted with approval. Patricia Altner, writing for the *Library Journal*, called the novel "entertaining" and remarked that "this witty novel offers a refreshing take on an oversaturated genre." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor agreed that the novel is "witty" and found the characters of Clara and Rowan "likable." For Krista Hutley in *Booklist*, "Haig's sly digs at suburbia's forced banality and conformity are on target." Hutley concluded: "A white-picket-fence-style happy ending caps off this unusual story." Matthew Sharpe, however, writing for the *New York Times Book*

Review, was of two minds about the novel. On the one hand, he observed that "Haig tends towards overstatement and repetition." Sharpe also noted that in his view, "'The Abstainer's Handbook,' for all its uptight charm, often repeats as instruction what has just been or is about to be narrated. This novel's central moral problem--that blood sucking is exhilarating yet morally wrong, while abstention is virtuous yet tedious and false--is sometimes hammered home all too explicitly and schematically. Mental states are too often simply announced rather than evoked." On the other hand, Sharpe opened his review by observing that "the vampire novel is a crowded genre these days. To distinguish itself, a book will need inventiveness, wit, beauty, truth and a narrative within which these attributes can flourish. *The Radleys* ... has got them, if sometimes in alloyed form." In closing, Sharpe called Haig "a novelist of considerable seriousness and talent."

Haig returned to the genre of juvenile fiction with *To Be a Cat*. His protagonist is Barney Willow, who has much to contend with in his young life: His father has disappeared from town, his mother is constantly working, the two are getting divorced, and he has become the target both of the school bully and of its frightening principal, Miss Whipmire. He turns to his best friend, Rissa, for support, but he continues to be miserable as his twelfth birthday approaches. One day, on his way home from school, he sees a cat named Maurice and thinks that his life would be easier if he could trade places with it. The next morning, he awakens to find himself transformed into the cat. Soon, however, he learns that the day-to-day life of an animal can be difficult. As he learns how to regain his humanity while being pursued by Miss Whipmire, he learns the truth about her and her motives, his father, and even the bully. Most importantly, he learns that being a human is not as terrible as it seems.

Reviewers were somewhat lukewarm in their response to *To Be a Cat*. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor observed that "Barney Willow's sad and odd story drags on a bit too long" and that "the plot offers some surprises but also feels repetitious in spots." The reviewer concluded by calling the book "simultaneously predictable and quirky." Sarah Reid, in *School Library Journal*, was somewhat more positive, writing that "the story features extreme characters and circumstances in the tradition of Roald Dahl, though it lacks some of the spark of his work. Nonetheless, Haig's cautionary tale is a unique one, and Barney's struggles will be understood by readers who are uncomfortable in their own skin."

Nineteenth-century German mathematician Bernard Riemann developed the hypothesis that prime numbers form a pattern. Not until 2012, however, was the hypothesis proven. The genius who discovers the proof in *The Humans* is Cambridge University mathematician Andrew Martin. But on the other side of the universe, the super-advanced Vonnadorians, believing that humans are too backward, brutish, and illogical to make good use of this earth-shattering breakthrough, with all of its implications for scientific advancement, dispatch one of their own to kill Martin, his family, and anyone with whom he has shared his discovery, and to ensure that the hypothesis is never proven. To that end, the alien inhabits Martin's body, setting in motion a classic fish-out-of-water tale as he learns to navigate the human world. Initially, the alien is disgusted and bewildered by his human body, but as he spends more time with Martin's wife and son, he is eventually transformed. He discovers the good things that humanity has to offer, including peanut butter, Emily Dickinson, the Beach Boys, wine, dogs, and even love. Ultimately, he turns out to be a better husband and father than the arrogant and self-absorbed Martin ever was and is unwilling to carry out his mission.

A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor dismissively characterized the book as "a saccharine novel," but other reviewers found its sweetness appealing. For Michael Cart in *Booklist*, "Haig strikes exactly the right tone of bemusement, discovery, and wonder in creating what is ultimately a sweet-spirited celebration of humanity and the trials and triumphs of being human. The result is a thought-provoking, compulsively readable delight." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* remarked that "while at times the novel is sentimental, the wonder and humor with which the protagonist approaches life, and the many emotions and discoveries he experiences, are worth getting a bit weepy over." In *Library Journal*, Neil Hollands called the novel "quick-paced, touching, and hilarious," while Andy Martin, a reviewer for the London *Independent Online*, wrote: "This is the beauty of *The Humans*: it manages to be both absurdly idiosyncratic and singular and, at the same time, charmingly universal." Finally, Harry Ritchie

of the London *Guardian Online*, finding the novel "funny and clever," asserted that it "deserves to live long and prosper."

Set in 2115, *Echo Boy* tells the story of Audrey, a girl from Yorkshire, who goes to live in London with her rich Uncle Alex after her parents die in a car accident. There, she becomes friendly with Alex's robot boy, Daniel, who reveals that Alex's company, Castle Industries, may be developing frightening technologies.

"Haig's moral seriousness ... combined with his formal playfulness and a certain outsider chic, make his work highly attractive to young adult readers," asserted Anthony McGowan on the London *Guardian* Website. Martin Chilton, a reviewer on the London *Telegraph* Website, commented: "The action rattles along and although the book does feel a tad long (over 400 pages), what keeps it interesting is the quality of Haig's observations and characters, even the robot-boy Daniel, whose thoughts we hear through a mind-log." A writer on the *Fantasy Book Review* Website suggested: "*Echo Boy* is an effortless read." *School Librarian* critic Rachel Bowler remarked: "Readers will be fascinated by Haig's depiction of a world in which climate change has wreaked havoc and rival technologies battle for supremacy."

