



A Little More Human

Fiona Maazel

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A dazzling new novel from the author of the “weird, thrilling, and inimitable” *Woke Up Lonely* (Marie Claire)

Meet Phil Snyder: new father, nursing assistant at a cutting-edge biotech facility on Staten Island, and all-around decent guy. Trouble is, his life is falling apart. His wife has betrayed him, his job involves experimental surgeries with strange side effects, and his father is hiding early-onset dementia. Phil also has a special talent he doesn’t want to publicize—he’s a mind reader and moonlights as Brainstorm, a costumed superhero. But when Phil wakes up from a blackout drunk and is confronted with photos that seem to show him assaulting an unknown woman, even superpowers won’t help him. Try as he might, Phil can’t remember that night, and so, haunted by the need to know, he mind-reads his way through the lab techs at work, adoring fans at Toy Pollio, and anyone else who gets in his way, in an attempt to determine whether he’s capable of such violence.

A Little More Human, rife with layers of paranoia and conspiracy, questions how well we really know ourselves, showcasing Fiona Maazel at her tragicomic, freewheeling best.

A Little More Human Details

Date : Published April 4th 2017 by Graywolf Press

ISBN : 9781555977696

Author : Fiona Maazel

Format : Paperback 351 pages

Genre : Fiction, Science Fiction, Adult

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From Reader Review A Little More Human for online ebook

David Turko says

I've never been so conflicted on a book before. I'm halfway through this book and I'm not enjoying it. The urge to read this dwindled as the days went on. It sucked too because it's right up my alley. Superpowers, conspiracy and a mixture of science fiction. The writing and the idea for the story are fantastic and in that sense it flows well. However the pacing and the characterization are weak. 3/4's of the characters were awful with very little positive traits. That and with the pacing where it just dragged on. The worst thing about this was that stuff was happening but not going anywhere. Again its upsetting because this had a lot of potential to be great. But as the pages kept going I couldn't keep investing in it.

exncgal says

I got about 1/3 of the way through, and just didn't have any desire to continue. The characters were a little too much (wacky, zany, pathological) for my tastes and I couldn't tell what the plot was going to turn into. Not my cup of tea.

Sean McBride says

?

Amber Schroer says

Seriously one of the best books I've read this year... funny, well-written, clever, speculative "futuristic" with a creative insight into the future of biometrics & where the line between tech meets medicine becomes blurred and twisted, and the best part... a page-turner - not unlike that of the best written thriller- trying to solve the puzzle that is this crazy twisted plot line. Think Gary Shyndangart meets Harlan Corbin in a novel that I can only compare to HBO's hilarious animated "Animals" (in particular Season Two's unraveling of the subplot). If you love any of the above, you'll love this!

Judy says

As my fellow readers know, I like to read all kinds of books in all kinds of genres. I especially like the younger female authors who are taking on the world-in-flux where we now live. Ever since I read her second novel, *Woke Up Lonely*, Fiona Maazel has been right up there near the top of my list.

The Los Angeles Times reviewer of this current novel said, "Imagine a situation comedy written by Philip K. Dick or a telenovela penned by Thomas Pynchon." I didn't want to write down what I thought as I read the

book (she writes like a man) because that seems so conflictedly sexist, but Jim Ruland did it for me.

Fiona Maazel does the magic trick of creating completely unlikeable characters that I grow to almost love. Phil Snyder and his equally wonky and hapless wife are two of those. Phil works as a nursing assistant at his parents' bleeding edge biotech research and rehabilitation center, SCET, where wounded soldiers and sufferers of brain disease receive experimental surgeries. On the side, Phil also has a weekend gig impersonating Brainstorm, star of a movie about a telepathic crime solver. The joke is that Phil can actually read minds but he can't solve the many crimes encircling his life.

Why did his wife turn to SCET for artificial insemination without telling him? How did his mother die? Is his current BFF Ben a true friend? And how the hell did he wake up one morning on the back of a horse, hungover, and covered in blood and semen? Did he really rape a woman while drunk?

This is a deep dark thriller that mines some of the horrible crimes going on at the fringes of modern society. The humor is black. The prose is relentless, jagged as a rapier in rapid action. As in her former novel, I spent the first half of the book crippled with doubt about why I was reading it, but I finished the book in awe. On Twitter I said I was left mentally gaping.

Levi says

Probably closer to 2.5 for me.

The concept of the story was promising, a fairly average person with the ability to read minds attempts to figure out what happened during a blackout drunk and why his life is spiraling.

I have multiple issues with the book though, the biggest being, I had no sympathy for any of the characters, the exception being the father, and some of the patients. The main characters, however, were petty, self absorbed and frustrating. There were also several points that I felt could have been flushed out more instead of being glanced over quickly and dropped in order to move the story along.

What I did like about the story is it's a pretty decent representation of what some people are predicting for the future of biotechnology. It also reflects how shitty people are, so it's a way is an accurate reflection of real life, and what actual superheroes might be like, assholes.

I really wanted more from this story.

