Fresh, inventive and superbly well executed, *Orphan Black* explores the moral, ethical, sociological and political implications of human cloning. The series opens with Sarah Manning (Tatiana Maslany), a scrappy con woman who—at first—inadvertently assumes the identity of an identical woman who turns out to be a clone, Elizabeth Childs (also Maslany). This is after Sarah witnesses Elizabeth shockingly committing suicide, jumping in front of a speeding train. Complicating matters is Sarah’s discovery that Elizabeth was a police detective under investigation by Internal Affairs. The show orbits around protagonist Sarah’s search for identity and family ties, and the glue that binds the whole enterprise is its award winning star: Maslany, who plays multiple clones.

When I sat poolside with Graeme Manson—the man behind the clones—at a boutique hotel in Beverly Hills, I wanted to know all about the show’s conception and sustainability. Season 4 is airing in 2016. First, though, the geek in me was excited to learn about the magic behind Season 2’s dance party finale—in which Maslany dances with different versions of herself, and Season 3’s dinner party featuring a toast shared by all the clones to celebrate Alison’s election win. Manson gives much of the credit for the show’s visual artistry to his longtime creative partner, series director, co-showrunner and Executive Producer, John Fawcett.

Manson explains how the process evolves: “We use a whole bunch of old techniques that have been around forever, including a simple twinning of the actor on the split screen. All the shooting over the shoulder, with doubles, that’s our stock in trade. But, when you get in there with the real scenes, that’s a motion control—a computerized, motion control system, called a techno dolly; it’s a very versatile crane arm on a track, that lets you do tracking shots, focus pushes, come around, do all the kind of camera movements that directors just love to do. When you’ve orchestrated your dance within that shot, it will repeat that move, perfectly. And then, it’s a doubles game again. Switching Tatiana in and out with doubles. But the cool thing is, once you’re down to doing your third pass, if she’s doing a third or fourth character, the composite image you’re watching is Tatiana acting against Tatiana, on the monitors. She runs out from in front of the camera, to come and watch then does another take. And then usually says, “Oh, okay, I was a little late on that. Eye-line’s a little like this....” She’s got her eye-lines on 10, and she’s so detailed that it looks seamless. The crew, and the actors, and she especially, have got just so good at it, that in our big ultimate clone dinner celebration, at the end of the master shot of this big clone move, Tatiana was comfortable enough to ad lib, to
wing it. And the actors picked up the ad lib, and the ad lib stayed in the shot. And then, when we switched around and she's in the other character, she picked up the other end of the ad lib, from the other character. She's amazingly quick on her feet."

As well as Orphan Black, Graeme Manson has written and produced on Canadian series Being Erica, Endgame, Flashpoint and The Bridge. Manson was the writer/showrunner of Rent-a-Goalie, for which he was nominated for a Gemini Award for Best Comedy. His episode “Wild Horses” in the show Nothing Too Good for a Cowboy was nominated for the Writers Guild of Canada Top Ten. As well as TV, Manson has worked on many features and co-wrote Cube, a cult psychological horror thriller, which won—among others—Best Canadian First Feature at the 1997 Toronto International Film Festival, and Best Screenplay and Best Film at Sitges Film Festival in Spain. Rupert's Land, which was Manson's first feature, won several Leo Awards, including Best Feature, and garnered 5 Genie Award nominations. Manson also co-wrote Lucky Girl for CTV with John Frizzell, for which they won the Writers Guild of Canada Award.

The multiple award winning and nominated Orphan Black collected the Canadian Screen Awards for Best Dramatic Series in 2014 and 2015, and the Gemini Awards for Best Dramatic Series and Best Writing in a Dramatic Series in 2014, for Manson's pilot, “Natural Selection”.

NL: The Orphan Black pilot is one of the best pilots I've seen in a decade. I love it for the same reasons I love the best Hitchcock movies, where an unsuspecting character is going about her day and suddenly a seemingly random event triggers an avalanche of chaos that forever alters her destiny. Can you talk about the genesis of your series’ idea, and the greatest influences on your approach?

