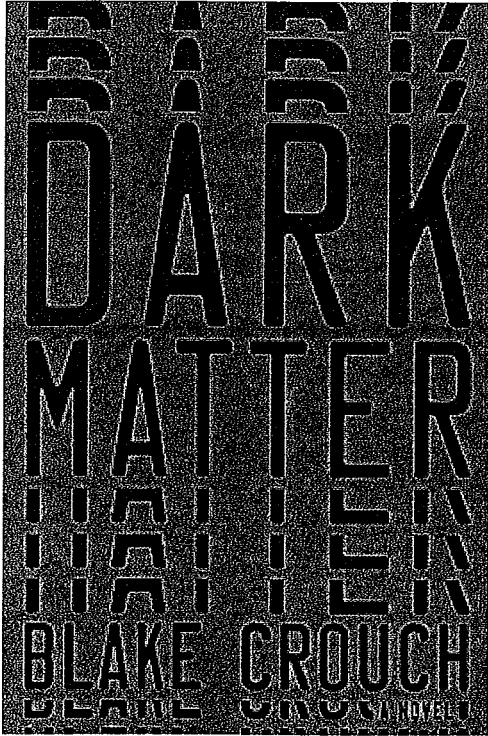


ORIGINAL ESSAYS

The Story Behind 'Dark Matter'

by Blake Crouch, July 18, 2016 3:03 PM



The hardest thing writers have to do is figure out for themselves who they are. What should they be writing about? What stories should they be telling? What does writing mean to them? I didn't know the answers to those questions for a long, long time. What does writing mean to them? I didn't know the answers to those questions for a long, long time.

Then I discovered Michael Crichton. I'd seen most of the movie adaptations like **Jurassic Park** and **Sphere**, but when I started reading his books and learning about his process, something clicked. I realized that he wasn't just coming up with cool plots. He was writing books that allowed him to explore topics that interested him. Writing a thriller as self-education. I thought, *Wait, you can just write about stuff that stokes your own curiosity?*

And so I tried that with a trilogy of books about a town called **Wayward Pines**. I had this idea for a guy who gets stranded in a creepy, *Twin Peaks* kind of town, and without giving too much away, it let me research and investigate two areas of scientific study that had been piquing my interest: suspended animation and flash mutation. It was the best writing experience I'd had to date, and when I finished those books, I felt like I'd actually learned something in the process.

And that brings me to this new book of mine, **Dark Matter**. For the last decade, during this writerly identity

crisis I'd been struggling through, I'd always wanted to write a thriller that played with quantum mechanics. I'd tried several times to write a version of *Dark Matter*, approaching it through three different ideas, but not one of them seemed to be enough to support a book on its own.

The breakthrough happened two years ago. I went to Chicago to see a good friend of mine, the novelist **Marcus Sakey**. I pitched him these three ideas as potentially separate books, and as we were talking and brainstorming, I suddenly realized these weren't three different novels. They were different aspects of the same big novel.

The scope and ambition of this new book felt scary and daunting, but I'd just had a great experience throwing myself into the deep end writing *Wayward Pines*, and I was feeling brave and excited. So I decided to dive in again, and again try to do something bigger and better than I'd ever written before.

Dark Matter is about a guy named Jason Dessen. Jason is a brilliant physicist living in Chicago with his wife Daniela and his son Charlie. He's a true genius, and while there was a point in his late-20s when his research could have made him a star in his field, he instead chose a family-focused life. One night, while walking home, he's abducted and injected with a strange drug. When he awakes, his world has completely changed. He's no longer married, doesn't have a son, and has achieved professional success beyond his wildest dreams. This sets him on a thrilling, mysterious, and sometimes terrifying journey to find out what has happened to him — one that, in very scary and concrete ways, forces him and the reader to reckon with the quantum-mechanics principles that make our universe tick.

Quantum mechanics sounds abstract and science-fiction-y and intimidating, I know. But I promise — I wrote *Dark Matter* so if you'd never heard of quantum mechanics, it wouldn't matter. And while the behavior of subatomic particles seems far removed from our day-to-day lives, when you scale the ramifications of quantum mechanics up to the macro world, to our world, things actually *do* get very interesting and very strange, very quickly.

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We've all wondered — what would've happened if I took that job I turned down? What if I'd gone to this college, instead of that one? Even on a smaller scale — if I'd slept in this morning instead of waking up in time, or if my last vacation was to Barcelona instead of Paris, wouldn't those decisions, in some way, have made me a materially different person from who I am right now?

What if quantum mechanics gave us a way to actually *answer* those questions? That's one of the big ideas at the heart of *Dark Matter*.

