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## Human Error

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HUMAN ERROR

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Avery Werther

2021

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Avery Werther, and entitled Human Error, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgement.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Les Standiford

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Aza Weir-Soley

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Debra Dean, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 28, 2021

The thesis of Avery Werther is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2021

## DEDICATION

To my mom, who never doubted my 5-year-old self when I said I would write books someday. Thank you for your unwavering belief in me and for making me the person I am today.

To my dad, who worries about me becoming a starving artist but supports me chasing my dreams nonetheless. Thank you for being my consulting sci-fi and tech expert on this project.

To Sander, who was there to pick me up every time I fell down along this journey. Thank you for always reading my work actively and earnestly, despite fiction not being your favorite.

And to Maximus, whose love and joy gave me the strength to keep going each day.

Thank you for quite literally staying by my side as I wrote this novel.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HUMAN ERROR

by

Avery Werther

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Debra Dean, Major Professor

HUMAN ERROR is a science-fiction novel set in a future in which, to save the planet from environmental degradation, humans have been eradicated and replaced by “Syntho-sapiens.” These synthetic humans are engineered in labs to be not only physically superior to their evolutionary predecessors, but also equal in every way to each other. However, from the moment Cal-12 opens his eyes, he is different. He not only has heterochromia, a mutation of the eye color, but also a strong need for connection that his emotionless peers seem to lack. This need intensifies when he discovers a human woman named Thalia, whose people live in hiding, awaiting their opportunity to reclaim the world that was taken from them. Through Cal and Thalia’s attempts to uncover both the dark secrets of his people and the lost history of hers, the novel explores the themes of power and personhood.

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## I. Chapter 1

The first thing Cal 12 saw was the sun. At the time of his birth, it had reached exactly the right angle in the sky to be clearly visible through the laboratory window, to cast a few warm rays on his face. He knew from his programming that the sun was only a star, one of countless billions more in the universe, yet he couldn't help but feel there was something fortuitous in that it happened to shine upon his first moments of awareness. After all, humans had once blotted the sun from the sky in their carelessness – had destroyed themselves and nearly the whole world with them – but here were Cal and the sun both, hundreds of years later, proving that life could not only go on, but could evolve into something better.

He was standing naked in a small, dim room, breathing air for the first time. Droplets of blue liquid still clung to his skin and dripped from his hair, remnants of the synthetic amniotic fluid that had filled his holding tank only moments before. The holes in his skin where tubes and wires had been attached to his wrists and neck were already healing rapidly and would soon be gone without a trace; only the tube that had connected at the center of his abdomen would leave a mark, and this was an intentional design choice on Father's part, an homage to the navel, a reminder of the days when females had been necessary for creating new life.

The glass doors of the holding tank and all the tubes and wires – the only semblance of a mother that Cal would ever have – had already receded into the wall behind him. Before him, the space was furnished with only a desk, above which floated a large, holographic computer screen. Cal noticed that all the data on the screen pertained to him, and it all seemed to indicate a healthy specimen, a successful birth. There were

pictures that cataloged his stages of development, from fetus to child to adolescent to adult, all suspended inside the holding tank with eyes closed as if in slumber. There were phrases like, “HEART RATE OPTIMAL” and “LUNGS ACTIVATED” displayed in bold, glowing letters. Syntho sapiens possessed all the same organs that humans once had, but down to the cellular level, they were better and stronger in every way. A video on the screen showed tiny, insect-like robots swimming around his tank, performing micro-surgeries to augment his body with the technological enhancements that would elevate his senses of sight and hearing. In the brief time between the creation of Syntho sapiens and the extinction of humans, the humans had called them “cyborgs,” failing to understand that they were overall more organic than cybernetic. In their hubris, they tended to mistakenly assume that such a superior life form must not be a life form at all, that something grown in a lab couldn’t truly be alive. But they had managed to stay alive even when humans couldn’t, surviving The Fall to inherit the earth from them.

In front of the screen stood a doctor who wore a white lab coat over his standard black jumpsuit and black boots. Just as Cal took note of his presence, he turned away from the desk and took a few steps towards Cal, closing the short distance between them and blocking Cal’s view of the sun. The doctor studied him with an expression that was nearly inscrutable but which betrayed the faintest hint of alarm. It was in the eyebrows; the way they pushed together and crinkled the man’s porcelain skin made Cal’s chest tighten.