GM: At first, John [Fawcett] and I were conceiving it as a high concept movie. At the time, we were watching features like Run, Lola, Run. The big standout, Memento, was a huge influence. We wanted to write something with that pace and excitement. We love that kind of storytelling, where you are in the character's shoes and they're the only shoes you're in.

Pushing things around, John came up with the simple pitch of, “A girl gets off a train, looks across the track, sees someone who looks exactly like her and in that moment, her double commits suicide.” That was it. I was like, “Well, that's awesome, where does it go from there?” And he was like, “I have no idea!”

NL: [Laughs] On the plus side, as you let the idea gestate, the actual technology to render your clone series possible also progressed.
GM: Right. Timing is everything. At first, we were brainstorming, hacking away at all the possibilities: Who was that doppelganger? Was she a twin? Well, that kind of exhausted itself. Was that a clone? We were intrigued, but couldn’t immediately crack it. The longer we worked on it, the more we realized we could never tell this story as a feature. It was too big. We ended up putting it on the shelf until cable television evolved. Then, we went from watching things like Memento, to watching Six Feet Under and The Sopranos. And going, “That’s where our Memento story belongs. That’s where our high concept, fast-paced, pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you thriller belongs, it’s television.” We could tell the story that we could never contain in 2 hours, because it was always a gradually unfolding mystery. Once we said, “Well, maybe it’s a cable series then,” I contacted a friend of mine, Cosima Herter, who’s the real Cosima; she’s a scientist, an historian and a Darwinist. I invited her for a beer and asked her to help me figure out the science. She came over and was immediately just like, “Clones! Ooh my god, clones are just so interesting!”

We started talking in metaphor about clones, and about nature and nurture. The minute you start talking in metaphor, to me, I know you’re onto something that’s an actual story—something that has depth. And you can look at it from a number of levels. For me, those kinds of conversations that are about the intellectual concept are very important at the beginning. As important as anything you’re going to do with the story. As much as John and I wrack our brains about plot, plot, plot, it has to start with, “What’s the concept? What’s it really about?”

NL: Which is the same as theme, right?

GM: Yes.

NL: What makes The Sopranos and Six Feet Under and most serialized shows work is, they’re all about families. Once you got your mystery and your thriller setup, seeding the cloning conspiracy, Orphan Black evolved in Season 2 and became much more about an extended family. Initially, Sarah was just trying to figure out what the hell was going on, stay alive, get her daughter, the money and get out of town. Was the idea always that you would eventually advance the story to Sarah’s realization, “These clones might be the only family I have?” Or to approach it like a family show, as you went forward?

GM: I think it definitely grew into that.

At the beginning, she’s almost desperate for family. She’s come back for her family—and is looking in all the wrong places, right? Having rejected her own stepmother and desperate to get her daughter back, she’s got that loss in her heart. One of the most interesting things for us was to take this rather unsympathetic antihero, and let her discover a new, unexpected family.
The show began to explore family in all its many guises: sisterhood, motherhood. We have Sarah’s stepmother, so we have a foster family; we have a foster brother. She has a biological daughter, and a foster mother. Alison has the house in the suburbs, but because the clones are engineered by design not to procreate, she has to adopt the children. The sisters are genetic siblings, who’ve never met. So, choosing your family is a big theme of the show. And a big part of Sarah’s journey to becoming a hero.

NL: Her coming back, and wanting to reclaim her daughter, also seems designed to create not only emotional stakes, but the kind of stakes that an antihero such as Walter White had—where he was doing bad things, but for a good purpose.

GM: That was designed to give her character real stakes. Giving a character a noble goal that can underpin their dastardly actions, you know, it’s an old trick. [laughs]

NL: Yeah, but it works! She has a goal that’s not just selfish. And it makes her vulnerable. In terms of crafting each distinctive clone, how much reverse engineering did you do? Did you know how many clones you were going to ultimately have? And did you know from the start where you were going with the military medical conspiracy?