So what is this novel? I like to think of it as a story about the road not taken. It contains elements of thriller, science fiction, paranoid suspense, the slightest touch of horror, but at its core, it's a love story — about

how our hero's relationship with the woman he loves has changed him and his world, and just how far he will go to be with her. It's also the manifestation of everyone's existential question: Am I who I was supposed to be? Is this the life I was meant to be living?

Which brings me back to Michael Crichton. He didn't just play with big ideas in his books. He used those ideas to explore questions that felt immediate, meaningful, emotionally powerful — to *everyone*. You didn't have to be a sci-fi reader to understand what he was talking about, or to care, deeply, about the suspenseful tale he was spinning. That's the kind of book I set out to write with *Dark Matter*.

Or, as I wrote on the dedication page: "This book is for anyone who has wondered what their life might look like at the end of the road not taken."

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Blake Crouch is best known for the **Wayward Pines** trilogy, which has sold more than a million copies and was adapted into a prime-time event series on FOX. He lives in Colorado. **Dark Matter** is his most recent novel.



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Dark Matter (Crouch)

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Dark Matter

Blake Crouch, 2016

Crown/Archetype

352 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781101904220



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Summary

A brilliantly plotted, relentlessly surprising science-fiction thriller from the author of the bestselling Wayward Pines trilogy.

“Are you happy with your life?”

Those are the last words Jason Dessen hears before the masked abductor knocks him unconscious.

Before he awakens to find himself strapped to a gurney, surrounded by strangers in hazmat suits.

Before a man Jason’s never met smiles down at him and says, “Welcome back, my friend.”

In this world he’s woken up to, Jason’s life is not the one he knows. His wife is not his wife. His son was never born. And Jason is not an ordinary college physics professor, but a celebrated genius who has achieved something remarkable. Something impossible.

Is it this world or the other that’s the dream? And even if the home he remembers is real, how can Jason possibly make it back to the family he loves? The answers lie in a journey more wondrous and horrifying than anything he could’ve imagined—one that will force him to confront the darkest parts of himself even as he battles a terrifying, seemingly unbeatable foe.

Dark Matter is a brilliantly plotted tale that is at once sweeping and intimate, mind-

bendingly strange and profoundly human—a relentlessly surprising science-fiction thriller about choices, paths not taken, and how far we'll go to claim the lives we dream of. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1978
- Where—Statesville, North Carolina, USA
- Education—B.A., University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
- Currently—lives in Durango, Colorado

Blake Crouch is an American author, best known for his 2012-14 Wayward Pines Trilogy, which was adapted into the 2015 television series *Wayward Pines*.

Early life and career

Crouch was born near the piedmont town of Statesville, North Carolina in 1978. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and graduated in 2000 with degrees in English and Creative Writing.

He published his first two novels, *Desert Places* and *Locked Doors*, in 2004 and 2005. His most recent work, *Dark Matter*, came out in 2016.

In addition to his novels, his short stories have appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Thriller 2* and other anthologies.

Crouch lives in Durango, Colorado. (*From Wikipedia. Retrieved 7/29/2016.*)

Book Reviews

What is "identity?" In the words of physics professor Jason Dessen, "If you strip away all the trappings of personality and lifestyle, what are the core components that make me *me*?" Conventional wisdom asserts that the choices we make shape our destiny and, perhaps, our identity. The surreal, "multi-verse" context of Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* presents a far more complex concept of identity: one not just comprised of multiple destinies but multiple *selves* across quantum states, each living in "alternate realities at the same point in space and time." [READ MORE.](#)

John Michael De Marco, author, Book Club Widower - LitLovers

In the technical sense of the term, Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* is definitely a book... But rather like the mysterious cubelike chamber invented by the physicist Jason Dessen in Crouch's novel—well, let's say by at least one version of Jason and

perhaps by several; indeed, perhaps by an infinite or incalculable number of Jasons—*Dark Matter* is a portal into other dimensions of reality...as you read it on paper it inhabits a state of quantum transubstantiation, or "superposition," to use Jason Dessen's lingo. It's a novel right now, one that barely qualifies as beach reading because you'll gulp it down in one afternoon, or more likely one night. But the next time you look, it will have metamorphosed into some other form.

Andrew O'Hehir - New York Times Book Review

A dazzling book for summer [with] a mind-bending premise, a head-spinning plot that's dialogue-driven and adrenaline-fueled, and a gut-wrenching climax that gave me goose bumps.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

A mind-blowing sci-fi/suspense/love-story mash-up.

Entertainment Weekly

Excellent characterization and well-crafted tension do much to redeem the outlandish plot of this SF thriller from Crouch.... Crouch makes little attempt to justify the underlying science fiction MacGuffin, but a rousing and heartfelt ending will leave readers cheering.