Cal stared back into the doctor’s dull, brown eyes and wondered if he should say something. Having of course never been born before, Cal wasn’t entirely sure that this

was how it was supposed to go. He glanced down at his bare feet and watched the last bits of blue liquid slither down a small drain between his heels.

Suddenly, the doctor's hand was under Cal's chin, thrusting his head upwards so that he was once again forced to make eye contact. The doctor's eyebrows had crept even closer together, and Cal wondered if he had done something wrong.

"Heterochromia."

The doctor had spoken so quietly that Cal at first thought he must have misheard. The word he had used was nowhere to be found in Cal's programming; he reasoned that it must be something only doctors were programmed to know.

The doctor tightened his grip on Cal's chin and turned his face from side to side a few times before releasing him and walking back to the computer. He paused, hand hovering over the screen as if preparing to enter a piece of data, but then seemed to think better of it and walked back to where Cal stood.

"Cal 12."

"Yes, doctor?"

"Do you feel any pain or discomfort in your eyes?"

Cal was taken aback. He didn't know what pain would feel like, but he determined that he wasn't feeling any now. He shook his head.

The doctor motioned for Cal to follow him to the window.

"Zoom in on the watchtower straight ahead, and look down at the door," said the doctor. "Can you read the number on the door?"

Cal took his first steps just as easily as his first breaths, and as he neared the window, he caught his first sight of The Haven. The laboratory was thirty floors high, and

the entire city – the last city on earth – sprawled before his eyes. His first impression of the place was *green*. Where there weren't sleek buildings and orderly transport tracks, there was grass, flawlessly manicured and impossibly green.

While the buildings varied in size, they were otherwise identical: solid white with evenly spaced windows, rectangular in shape, only differentiated by small signs on their front doors that labeled them by function. The only unique piece of architecture was the Ark, where Cal knew that Father lived. It stood precisely in the center of the city, a monolithic dome with a stainless steel surface as shiny and smooth as liquid mercury, reflecting all of The Haven back on itself. There were no doors, no windows.

It was the city's walls that Cal found most impressive, though. Taller than the tallest buildings, they formed an impenetrable, circular barrier around The Haven, and nothing beyond them was visible. This was necessary, keeping the last city separate from the rest of the world. When the humans finally drove themselves to extinction, Father had saved the planet by letting it flourish, untouched. Unlike their evolutionary predecessors, the Syntho sapiens took up only the minimum space they needed – a little more than 286 square miles, slightly smaller than the long-ago city of San Diego that once stood somewhere south of here – and their community inside The Haven's walls was entirely self-sustaining, with a carrying capacity of 12,000 inhabitants which was consistently and precisely maintained. Those walls stood as a symbol that nature would never face such degradation again, that the earth was safe now.

Along the walls there were 60 watchtowers, each spaced one mile apart from its nearest neighbors, and Cal felt a rush of excitement thrum through his veins at the sight of them. All Syntho sapiens were programmed for a specific role to keep their ecosystem

running at perfect efficiency, and Cal was programmed to be a watchman. From the vantage point of the watchtowers, watchmen were the only Syntho sapiens who would ever see outside the walls. It was their job to keep an eye on nature, to monitor its progress and ensure that the planet stayed healthy. Cal couldn't wait to begin.

He located the Watchtower straight ahead; the laboratory must have been on the opposite side of the city from it, because Cal figured that the tower was nearly 20 miles away. He focused his eyes, allowed them to zoom and then refocus again, and in perfect clarity the sign on the tower door appeared.

"It's number 57," said Cal.

There was relief in the doctor's sudden exhalation.

"Good. Then it hasn't affected your vision."

Cal zoomed back out and turned to face the doctor.

"What hasn't affected my vision?"

The doctor crossed the room to a wall of metal cabinets, pulled one open, and began to rummage around for something.

"The heterochromia."

So Cal hadn't misheard, but he still had no idea what the word meant.

A moment later, the doctor withdrew a small mirror from the cabinet and held it up for Cal to see.

Cal tentatively stepped towards the doctor, feeling quite certain by now that this was not how a birth was typically supposed to go and noticing how that thought seemed to make his heartbeat quicken. When he finally stood before the mirror and saw his own face looking back at him, he could have sworn his heart had migrated into his ears.