GM: I think we knew that; we knew our conspiracy. We’ve had a pretty good handle on what the conspiracy could be, or should be, and where it’s going. As for the characters of the clones, it was really a combination of John and myself. John’s from the suburbs of Calgary, and we’ve worked together before. He does great suburbs—he just knows it, he loves it. It’s something that would turn on John, and it was where we felt we wanted a tone that encompassed many different things.

NL: Yes. There’s a lot of humor.

GM: We wanted to be able to do a bunch of things in tone, in ways that are often difficult to explain to networks. They want to know what your tone is. And we’re like, “Well, each world has its own tone.” Which is something we worked very hard to do. We knew we wanted this to give life to this nature/nurture theory, right in front of you, on screen. So, there’s Sarah, the sort of displaced punk, foster kid on the run; Alison, the suburban soccer mom, with the kind of parents who raised her just so, who has the weight of social expectation on her shoulders, and all of that. And then Cosima, the original Cosima character, we knew we wanted a scientist. We knew we wanted to be able to look at ourselves in ways that aren’t just like Sarah pursuing the mystery, Alison pursuing her own internal, whatever she’s going through, being a clone. But for Cosima, she has this wonderful, standoffish, omniscient quality to her, where she could look and be the logical one; she could be the Spock of the clones.

NL: Yes, and carry all that scientific exposition?
**GM:** Right. But I wanted her to be different, not solely a geek. I see geeks and hippies so misrepresented in the media, and I know they go together, so I really worked on that character, right down to when we were doing the wardrobe and hair testing. We discovered dreadlocks in those tests, and we were like, “Yeah. That says it all.” But Cosima is my good friend and remains the real science consultant on the show to this day. Interestingly, when we were beginning the first season of the show, we brought Cosima in to talk to the whole crew, to do ‘Cloning 101,’ explain some of the themes that we’re going through, and do 101s with the actors. She sat down with Tatiana and they had a long session and have since become friends. And I think Tatiana definitely lifted some mannerisms from Cosima. As I was lifting her voice, too, the run-on thoughts and the waving hands, that’s definitely the real deal!

**NL:** There are two buzzwords that are currently being used—a lot—by US TV networks; one is “grounded” and the other is “sustainability.” Sustainability in relation to creating a long running hit, and grounded in credible reality. What’s great about the show is: not only is cloning scientifically possible now, but you’ve also grounded the plot in real science. What makes *Orphan Black* so scary is it could already be happening today. When you sold the show, did you already know your end game, your intended series finale?

**GM:** Yeah, that was always part of the pitch. And, part of the pitch was definitely the grounded aspect of it. But we are in the here and now, and our sci-fi is one step over the line—one jump, one small step into the future. That’s what we wanted, we didn’t want a futuristic world at all...we didn’t even want to feel like the world was 5 minutes in the future.

**NL:** Right.

**GM:** It’s here and now, and that was our intention from the very beginning. In terms of the longer arcs, we were pitching a 3 season concept, that could sort of go to 5, but it’s all loose bullshit at that point! The truth is, we had the Season 1 end point [*SPOILER ALERT*], which is, Sarah shoots Helena. We had that, we knew that, and that the discovery of the twin sister was a huge thing, that those would be less about the conspiracy and more about the characters, more about discovering this family, this fractured, weird family, this genetic family, scattered.

We knew our ultimate end point, and we are figuring out how to create finely structured seasons, while still kicking the end point down the road. We can only do that so far, so long, I think, we’ll see what happens when we get really into the nitty gritty, in Season 4, whether, it’s like, “We’ve got to get to that end in Season 5, for it to be satisfying,” so it doesn’t feel like you’re kicking shit down the road all the time. And then if we continue past—it’s the reboot, right? Which is the other way to go—it’s like, get to your end, and then, what’s the great concept that can twist it, and throw it forward?