Publishers Weekly

[A]n irresistible read. Despite a few small missteps...it is not hard to see why this title was preempted by Sony in a big bid for the movie rights. Verdict: While stories of the multiverse are not new, Crouch brings a welcome intensity to the trope. —MM

Library Journal

Crouch keeps the pace swift and the twists exciting. Readers who liked his *Wayward Pines* trilogy will probably devour this speculative thriller in one sitting [as will] those who enjoy roller-coaster reads in the vein of Harlan Coben.

Booklist

[E]ncounters sometimes strain credibility.... Suspenseful, frightening, and sometimes poignant—provided the reader has a generously willing suspension of disbelief.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

(We'll add the publisher's questions if and when they're made available; in the meantime, use these LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for *Dark Matter*...than take off on your own:

1. In what way is Jason like the Box, the mysterious cube-ish chamber?
2. What does "superposition" mean? Can you explain it?
3. Talk about the various universes Jason inhabits. Which do you find most disturbing or frightening? Consider this question, which has been posed by ethical philosophers regarding multiple universes: if a murder takes place in one universe, would we find it as horrifying if there were other universes in which the murder doesn't take place? What about the Holocaust in World War II or, say, slavery before the U.S. Civil War?
4. This book explores the nature of identity. Who is the real Jason? *Is* there a real Jason—could a case be made that he is not the Jason with a wife and son who narrates the story? Out of all the versions of Jason, what makes him...him?
5. What would your alternate universes look like? What dreams, in your own life, did you choose not to pursue which, if events in *Dark Matter* happened to you, would return as alternate universes? Ever wish that were possible? How different a person might you be had you chosen one of those different paths?
6. During his search for "home" what does Jason come to learn about himself, flaws and all? What does he come to value?
7. Have you read or watched other works of speculative fiction about the nature of identity? Consider Ursula K. Le Guin, Neil Gaiman, or Peter F. Hamilton. What about the movie *Sliding Doors* or *The Man in the High Castle*, either the 2015 film series or the book by Philip K. Dick? How does Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* compare with any of them—how does it stack up?
8. What about the science? For those with little scientific knowledge: were the book's scientific passages a detraction, something you had to plow your way through, or maybe just skim over? For those strong in the sciences: was the writing too boiled down, merely "popsience"? Or was it a fairly legitimate description of today's scientific theories?
9. What is the theoretical underpinning of multiple universes? Do you believe they exist?

1. Is the use of the box ethical? Why or why not?
2. Is there a "best" Jason? Explain your answer.
3. What will happen to the parallel Jasons now? Will they follow the family?
4. Where do you think Amanda ends up? What criteria might she choose when looking for a new world?
5. Is Jason2 a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
6. Does quantum physics affect your understanding of free will?
7. Where do you think the Dessen family will end up? Be creative.
8. Pick one choice that Jason makes and write what you think would have happened if he had made the opposite decision.



SEARCH



Dark Matter Reader's Guide

BY BLAKE CROUCH

Category: Suspense & Thriller | Science Fiction

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READERS GUIDE

In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal certain aspects of the story in this novel. If you have not finished reading *Dark Matter*, we respectfully suggest that you do so before reviewing this guide.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. For you, what was the biggest surprise as you followed Jason through the many twists laid out in *Dark Matter*?
2. What makes Jason 1 a standout amongst the others? Is our allegiance to him a matter of perspective? Or is there something fundamental to him that is more deserving of Daniela and Charlie than the others?
3. When the novel switches to Daniela's point of view for the first time, were you surprised by the scene that takes place? Confused? What did you think was happening?
4. At its heart, *Dark Matter* is a love story. Yet we see Daniela in many different worlds and in situations where she is not with Jason and happy. Do you think they are supposed to be together? Do you believe that they would have been just as happy pursuing their career-driven dreams?
5. Many of the decisions in *Dark Matter* center around the notion of career and family. If you had to choose, would you rather live Jason 1 or Jason 2's life? Why?
6. Jason 2 (and some of the other Jasons we meet later in the book) acts in morally questionable ways throughout the novel. Do you think that his life path has caused him to be less kind-hearted? Or is he merely self-interested and willing to do whatever it takes?
7. Without Amanda, Jason 1 might not have survived. What do you think of her decision to leave him? How did you feel about their relationship?
8. What kind of world do you imagine Jason, Daniela, and Charlie entered at the end of the book?

9. What did you think of the science and technology in the book? If this kind of advancement in science was possible, would you want it to exist?
10. Dark Matter has a somewhat unusual combination of qualities—it's part thriller, part science-fiction novel, part love story. Can you think of other books or movies that combine these genres in similar ways?
11. What writing tricks and techniques does the author use to keep readers turning pages and make the book read quickly? Did you find them effective?
12. What was your favorite element of the novel? Your least favorite?
13. Is there a path not taken that you wish you could experience? If so, what is it? Do you feel you ultimately made the right decision?
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