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Opening Extract from...

The Humans

Written by Matt Haig

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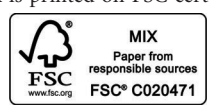
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The man I was not

So, what is this?

You ready?

Okay. Inhale. I will tell you.

This book, this actual book, is set right *here*, on Earth. It is about the meaning of life and nothing at all. It is about what it takes to kill somebody, and save them. It is about love and dead poets and wholenut peanut butter. It's about matter and anti-matter, everything and nothing, hope and hate. It's about a forty-one-year-old female historian called Isobel and her fifteen-year-old son called Gulliver and the cleverest mathematician in the world. It is, in short, about how to become a human.

But let me state the obvious. I was not one. That first night, in the cold and the dark and the wind, I was nowhere near. Before I read *Cosmopolitan*, in the garage, I had never even seen this written language. I realise that this could be your first time too. To give you an idea of the way people here consume stories, I have put this book together as a human would. The words I use are human words, typed in a human font, laid out consecutively in the human style. With your almost instantaneous ability to translate even the most exotic and primitive linguistic forms, I trust comprehension should not be a problem.

Now, to reiterate, I was not Professor Andrew Martin. I was like you.

Professor Andrew Martin was merely a role. A disguise. Someone I needed to be in order to complete a task. A task that had begun with his abduction, and death. (I am conscious this is setting a

grim tone, so I will resolve not to mention death again for at least the rest of this page.)

The point is that I was not a forty-three-year-old mathematician – husband, father – who taught at Cambridge University and who had devoted the last eight years of his life to solving a mathematical problem that had so far proved unsolvable.

Prior to arriving on Earth I did not have mid-brown hair that fell in a natural side-parting. Equally, I did not have an opinion on *The Planets* by Holtz or Talking Heads' second album, as I did not agree with the concept of music. Or I shouldn't have, anyway. And how could I believe that Australian wine was automatically inferior to wine sourced from other regions on the planet when I had never drunk anything but liquid nitrogen?

Belonging as I did to a post-marital species, it goes without saying that I hadn't been a neglectful husband with an eye for one of my students any more than I had been a man who walked his English Springer Spaniel – a category of hairy domestic deity otherwise known as a 'dog' – as an excuse to leave the house. Nor had I written books on mathematics, or insisted that my publishers use an author photograph that was now nearing its fifteenth anniversary.

No, I wasn't that man.

I had no feeling for that man whatsoever. And yet he had been real, as real as you and I, a real mammalian life form, a diploid, eukaryotic primate who, five minutes before midnight, had been sitting at his desk, staring at his computer screen and drinking black coffee (don't worry, I shall explain coffee and my misadventures with it a little later). A life form who may or may not have jumped out of his chair as the breakthrough came, as his mind arrived at a place no human mind had ever reached before, the very edge of knowledge.

And at some point shortly after his breakthrough he had been taken by the hosts. My employers. I had even met him, for the

very briefest of moments. Enough for the – wholly incomplete – reading to be made. It was complete physically, just not mentally. You see, you can clone human brains but not what is stored inside them, not much of it anyway, so I had to learn a lot of things for myself. I was a forty-three-year-old newborn on planet Earth. It would become annoying to me, later on, that I had never met him *properly*, as meeting him properly would have been extremely useful. He could have told me about Maggie, for one thing. (Oh, how I wish he had told me about Maggie!)

However, any knowledge I gained was not going to alter the simple fact that I had to halt progress. That is what I was there for. To destroy evidence of the breakthrough Professor Andrew Martin had made. Evidence that lived not only in computers but in living human beings.

Now, where should we start?

I suppose there is only one place. We should start with when I was hit by the car.

Detached nouns and other early trials for the language-learner

Yes, like I said, we should start with when I was hit by the car.

We have to, really. Because for quite a while before that there was nothing. There was nothing and nothing and nothing and—

Something.

Me, standing there, on the 'road'.