We try to write ourselves into corners—which is nerve-wracking, but after you’ve done it for a while, you just go in with, “Oh well, here we are, in another corner.” You’ve got 6 smart
people in a room, we’ll figure it out. John’s the worst. When your partner’s a director, they
don’t really care. They want to drive it into a corner all the time!

NL: They’re like, “You’ll figure it out!”

GM: Yeah. It’s not the spadework they’re going to have to do to get you out of it. But that
dynamic works, that you push each other.

NL: It’s the anxious writer, and the visionary director who says, “I’ll make it look amazing, just
tell me where it’s going.” For me, what’s so satisfying about your show is its unpredictability. If
it’s hard for you guys to figure your way out of the corner, it’s virtually impossible for the
audience to get ahead of you. To me, those diamond moments in shows are where you go,
“Oh, that’s fantastic, that’s great! I never in a million years would have thought that’s where
they would have gone.”

GM: It’s really influenced genre. Breaking Bad—they’re the masters of “Now, what the fuck?!”
We really liked that. Going with our pace idea—we always had the pace, and we always had
the “We want to pull the rug out from under the audience” concepts. The fact that it was
embraced in Breaking Bad, and people loved that kind of storytelling, I think helped us get
our show made.

NL: What’s your writing process? Do you run a traditional writers’ room, where you’re all just
sort of tossing ideas around and putting stuff up on whiteboards? Do you assign beat sheets
and outlines?

GM: The way we work a season is, John and I will get together and go away for 4 days
somewhere and hole up in a cabin. We’ll get down some of our big thoughts for the season.
Some of that will be character stuff, some will be plot tent poles, things we want to see. Just
our own fetishes of, “Wouldn’t it be awesome if we did this?” So, we get that down, and go
back to the writers’ room, and probably do 6 weeks of big picture planning before anybody
puts anything on paper. I usually write the first episodes, which will all be the first things on
paper as we go. Trying to get that big picture thing—not only the big picture season, but the
big picture of the series. So, “If we do this, this year, how would it impact the final end game,
down the road?” Then, it gets more traditional. Each writer is in charge of a script, and the
whole room works on breaking that script, the whole room works on giving notes through
outlines of that. We start with the story on the whiteboards, the writers will write up a beat
sheet from the whiteboards, then they’ll go to outline—we’ll do very detailed outlines.

NL: Like, 10 pages, 20 pages?

GM: More like 16/17 pages. Of course, those go through the networks. If there’s one
indulgence I have as a showrunner, it’s that I hate delivery schedules. I’m not going to deliver
something that's not right, because we'll end up in a conversation that'll waste so much of my
time; by the time you've read it and get back to me with notes on that, I'll already be revising it
anyway. Just in terms of efficiency, though it may not seem as efficient, I prefer to have a
script that's really, or an outline that's really well formed, before it goes to the networks. And
our scripts, before going to the networks, go through our executives at Temple Street
[Productions]. So, that's another level of in-house quality control.

**NL:** How many scripts do you have before you start shooting? And I know there's the ideal
and maybe the reality...

**GM:** The ideal is 5, but the reality is, we've never had that, or even close. We spend a lot of
time filming, and a lot of time getting those first scripts in order. Then filming catches up, and
then it's like, just running round. It's just like running, on and on.

**NL:** Prepping off of an outline, and things like that?

**GM:** I prefer not to do that, but it certainly has happened, yes.

**NL:** So there's not much opportunity to cross board and block shoot episodes?

**GM:** We'll block shoot the first 2 episodes, to save a little time and money. That's always a
goal, to make sure the first 2 are as ready to be block shot as possible. John will shoot that
first block of 2. That saves us a day or 2 on production overall. We would love it to be 3 and 4
as well, but it's never quite been that way. This year, because of cast availability, etc, we had to
shoot the pilot third, so we had to change the pole position at the last minute.

