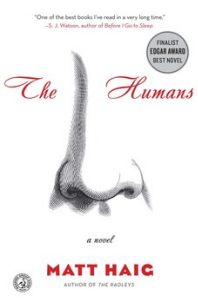
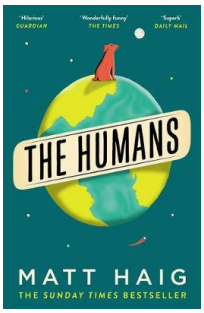
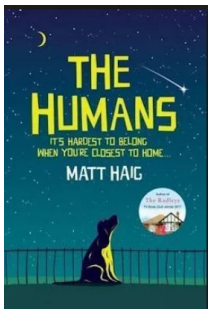
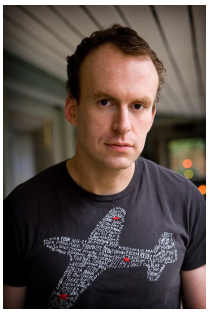
The Humans, *Matt Haig*, Simon & Schuster, 2013 (320 p.) isbn: 978-1-4767-3059-2 (pbk) .








Matt Haig

This is a science fiction story, not only because the start of the plot is that some mathematician Andrew Martin solves the Riemann Hypothesis, and therefore reached the very edge of knowledge. The Vonnadorians, a very advanced civilisation unimaginably far removed from our galaxy learned about this fact and they immediately took his life and sent a clone whose assignment is to eliminate every trace of the fact that there has been a breakthrough towards the solution of the Riemann Hypothesis.

The 43 year old replacement of Andrew Martin is aware of what was in the original one's brain, but he is a completely newborn on earth, not knowing how to behave or to understand the completely illogical behaviour of humans. So he walks around not wearing any clothes, wondering why other people are staring at him, and why they feel comfortable in covering their skin. Spitting at people as a sign of friendly greeting does not help much to socialise.

He of course is picked up by the police when he walks into Corpus Cristi (Cambridge University) and is put in a mental hospital to be treated for a breakdown. He has the human appearance, but has all the powers of a Vonnadorian: they can heal all their wounds, and wounds of others, except death, that is really fatal. But being undercover, he cannot disclose any of this.

After he leaves the hospital, he lives with his wife (Isobel), a teenage son (Gulliver), and a dog (Newton). The real Andrew was all but a loving husband and father, only interested in mathematics and his career, having an affair with a student on the side. The replacement, who is supposed to find out anyone who knew about the Riemann Hypothesis and kill them. Vonnadorians have no emotions, so that should be easy. He finds out that Isobel (a historian, and author) does not seem to be aware of anything and the son, has his own problems, just hates his father, and is not at all interested in his work. But there are others.

Another problem that the new Andrew has is food. He detests almost everything the humans eat, especially meat (why eat beef but not a cow?), and the only thing he seems to be able to swallow is a sandwich with peanut butter (also liked by Newton). And he does not know about loving or sex. All he knows about this subject, he knows from reading the *Cosmopolitan* magazine. He has to learn all the facial expressions of humans, and that what they say is not always what they mean. Many things are left unspoken, and what they ask has often an obvious answer.

While he is still in contact with his Vonnadorian superiors, who urge him to "clean up" everything, he becomes more and more human, appreciating the emotions that humans seem to have, the poems of Emily Dickinson, and music. This leads to some emotional and romantic scenes, both with his son and his wife. His superiors seem to loose grip on him, he is cut off from his powers (all the powers reside in the left hand), and a replacement is sent to finish the job. There is actually some suspense at this point, since instead of eliminating them, he is defending the ones he is now appreciating.

Thus the story becomes very much like a *The Little Mermaid* story with some twist at the end, that I will not spoil. There is of course some explanation about the Riemann hypothesis, and even a formula $\xi(1/1+it) = [e^{R\log(r(s/2))}\pi^{-1/4}(-t^2-1/4)/2] \times [e^{ij\log(r(s/2))}\pi^{-it/2}\zeta(1/2+it)]$ (no explanation given), and there is some reference to prime numbers, Giorgi Perelman, and Fermi paradox, but little reference to other mathematics. An engaging read: funny, romantic, thrilling, sometimes violent, and putting many things into perspective. Adhemar Bultheel