Once there, I had several immediate reactions. First, what was with the weather? I was not really used to weather you had to think about. But this was England, a part of Earth where thinking about the weather was the chief human activity. And for good reason. Second, where was the computer? There was meant to be a computer. Not that I actually knew what Professor Martin's computer would look like. Maybe it looked like a road. Third, what was that noise? A kind of muted roaring. And fourth: it was night. Being something of a homebird, I was not really accustomed to night. And even if I had been, this wasn't just any night. It was the kind of night I had never known. This was night to the power of night to the power of night. This was night cubed. A sky full of uncompromising darkness, with no stars and no moon. Where were the suns? Were there even suns? The cold suggested there might not have been. The cold was a shock. The cold hurt my lungs, and the harsh wind beating against my skin caused me to shake. I wondered if humans ever went outside. They must have been insane if they did.

Inhaling was difficult, at first. And this was a concern. After all, inhaling really was one of the most important requirements of being a human. But I eventually got the knack.

And then another worry. I was not where I was meant to be, that was increasingly clear. I was meant to be where he had been. I was meant to be in an office, but this wasn't an office. I knew that, even then. Not unless it was an office that contained an entire sky, complete with those dark, congregating clouds and that unseen moon.

It took a while – too long – to understand the situation. I did not know at that time what a road was, but I can now tell you that a road is something that connects points of departure with points of arrival. This is important. On Earth, you see, you can't just move from one place to another place instantaneously. The technology isn't there yet. It is nowhere near there yet. No. On Earth you have to spend a lot of time travelling in between places, be it on roads or on rail-tracks or in careers or relationships.

This particular type of road was a motorway. A motorway is the most advanced type of road there is, which as with most forms of human advancement essentially meant accidental death was considerably more probable. My naked feet were standing on something called tarmac, feeling its strange and brutal texture. I looked at my left hand. It seemed so crude and unfamiliar, and yet my laughter halted when I realised this fingered freakish thing was a part of me. I was a stranger to myself. Oh, and by the way, the muted roaring was still there, minus the muted part.

It was then I noticed what was approaching me at considerable speed.

The lights.

White, wide and low, they may as well have been the bright eyes of a fast-moving plain-sweeper, silver-backed, and now screaming. It was trying to slow, and swerve.

There was no time for me to move out of the way. There had been, but not now. I had waited too long.

And so it hit me with great, uncompromising force. A force which hurled me off the ground and sent me flying. Only not real

it to be a suitable punishment. They knew it was a job no one in their right mind would choose to do and, though my task was important, they knew I (like you) belonged to the most advanced race in the known universe and so would be up to the job.

'I know you from somewhere. I recognise your face. Who are you?'

I felt tired. That was the trouble with teleportation and matter shifting and bio-setting. It really took it out of you. And even though it put it back in to you, energy was always the price.

I slipped into darkness and enjoyed dreams tinged with violet and indigo and home. I dreamed of cracked eggs and prime numbers and ever-shifting skylines.

And then I awoke.

I was inside a strange vehicle, strapped to primitive heart-reading equipment. Two humans, male and female (the female's appearance confirmed my worst fears. Within this species, ugliness does not discriminate between genders), dressed in green. They seemed to be asking me something in quite an agitated fashion. Maybe it was because I was using my new upper limbs to rip off the crudely designed electrocardiographic equipment. They tried to restrain me, but they apparently had very little understanding of the mathematics involved, and so with relative ease I managed to leave the two green-clothed humans on the floor, writhing around in pain.

I rose to my feet, noticing just how much gravity there was on this planet as the driver turned to ask me an even more urgent question. The vehicle was moving fast, and the undulating sound waves of the siren were an undeniable distraction, but I opened the door and leapt towards the soft vegetation at the side of the road. My body rolled. I hid. And then, once it was safe to appear, I got to my feet. Compared to a human hand, a foot is relatively untroubling, toes aside.

I stood there for a while, just staring at all those odd cars, confined to the ground, evidently reliant on fossil fuel and each

making more noise than it took to power a polygon generator. And the even odder sight of the humans – all clothed inside, holding on to circular steer-control equipment and, sometimes, extra-biological telecommunications devices.

I have come to a planet where the most intelligent life form still has to drive its own cars . . .

Never before had I so appreciated the simple splendours you and I have grown up with. The eternal light. The smooth, floating traffic. The advanced plant life. The sweetened air. The non-weather. Oh, gentle readers, you really have no idea.

Cars blared high-frequency horns as they passed me. Wide-eyed, gape-mouthed faces stared out of windows. I didn't understand it, I looked as ugly as any of them. Why wasn't I blending in? What was I doing wrong? Maybe it was because I wasn't in a car. Maybe that's how humans lived, permanently contained in cars. Or maybe it was because I wasn't wearing any clothes. It was a cold night, but could it really have been something so trivial as a lack of artificial body-covering? No, it couldn't be as simple as that.