By the time we get into Episodes 8, 9 and 10, we're inevitably running behind schedule, like,
prepping off outlines. Like this year, we invited the whole production team into the writers'
room, and then pitched it off the board.

**NL:** Yeah, I've been there! [Laughs]

**GM:** [Laughs]

**NL:** Thanks to Netflix and ultimately Amazon Prime, *Orphan Black* has become a
phenomenon, with a huge global fan base. Is the metric for success still overnight ratings for
BBC America—and do those numbers add to your stress level?

**GM:** BBC America was very clear from the top that they didn't care what the initial numbers
were. They had their strategy, and certainly the relevance of ratings isn't what they used to be.
At the same time, ratings still matter, especially in Canada. There's a little more brick and
mortar up there, and Canadian networks might point to those numbers now, in this day and
age, and go, “But, the numbers aren’t good”—even though you know in their boardrooms, they’re talking about all the other ways that people are watching.

**NL:** Yeah, second window, third window...

**GM:** But, they can still point to that number, like the old metric, and go, “So, there’s no more money for this season. These were our numbers last year, I’m sorry.”

**NL:** But that’s such a small slice of the pie now.

**GM:** It is, and it’s disingenuous, and it’s like, “Come on, who’s really going to believe that?” The reason we’re not getting any more money is because you’re a phone company! [Laughs] You know?

One thing I meant to mention that was interesting, was that both John and I, and most of the people we know who are working directors and writers in Canada—coming up through the 90s, and early 2000s—we always worked film and TV. We always did both, because that’s how you made a living. In Hollywood, there seemed to be this real divide between film and TV, you were either one, or the other. That’s changed now, but that’s one thing where I think Canada was a little bit ahead of the game. That we were ready to jump into whatever level of film or TV happened to be coming our way, so when we were thinking, “Well, maybe this feature we were working on would work better on cable TV,” we’d already been working on numerous shows together in the TV world. So, it was easy for us to make that switch. We got excited because TV was suddenly good, which had been our bread and butter paychecks, to try and make features, to do our good work.

**NL:** And TV shows have become much more cinematic. To me, *House of Cards* and *Bosch* have the feeling of a great, 1970s political thriller. There’s a cinematic quality, as opposed to just talking heads and close ups, and that horribly lit video on soundstages. Your show has that scope and attention to detail.

**GM:** Thanks to Aaron Morton, our extremely talented cinematographer, who’s a Kiwi, who John had worked with on *Spartacus*.

**NL:** And indeed, you had the agility to pivot, not just be stuck doing some of the poorer quality, inexpensive TV shows.

**GM:** John would never have stood for that. We wanted to do something very cinematic. And worked very, very hard on the looks of the different worlds, to make sure the palettes of the worlds matched the tones of worlds, that each was a look.
**NL:** Even though many younger viewers don’t get the full visual experience as they watch on their phones and iPads—while they’re live tweeting.

**GM:** Yeah!

**NL:** How much does it bug you when they’re tweeting stuff that maybe they’re misinterpreting? Do you read the message boards—do they get snarky sometimes?

**GM:** I think we’re pretty lucky; Clone Club is very well behaved. I think they’re very good to each other, and that there’s a certain etiquette and respect that comes with Clone Club, because I think a lot of people have cottoned onto it because it’s a very accepting space, and accepting show. We set out on purpose to create an inclusive kind of group—“Your sexuality? What? Who fucking cares?” But, we’ll see, maybe the internets will turn on us this season! Then, I’ll have a different opinion.

**NL:** Any plot tidbits you can share with me about Season 4?

**GM:** We’d like to give Felix [Jordan Gavaris] his own, new storyline.

**NL:** And, of course, you’re going to play out Helena’s pregnancy and how her maternal pangs impact her killer instincts?

**GM:** Right. But we’re still mapping out the season—but I promise more twists and turns and surprises.