Slagle Rock says

Though it read like a soap opera overlaid on a fairly cliché medical sci-fi tale and had tons of false starts and loose ends that didn't go much anywhere, I sort of enjoyed this book, based mostly, I think, on the strength of Maazel's prose. I agree with some other comments I saw that the author needs to do a better job of self editing. There was a lot to this story that was unexplainable and unessential, including the premise of the main character's brainstorm capabilities (though the gift did serve the author in wrapping up some issues at the end of the book). I was a bit disappointed with the ending, which seemed like a series of highly

improbable events and coincidences. Yet, I appreciated the way Maazel dealt with the slippery motivations and perceptions of her characters and I might try reading more of her work. Maybe her next book will be less taxing on one's willingness to suspend disbelief.

Kelly says

I found this to be a confusing jumble of words that were not leading anyplace interesting. It is rare for me to quit reading a book I have started but I called it quits on this one.

Matthew says

3.5 stars.

I'm waiting for Fiona Maazel to write what amounts for me to be the perfect novel. She showed me glimpses of her brilliance in her previous effort, *Woke Up Lonely*; these glimpses usurped the book's flaws and gave me hope that her next work would be truly exceptional. A few years later and I'm still in the same spot as before, as Maazel's follow-up, *A Little More Human*, disappointingly follows the same trend.

This is not to say *A Little More Human* isn't bursting with incredible moments. The problem is, much like its predecessor, there are too many of them. Maazel is undoubtedly talented and filled with ideas; it's her self-editing that needs work. And for something as fixable as streamlining one's genius, I'll continue to hold out hope that she'll one day blow my mind rather than muddle it.

But about the book itself... Phil Snyder is a man whose life is in flux. His marriage is faltering, thanks in part to his wife having gone behind his back to become artificially inseminated. Said insemination has been funded by his father, a renown neurologist with whom he has a spotty relationship. Father is privately struggling with dementia, along with the long term affects of the premature death of his wife, Phil's mother. All of these interweaving subplots should alone make *A Little Less Human* intriguing, yet Maazel doesn't stop there. And that's why it's difficult for me to deem the novel as anything more than a messy palette of vibrant colors, many of which clash and muddy the overall portrait.

Phil works at his father's hospital, a famous neurological institute on the cutting edge of medical technology. He begins to notice things out of the ordinary occurring to both himself and the patients that he interacts with daily. What's more, Phil has a side gig playing the part of a superhero at an area toy store; he uses this temporary employment to mask his ability to read minds, something the superhero he plays is also known to do.

Still with me? I know, it's a lot to take in. And I haven't even mentioned any of the supporting characters or the conspiracy theories that surround them. Or that Phil is being accused of rape. Or "The Swimmer". Etc. Etc. Etc...

Unsurprisingly, *A Little More Human* touches on several themes, most especially the importance of family and establishment of one's identity. Yet, ironically, it can't seem to find its own identity, wavering from literary fiction to mystery to dysfunctional family drama.

The glue that holds it together, keeps the novel from going completely off the rails, is Maazel herself; her aforementioned talent breathes life into each passage, bloated or otherwise. She's a thrilling writer - sharp, very funny, and remarkably self assured - yet one who also manages to get in her own way. Suffice to say had a lesser author taken on such an ambitiously plotted novel, I'd have likely given up half way through. But based on hope and skill, I managed my way through and was left in a familiar spot: waiting for one's genius to become fully realized.

Robert Wechsler says

Like the last book I tasted, Aminatta Forna's *Happiness*, this novel goes back and forth between different characters and stories, present and past. The major difference is that Maazel has a better ear and a good sense of humor. But these were not enough to get me past the first 75 pages. Some good fun, but it didn't hold my interest.

Jeff says

[Disclosure: I got an ARC of A Little More Human from the publisher; based--I guess--on the fact that I gave positive reviews to Fiona Maazel's previous books. Well, as it turns out I'm going to give this book a positive review too because it's great and you should all be jealous that I got to read it first!]

Fiona Maazel's new book, A Little More Human, is--like Woke Up Lonely--a funny, sad (lonely, even), multi-layered, semi-fantastical deconstruction of the things that make life difficult and worth living. It's got the elements that I'm now starting to see as common to Maazel's writing: lots of flawed but ultimately good characters with deep-inner lives and intersecting plot lines; double-lives and secrets and conspiracies that bump up into each other unexpectedly; a messy refusal to fully explain or wrap up every single thread because that's how life works; and a knife's edge of hilarity and pathos. Plus it is so much fun to read!

The plot line is slightly more traditional than her last book (but just slightly) in that it has the foundations of a corporate thriller, with a reluctant protagonist up against a shadowy international conspiracy. Even as it bounces between points of view, the plot is driving towards solving a mystery (with clues like unidentified dead bodies and secret keys!), and this edifice makes it more "readable." For those that found Woke Up Lonely well written but too hard to follow, A Little More Human will click better. (Not that I'm criticizing Woke Up Lonely--it's one of my favorite books!) Then on top of that there's the mind-reading and the experimental biotech laboratory, not-quite-reality factors that are fun and interesting, used to further an exciting plot but also to dig into themes of humanity and responsibility and question what we can know about our mind.

