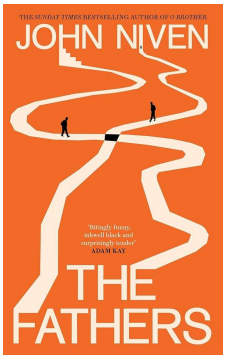
# ‘The Fathers’, by John Niven

## Review by Martyn Colebrook




I first became aware of John Niven through his more recent works, having regrettably overlooked the earlier and significant part of his career. So it was with great delight that a notification of the publication of *TheFathers* arrived out of the blue earlier this year, with my appetite having been suitably whetted by Niven’s shocking revenge thriller *The F*ck it List* (2020) and, in 2023, his sobering memoir *Oh Brother*. Between the highly personal, often traumatic reflections of the latter, and the outlandishly transgressive and edgy darkness of the former, there is a bleak gallows humours and propensity for action that is often unexpected, propelling the reader to scurry back through the pages to detect whether a glaring or subtle clue has been missed in the exuberance of devouring the novel. Inevitably, there has not – a testament to the breadth of talent Niven possesses.

Niven’s latest novel opens in the somewhat unlikely setting of a Glasgow maternity ward, where the eponymous Fathers – Dan and Jada – meet following the birth of their respective sons. From the outset it is apparent that these two men inhabit very different worlds, and this chance encounter sets up a sequence of events with consequences beyond the imagination of the most perceptive reader. Dan is a firmly middle-class, high-flying screenwriter with a portfolio of successful tv serials to his name. He is married to Grace and their life displays the trappings of wealth without veering into ostentation. Yet beneath the surfaces of domestic harmony and comfort, the shadow of infertility and their inability to conceive haunts the couple; a feeling of failure clouds the relationship and exposes Dan’s vulnerability in achieving the final markers of masculine success. Jada, by contrast, is a lower-class petty criminal, scraping by day-to-day on his

wits and the illegal enterprises in which he routinely involves himself to keep the bookmaker's debts at bay, his dealer onside and some semblance of order maintained in his chaotic household with Nicola, his partner and the mother of his child. Whilst Dan is a first timer, this is not Jada's first rodeo – a father of at least six, he is quietly known among local women as "positions Jada".

Upon witnessing his son's arrival, Dan remarks 'it was horror. Pure horror. It was a John Carpenter film. Cronenberg.' (3), and it is this juxtaposition of dark humour and the everyday which leads the reader wonder which Niven novel they are about to encounter. Dan muses on Shakespeare after dwelling on the potential problems of conception via artificial insemination until his mental digressions are interrupted by an inquisitive 'Ye awright there, pal?' (p. 8) and the cigarette-smoking, facially scarred figure of Jada with his 'small, dark marbles, slightly hooded' (p. 9) eyes whose 'natural setting seeming to be vigilance' (8) enters his consciousness. From this first meeting, there is a mutual misunderstanding of each other's lives: why would Dan (an 'ancient wank') be having his first child in his forties, and does Jada only have to look at a woman to impregnate them? Dan documents frequent 'Jadaisms' as notes in his phone for future use (one suspects) as character epithets in his television work.

Jada's post-birth haunt is 'The Flaps', a 'blighted pub' that 'lay on the hinterland between Partick and Whiteinch' (p. 20). Here he celebrates in his own chaotic way –whether securing contraband, winning fights, or gaining early release from a stint at His Majesty's pleasure. While conducting business with his criminal fraternity, Jada is kept informed of an opportunity to intercept freight from an airport, liberating items of value to move through the supply chain for money which, whilst not lucrative, would certainly give him 'walking around money'.

Dan's post-birth activities, by contrast, are far more sedate and orderly: he navigates the delicate handling of a lead actor in the production that has made him wealthy alongside social gatherings of his own circle of comfortably positioned friends and family. Yet the worlds of the two men continue to collide in the most aberrant of ways. Dan finds himself in The Flaps, treated by Jada's cohort as an oddity they can appreciate despite knowing little of his ventures, while Jada enters Dan's world bringing his own streak of retributive violence: a public knee to a sensitive area of the body leaves one of Dan's friends on the floor of a bar, prompting the interloper's swift departure. PriceBeater poverty meets posh and plush on a regular basis, with such interactions leaving this reader

occasionally cheering on the rogue actions of Jada. Other memorable moments centre on distinctive approaches to parenting, such as when Jada and Nicola take heroin in front of their son and bottle-feed him Irn Bru – a scene reminiscent of the bleak and grotesque worlds that Irvine Welsh's anti-heroes populate.

To reveal further plot developments would risk spoilers, but the novel's Glasgow setting remains unmistakable throughout, culminating in Niven's final line: 'Like any properly elevated view of Glasgow, it reminded you that it really was a very compact city, a small place where the wildest things happened all the time' (p. 357). *The Fathers* is indeed a wild ride: uncomfortable, bitter, bleak and bloody marvellous.

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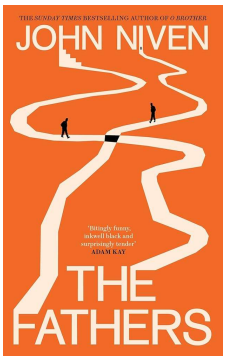


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