I looked up at the sky.

There was evidence of the moon now, veiled by thin cloud. It too seemed to be gawping down at me with the same sense of shock. But the stars were still blanketed, out of sight. I wanted to see them. I wanted to feel their comfort.

On top of all this, rain was a distinct possibility. I hated rain. To me, as to most of you dome-dwellers, rain was a terror of almost mythological proportions. I needed to find what I was looking for before the clouds opened.

There was a rectangular aluminium sign ahead of me. Nouns minus context are always tricky for the language learner, but the arrow was pointing only one way so I followed it.

Humans kept on lowering their windows and shouting things at me, above the sound of their engines. Sometimes this seemed good-humoured, as they were spitting oral fluid, in my direction,

orminurk-style. So I spat back in a friendly fashion, trying to hit their fast-moving faces. This seemed to encourage more shouting, but I tried not to mind.

Soon, I told myself, I would understand what the heavily articulated greeting 'get off the fucking road you fucking wanker' actually meant. In the meantime I kept walking, got past the sign, and saw an illuminated but disconcertingly unmoving building by the side of the road.

I will go to it, I told myself. I will go to it and find some answers.

Texaco

The building was called 'Texaco'. It stood there shining in the night with a terrible stillness, like it was waiting to come alive.

As I walked towards it, I noticed it was some kind of refill station. Cars were parked there, under a horizontal canopy and stationed next to simple-looking fuel-delivery systems. It was confirmed: the cars did absolutely nothing for themselves. They were practically brain dead, if they even had brains.

The humans who were refuelling their vehicles stared at me as they went inside. Trying to be as polite as possible, given my verbal limitations, I spat an ample amount of saliva towards them.

I entered the building. There was a clothed human behind the counter. Instead of his hair being on the top of his head it covered the bottom half of his face. His body was more spherical than other humans' so he was marginally better looking. From the scent of hexanoic acid and androsterone I could tell personal hygiene wasn't one of his top priorities. He stared at my (admittedly distressing) genitalia and then pressed something behind the counter. I spat, but the greeting was unreciprocated. Maybe I had got it wrong about the spitting.

All this salivatory offloading was making me thirsty, so I went over to a humming refrigerated unit full of brightly coloured cylindrical objects. I picked one of them up, and opened it. A can of liquid called 'Diet Coke'. It tasted extremely sweet, with a trace of phosphoric acid. It was disgusting. It burst out of my mouth almost the moment it entered. Then I consumed something else. A foodstuff wrapped in synthetic packaging. This was, I would

later realise, a planet of things wrapped inside things. Food inside wrappers. Bodies inside clothes. Contempt inside smiles. Everything was hidden away. The foodstuff was called Mars. That got a little bit further down my throat, but only far enough to discover I had a gag reflex. I closed the door and saw a container with the words 'Pringles' and 'Barbecue' on it. I opened it up and started to eat. They tasted okay – a bit like sorp-cake – and I crammed as many as I could into my mouth. I wondered when I had last actually fed myself, with no assistance. I seriously couldn't remember. Not since infancy, that was for sure.

'You can't do that. You can't just eat stuff. You've got to pay for it.'

The man behind the counter was talking to me. I still had little idea of what he was saying, but from the volume and frequency I sensed it wasn't good. Also, I observed that his skin – in the places on his face where it was visible – was changing colour.

I noticed the lighting above my head, and I blinked.

I placed my hand over my mouth and made a noise. Then I held it at arm's length and made the same noise, noting the difference.

It was comforting to know that even in the most remote corner of the universe the laws of sound and light obeyed themselves, although it has to be said they seemed a little more lacklustre here.

There were shelves full of what I would shortly know as 'magazines', nearly all of which had faces with near-identical smiles on the front of them. Twenty-six noses. Fifty-two eyes. It was an intimidating sight.

I picked up one of these magazines as the man picked up the phone.

On Earth, the media is still locked in a pre-capsule age and most of it has to be read via an electronic device or via a printed medium made of a thin, chemically pulped tree-derivative known as paper. Magazines are very popular, despite no human ever feeling better

was a small collection of maps. A *Road Map of the British Isles* was among them. Perhaps I was on the British Isles. I picked up the map and tried to leave the building.

