

# The Dead Fathers Club

by Matt Haig

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## About the Book

The plot may strike one as oddly familiar. Following the premature death of his beloved father, a young man is visited by the father's ghost. The spirit urges the youth to take vengeance upon a morally ambiguous uncle, who may have had a hand in the father's death and who now has romantic designs on the dead man's widow. Torn between loyalty to his father and his moral obligations to the living, the young man is plagued by indecision. Although he yearns to bring peace to his father's soul by killing the apparent murderer, he hesitates, wondering what kind of peace can truly be won by giving the wheel of violence another turn.

Recognizable as it all seems, the scene of Matt Haig's ingenious novel **The Dead Fathers Club** is not Denmark, but the working-class English town of Newark-on-Trent. The only castle in sight is not Elsinore, but the Castle and Falcon pub, owned and operated by Brian Noble until the suspicious car accident that claimed his life. Furthermore, Haig's Hamlet figure is a far cry from the brooding, intellectual scholar who returns from Wittenberg to find his life in tatters. He is, instead, eleven-year-old Philip Noble, an isolated, introspective boy who wrestles with his dead father's stark, insistent command: He must kill his seemingly kindly Uncle Alan, who, as an experienced garage mechanic, possessed both the knowledge and the opportunity to tamper with his late brother's car. As Philip looks on, motive is soon added to means and opportunity: Not only does Alan swiftly step in to take charge of Brian's pub, but he also promptly proposes marriage to Philip's mother. As Philip contends with powerful emotions of grief, anger, and jealousy, he must also confront a battery of almost unanswerable questions. Is his father's ghost telling him the truth, or is he duping his son into committing a series of unconscionable crimes? Is Uncle Alan sincere in his apparent indulgence and generosity toward Philip, or is he, as the ghost insists, secretly plotting to kill both Philip and his mother? And, as another writer once put it, is it nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, end them?

Enlivening this remarkable novel from start to finish is the narrative voice of Philip himself. Lonely, misunderstood, but thoughtful beyond his years, Philip struggles to express his complex fears of both life and death in the journal that his

school counselor encourages him to keep. As Matt Haig leads us to question the motives of Philip's family and friends, as well as the true nature of Philip's father's ghost, he gradually evolves a brilliant contradictory portrait of his central character. Is he precociously philosophical or pathetically mad? Is he a foolish boy, or a fount of strange forbidden wisdom? Must he follow Hamlet's destiny to the bitter end, or will he summon the courage to regain control of his fate? Not until the shattering conclusion do the deep mysteries of the story become clear.

## Discussion Guide

1. During the course of his narrative, Philip Noble, commits a series of crimes that grow increasingly serious. Despite his criminal behavior, does he continue to move the sympathies of the reader? By what means does he do so?
2. Leah confides to Philip that she hates God. By contrast, her father, Mr. Fairview, has turned enthusiastically toward religion after the death of his wife. What commentary does *The Dead Fathers Club* offer regarding religion, and how does religion influence events and relationships in the novel?
3. Philip observes, "If you speak to yourself people think you are mad but if you write the same things they think you are clever." Discuss examples from life or literature that bear out this observation on the nature of madness and intelligence.
4. Philip routinely omits standard punctuation and sometimes arranges words on the page to add visual meanings to the verbal significance of his writing. How do these devices influence the experience of reading the novel?
5. How might Philip's mental disturbances be influenced by matters relating to sexuality, for example, his recent circumcision, his attraction toward his mother, and his ambivalent feelings about Leah?
6. Many of Haig's characters, including Uncle Alan (Claudius), Philip's mother (Gertrude), Leah (Ophelia), and Ross and Gary (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) have clear parallels in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, these characters have been reimaged with traits and motivations that distinguish them from their Shakespearean models. Choose a character from **The Dead Fathers Club** and reread the scenes involving that character's counterpart in *Hamlet*. How has Haig altered the character? What do you think of these changes?
7. Philip takes a surprising interest in Roman history, especially in the reign of Nero. How does this interest relate to Philip's overall mental state, and how is it woven into the novel's plot?
8. Philip, who occasionally alludes to the wealth of the Fairview family and comments that "clever schools did Rugby and thick schools did Football," is aware of the social and intellectual class system that surrounds him. To what extent is Haig's novel shaped by issues of class?
9. What is the most useful way to understand the spirit that we come to know as Philip's father's ghost? Should he be thought of as a character, as an embodiment of Philip's anxieties, as a demonic presence, or as something else? Why does Philip trust him for so long?
10. Philip grossly misjudges the people around him and, because he tells the story, we view these people only from his misguided perspective. Nevertheless, by some miracle of narration, we are able to see them more or less as they are: as

somewhat limited but basically well-meaning human beings. How does Haig manage both to immerse us in Philip's point of view and give us an objective understanding of his other characters?

**11.** In a famous essay, T. S. Eliot complained that *Hamlet* was artistically flawed because the hero's emotions were in excess of the factual situation in which he found himself. Does Haig's retelling of the story give Philip sufficient motives for his extreme conduct? Do you find Philip believable as a character? Why or why not?

## Author Bio

Matt Haig is the author of the internationally bestselling memoir REASONS TO STAY ALIVE, along with five novels, including THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY, HOW TO STOP TIME and several award-winning children's books. His work has been published in 50 territories across the world.

## Critical Praise

Touching, quirky and macabre.

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