Haig writes about his battles with depression in *Reasons to Stay Alive*. He describes his symptoms and feelings during depressive episodes and comments on various forms of treatment. Haig notes that offering kindness to others, writing, and reading helped him to overcome the illness that he endured for many years. Reviewing the book on the London *Observer* Website, Lettie Kennedy commented: "It is an intensely individual, creative response to a period of profound crisis, and an account of what pulled one man back from the brink." Clair Woodard, a contributor to the London *Express* Website, remarked of Haig: "He details his own depression mixed with anxiety so perfectly that *Reasons to Stay Alive* is almost a manual for sufferers and those who know them." "Haig's book provides unobjectionable advice that will offer some help and succor to those who experience depression," suggested a *Kirkus Reviews* critic. The same critic described the book as "a vibrant, encouraging depiction of a sinister disorder."

In *A Boy Called Christmas*, Haig tells the story of how Father Christmas came to be. As an eleven-year-old, Nicholas (the future Father Christmas) sets out to find his father, who disappeared while on his way to a place called Elfhelm. On his way, he meets Blitzen, a reindeer. He nearly freezes to death but is rescued by the elves of Elfhelm. In an interview with James Kidd, a contributor to the London *Independent* Website, Haig explained why he wrote *A Boy Called Christmas*. Referring to his previous book, *Reasons to Stay Alive*, he stated: "I had written about the darkest period in my life. The writing hadn't been too hard but I knew I was going to spend a year having these public therapy sessions. To keep me sane and happy I thought: 'What is the most fun I can have writing?' An origin story of Father Christmas was the one that was there." "It's suitable for children from nine to ninety-nine," remarked Tony Bradman on the London *Guardian* Website. A writer on the *Caught Read Handed* Website described the volume as "a perfect book to read with your kids at Christmas or with yourself to get you into the Christmas spirit. It's fun and magical."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- o *Booklist*, December 1, 2006, Michael Cart, review of *The Dead Fathers Club*, p. 20; November 1, 2010, Krista Hutley, review of *The Radleys*, p. 35; May 15, 2013, Michael Cart, review of *The Humans*, p. 32.
- o *Independent* (London, England), May 20, 2008, James Urquhart, review of *The Possession of Mr. Cave*.

- o *Kirkus Reviews*, November 15, 2006, review of *The Dead Fathers Club*, p. 1147; January 15, 2008, review of *The Labrador Pact*; August 1, 2008, review of *Samuel Blink and the Runaway Troll*; January 1, 2009, review of *The Possession of Mr. Cave*; April 15, 2013, review of *To Be a Cat*; May 15, 2013, review of *The Humans*; November 15, 2015, review of *Reasons to Stay Alive*.
- o *Library Journal*, December 1, 2006, Joshua Cohen, review of *The Dead Fathers Club*, p. 110; October 1, 2010, Patricia Altner, review of *The Radleys*, p. 67; June 15, 2013, Neil Hollands, review of *The Humans*, p. 82.
- o *New York Times Book Review*, January 2, 2011, Matthew Sharpe, "The Blood Suckers Next Door," review of *The Radleys*, p. 17.
- o *Publishers Weekly*, November 19, 2007, review of *The Labrador Pact*, p. 31; November 17, 2008, review of *The Possession of Mr. Cave*, p. 37; October 4, 2010, review of *The Radleys*, p. 27; May 20, 2013, review of *The Humans*, p. 41.
- o *School Librarian*, autumn, 2014, Rachel Bowler, review of *Echo Boy*, p. 182; spring, 2016, Wendy Worley, review of *A Boy Called Christmas*, p. 38.
- o *School Library Journal*, September 1, 2008, Tasha Saecker, review of *Samuel Blink and the Runaway Troll*, p. 182.
- o *USA Today*, March 13, 2008, review of *The Labrador Pact*, p. 5.

ONLINE

- o *Caught Read Handed*, <https://caughtreadhanded.wordpress.com/> (November 27, 2015), review of *A Boy Called Christmas*.
- o *Curled Up with a Good Book*, <http://www.curledup.com/> (March 20, 2009), Heather Darcy, review of *The Labrador Pact*.
- o *Express Online*, <http://www.express.co.uk/> (March 12, 2015), Clair Woodard, review of *Reasons to Stay Alive*.
- o *Fantasy Book Review*, <http://www.fantasybookreview.co.uk/> (August 23, 2016), review of *Echo Boy*.
- o *Guardian Online*, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (May 15, 2013), Harry Ritchie, review of *The Humans*; (May 3, 2014), Anthony McGowan, review of *Echo Boy*; (November 21, 2015), Tony Bradman, review of *A Boy Called Christmas*.
- o *Independent Online*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/> (June 7, 2013), Andy Martin, review of *The Humans*; (November 29, 2015), James Kidd, author interview.
- o *Kidsreads.com*, <http://www.kidsreads.com/> (March 20, 2009), Norah Piehl, review of *Samuel Blink and the Forbidden Forest*.
- o *Los Angeles Times Online*, <http://articles.latimes.com/> (July 14, 2013), Tracy Brown, "Matt Haig Discusses Math, Aliens and His New Novel, *The Humans*."
- o *Matt Haig Website*, <http://www.matthaig.com> (August 23, 2016).
- o *Monsters & Critics*, <http://www.monstersandcritics.com/> (March 20, 2009), Angela Youngman, review of *Shadow Forest*.
- o *Observer Online*, <https://www.theguardian.com/> (January 31, 2016), Lettie Kennedy, review of *Reasons to Stay Alive*.
- o *Telegraph Online*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/> (March 20, 2013), Matt Haig, "Matt Haig: 30 Things That Every Writer Should Know"; (April 7, 2014), Martin Chilton, review of *Echo Boy*; (March 5, 2015), Theo Merz, author interview.*

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