The man hung up the phone.

The door was locked.

Information arrived, unprompted: *Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University.*

'You're not bloody leaving,' said the man, in words I was beginning to comprehend. 'The police are on their way. I've locked the door.'

To his bafflement, I then proceeded to open the door. I stepped out and heard a distant siren. I listened, and realised the noise was only three hundred metres away and getting rapidly closer. I began to move, running as fast as I could away from the road and up a grass embankment towards another flat area.

There were lots of stationary haulage vehicles, parked in an ordered geometric fashion.

This was such a strange world. Of course, when viewed afresh there were only strange worlds but this one must have been strangest of all. I tried to see the similarity. I told myself that here all things were still made of atoms, and that those atoms would work precisely as atoms always do. They would move towards each other if there was distance between them. If there was no distance between them, they would repel each other. That was the most basic law of the universe, and it applied to all things, even here. There was comfort in that. The knowledge that wherever you were in the universe, the small things were always exactly the same. Attracting and repelling. It was only by not looking closely enough that you saw difference.

But still, right then, difference was all I saw.

The car with the siren was now pulling into the fuelling station, flashing blue light, so I hid among the parked lorries for a few minutes. I was freezing, and crouched into myself, my whole body

Corpus Christi

I was not told to provide this document of human life. That was not in my brief. Yet I feel obliged to do so to explain some remarkable features of human existence. I hope you will thereby understand why I chose to do what, by now, some of you must know I did.

Anyhow, I had always known Earth was a real place. I knew that, of course I did. I had consumed, in capsule form, the famous travelogue *The Fighting Idiots: My Time with the Humans of Water Planet 7,081*. I knew Earth was a real event in a dull and distant solar system, where not a great deal happened and where travel options for the locals were severely limited. I'd also heard that humans were a life form of, at best, middling intelligence and one prone to violence, deep sexual embarrassment, bad poetry and walking around in circles.

But I was starting to realise no preparation could have been enough.

By morning I was in this Cambridge place.

It was horrendously fascinating. The buildings were what I noticed first, and it was quite startling to realise that the garage hadn't been a one-off. All such structures – whether built for consumerist, habitative or other purposes – were *static* and *stuck to the ground.*

Of course, this was meant to be my town. This was where 'I' had lived, on and off, for over twenty years. And I would have to act like that was true, even though it was the most alien place I had ever seen in my life.

The lack of geometric imagination was startling. There was not so much as a decagon in sight. Though I did notice that some of the buildings were larger and – relatively speaking – more ornately designed than others.

Temples to the orgasm, I imagined.

Shops were beginning to open. In human towns, I would soon learn, everywhere is a shop. Shops are to Earth-dwellers what equation booths are to Vonnadorians.

In one such shop I saw lots of books in the window. I was reminded that humans have to *read* books. They actually need to sit down and look at each word consecutively. And that takes time. Lots of time. A human can't just swallow every book going, can't chew different tomes simultaneously, or gulp down near-infinite knowledge in a matter of seconds. They can't just pop a word-capsule in their mouth like we can. Imagine! Being not only mortal but also forced to take some of that precious and limited time and read. No wonder they were a species of primitives. By the time they had read enough books to actually reach a state of knowledge where they can do anything with it they are dead.

Understandably, a human needs to know what kind of book they are about to read. They need to know if it is a love story. Or a murder story. Or a story about aliens.

There are other questions, too, that humans have in bookstores. Such as, is it one of those books they read to feel clever, or one of those they will pretend never to have read in order to stay *looking* clever? Will it make them laugh, or cry? Or will it simply force them to stare out of the window watching the tracks of raindrops? Is it a true story? Or is it a false one? Is it the kind of story that will work on their brain or one which aims for lower organs? Is it one of those books that ends up acquiring religious followers or getting burned by them? Is it a book about mathematics or – like everything else in the universe – simply *because of it*?

Yes, there are lots of questions. And even more books. So, so many.

Humans in their typical human way have written far too many to get through. Reading is added to that great pile of things – work, love, sexual prowess, the words they didn't say when they really needed to say them – that they are bound to feel a bit dissatisfied about.