And it's those themes that really make this book something special. This is definitely still the kind of literary fiction that has high expectations of the reader. The plot is just one of many aspects, and you can and should engage with the material on multiple levels. I'm continually impressed with how many different concepts Fiona Maazel juggles within a single book, all of it working together to build something bigger. I just finished reading it so I'm still trying to unpack my own thoughts, and I'll probably be mulling over A Little More Human for a long time.

What connected most for me was the idea of how little we can know those around us and how little we even

know our own selves. So much of what was going on in the book fed into this question. Even with the protagonist Phil Snyder's limited mind reading capabilities, he didn't understand the secrets carried by everyone around him. And--more importantly--he had big gaps in his own memory, as well as a real lack of self-introspection and a failure to wrestle with his own motivations. It's tough at times to like Phil because of the terrible thing he's potentially done during his lost time, but also because of the stupid and angry way he's responding to conflict in his life. But, then again, he's so human in that he doesn't always make the right decisions and has to live with his stupidity and his anger.

Then there's his father, a once great doctor and scientist who is struggling with the oncoming rush of dementia, losing more memories every day, knowing that soon he won't even know what he's lost, wondering if he'll still be the same person if he no longer knows himself. He's also a hoarder, a fact that is handled with real compassion (rather than mockery as is so common). It's also presented with exquisite detail, a suffocating sense of a life about to tumble into nostalgia's chaos. In this book a house filled with extreme clutter works as a metaphor for the brain's disordered memories, and it's a brilliant analog parallel to the book's biotech plotline: hoarding as physical manifestation of memory augmentation.

I want to go even further and say that, structurally, the way the novel skips between points of view is itself a representation of the mind's grasp at patterns. But, perhaps I'm overthinking... sometimes a book just jumps between points of view. But that's thing about *A Little More Human*: it has you linking everything, looking for connections everywhere, sucking you into its paranoia and conspiracies.

And with all this I've hardly scratched the surface! There's also Ada and her real-world Nigerian e-mail scam and there's a movie superhero overlapped onto Phil's life and there's a Big Pharma plutocracy and all of it mixing together with an ease of social parody and winking cultural reference. in the end the tumble of exciting revelations is second only to the revelations about who the characters really are inside when pushed to the breaking point, a lesson most people don't want to learn. Like *Woke Up Lonely*, it's not what I'd call a happy ending but maybe more of a "happy moment," a split second when you can feel good about yourself before the hoarded memories come crashing down on your head. It's so beautiful and sad and perfect and I loved reading it.

David says

Phil Snyder's wife has gone behind his back and had herself artificially inseminated. His father is losing his mind. On the weekends Phil works as a promotional costumed superhero called Brainstorm. And meanwhile, his ability to read minds and manipulate thoughts prove useless when he is accused of sexually assaulting a woman. And to top it off, the local biotech company, SCET, is secretly manipulating it all.

There's a lot more to it, but that was the bare bones of it. *A Little More Human* is a challenging read.

I read a lot of books, and admittedly many follow a loose structure that allows my mind to wander a little bit without losing the plot. But this one is so bizarre, with so many characters and plotlines that it is easy to get lost. It is overall enjoyable but there is a lot going on.

I thought it was interesting to think about Phil's odd superpower and how a normal person would try to use it. He can re-set other people around him so that they don't remember him or what they know about him. If you could re-set the people in your life, would it be worth it?

A Little More Human is ultimately satisfying because it is not a paint-by-numbers novel.

Jason Pettus says

DID NOT FINISH. There wasn't anything particularly wrong with this book; but a hundred pages in, I still found myself completely disengaged with the proceedings, so thought I'd use my reading time more wisely and move on to something I'll hopefully like more. Like a lot of 21st century academic literary fiction, Maazel here fills up her book with quirky details, in the hopes of masking the fact that almost nothing of interest is actually happening to anyone; this is my first book of hers, and although I've heard good things about the rest of her oeuvre, this mediocre experience now makes me question whether I'd like them or not. Just compelling enough that I'll take another chance with her next book (or maybe an earlier one if I stumble across it), but you can consider my expectations officially lowered at this point.

Aaron Ambrose says

what is this book? A comic caper? A romantic comedy? A paternity drama? A paranoid thriller? A super-power adventure story? A contemplation of what it means to be human?

It's a little bit of all these things, but it doesn't hold together, and the smart alecky writing style grates increasingly, as the story reveals its inability to hang together. I could handle it while I was trapped on airplanes for a day, but when I tried to finish the last 90 pages at home, all I could think was, "Why do I care about this nonsense?"

It's extremely rare for me to give up on a book, but 50 pages from the end, I lost all patience and dropped it in the recycle bin.

Alicia says

I have been reading this book since Tuesday and finally realized that at 50 percent in, I was just not at all feeling it. It should have been right up my alley-- people with superpowers, mysterious happenings, a sort of thriller element-- but I felt like Maazel was not revealing anything to the reader in a timely manner, so it was just STUFF happening and not leading anywhere. Really bogged down for me and I did not care enough to invest more time in it.