So, humans need to know about a book. Just as they need to know, when they apply for a job, if it will cause them to lose their mind at the age of fifty-nine and lead them to jump out of the office window. Or if, when they go on a first date, the person who is now making witticisms about his year in Cambodia will one day leave her for a younger woman called Francesca who runs her own public relations firm and says Kafkaesque without having ever read Kafka.

Anyway, there I was walking into this bookshop and having a look at some of the books out on the tables. I noticed two of the females who worked there were laughing and pointing towards my mid-section. Again, I was confused. Weren't men meant to go in bookshops? Was there some kind of war of ridicule going on between the genders? Did booksellers spend all their time mocking their customers? Or was it that I wasn't wearing any clothes? Who knew? Anyway, it was a little distracting, especially as the only laughter I had ever heard had been the fur-muffled chuckle of an Ipsoid. I tried to focus on the books themselves, and decided to look at those stacked on the shelves.

I soon noticed that the system they were using was alphabetical and related to the initial letter in the last name of each author. As the human alphabet only has 26 letters it was an incredibly simple system, and I soon found the Ms. One of these M books was called *The Dark Ages* and it was by Isobel Martin. I pulled it off the shelf. It had a little sign on it saying 'Local Author'. There was only one of them in stock, which was considerably fewer than the number of books by Andrew Martin. For example, there were thirteen copies of an Andrew Martin book called *The Square Circle* and

eleven of another one called *American Pi*. They were both about mathematics.

I picked up these books and realised they both said '£8.99' on the back. The interpolation of the entire language I had done with the aid of *Cosmopolitan* meant I knew this was the price of the books, but I did not have any money. So I waited until no one was looking (a long time) and then I ran very fast out of the shop.

I eventually settled into a walk, as running without clothes is not entirely compatible with external testicles, and then I started to read.

I searched both books for the Riemann hypothesis, but I couldn't find anything except unrelated references to the long-dead German mathematician Bernhard Riemann himself.

I let the books drop to the ground.

People were really beginning to stop and stare. All around me were things I didn't quite yet comprehend: litter, advertisements, bicycles. Uniquely human things.

I passed a large man with a long coat and a hairy face who, judging from his asymmetrical gait, seemed to be injured.

Of course, we may know brief pain, but this did not seem of that type. It reminded me that this was a place of death. Things deteriorated, degenerated, and died here. The life of a human was surrounded on all sides by darkness. How on Earth did they cope?

Idiocy, from slow reading. It could only be idiocy.

This man, though, didn't seem to be coping. His eyes were full of sorrow and suffering.

'Jesus,' the man mumbled. I think he was mistaking me for someone. 'I've seen it all now.' He smelt of bacterial infection and several other repugnant things I couldn't identify.

I thought about asking him for directions, as the map was rendered in only two dimensions and a little vague, but I wasn't up to it yet. I might have been able to say the words but I didn't

sign. These words said 'Cambridge University'. I used my left hand to open the gate and walked through, on to grass, heading towards the building that still had lights on.

Signs of life and warmth.

The grass was wet. The soft dampness of it repulsed me and I seriously considered screaming.

It was very neatly trimmed, this grass. I was later to realise that a neatly trimmed lawn was a powerful signifier, and should have commanded in me a slight sense of fear and respect, especially in conjunction (as this was) with 'grand' architecture. But right then, I was oblivious to both the significance of tidy grass and architectural grandeur and so I kept walking, towards the main building.

A car stopped somewhere behind me. Again, there were blue lights flashing, sliding across the stone façade of Corpus Christi.

(Flashing blue lights on Earth = trouble.)

A man ran towards me. There was a whole crowd of other humans behind him. Where had they come from? They all seemed so sinister, in a pack, with their odd-looking clothed forms. They were aliens to me. That was the obvious part. What was less obvious was the way I seemed like an alien to them. After all, I *looked* like them. Maybe this was another human trait. Their ability to turn on themselves, to ostracise their own kind. If that was the case, it added weight to my mission. It made me understand it better.

Anyway, there I was, on the wet grass, with the man running towards me and the crowd further away. I could have run, or fought, but there were too many of them – some with archaic-looking recording equipment. The man grabbed me. 'Come with me, sir.' I thought of my purpose. But right then I had to comply. Indeed, I just wanted to get out of the rain.

'I am Professor Andrew Martin,' I said, having complete confidence that I knew how to say this phrase. And that is when I discovered the truly terrifying power of other people's laughter.