

Strategic Entanglements: Exploring Actor-Networks in Harlan Coben's "I will find you"

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Abstract

"The present Article applies Bruno Latour's Actor - Network Theory (ANT) to Harlan Coben's thriller 'I Will Find You', examining the complex web of human and non-human actors driving the narrative. Through a close reading of the novel, we explore how strategic entanglements of actors – including surveillance technologies, social relationships, and power dynamics – shape the protagonist's Quest for truth and the antagonist's pursuit of control. Our analysis reveals how Coben's portrayal of interconnected networks highlights themes of agency, visibility, and the intricate play of power in the digital age. By mapping these actor-networks, this study demonstrates the value of ANT in unboxing the complex strategies of thriller fiction. Utilizing ANT, this paper analyzes the "strategic entanglements" within the text—the shifting relationships between human characters (David Burroughs, the FBI, Rachel) and material/immaterial entities (fingerprints on a baseball bat, DNA evidence, prison, the photograph)..We argue that the novel's intensifying suspense, or "rhythms of translation," occurs as these elements are assembled, broken, and reconfigured in David's quest to clear his name.The study concludes that the "thriller" effect is generated not just by human action, but by the relentless entanglement of these diverse actants, revealing how material and semantic networks dictate the truth-finding mission.

Keywords: Action- Network Theory (ANT), Entanglements, reconfigured, surveillance, semantic networks.

Introduction

In the contemporary thriller, suspense is rarely generated by a single antagonistic force; rather, it is constructed through a complex, fragile web of human relationships, hidden histories, and material evidence. Harlan Coben's (2023) Novel, "I Will Find You" exemplifies this narrative complexity by presenting a story where truth is not merely found, but reassembled from a "strategic entanglement" of, and connections between, diverse actors. The narrative follows David Burroughs, a father serving a life sentence for the murder of his son, whose existence is upended when a photograph suggests his child may still be alive. To prove his innocence, Burroughs must navigate a tangled network of allies, antagonists, and digital, photographic, and institutional intermediaries.

This article explores the narrative of ' I Will Find You ' through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), analyzing how social relations, power, and organization are produced through a heterogeneous network. By focusing on "strategic entanglement"—the ways in which characters, secrets, and technologies (such as the photograph, prison walls, or legal documents) bind together to form a functioning, albeit dangerous, reality—this study aims to uncover how Coben crafts suspense. We will

examine how human actors (David, Rachel, the FBI) interact with non-human actants (the damning photo, the prison infrastructure) to produce a "network of stories" that defines the thriller genre. The analysis will demonstrate that the gripping, fast-paced nature of ' I Will Find You ' is a result of the intricate, shifting, and often chaotic web of agents that determine the boundaries of truth and deception. However, the true narrative driver in this is not merely David's willpower, but rather the "strategic entanglements" between human actors and inanimate objects that either bind him in a prison or drive him toward freedom .

INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

I. Theorizing Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in I Will Find You

Harlan Coben's thriller I Will Find You isn't just a chase-scene marathon—it's a living laboratory of *Actor-Network Theory* (ANT) in action. Imagine every character, every smartphone ping, every CCTV camera as a node in a sprawling, invisible web that constantly reshapes the story's momentum. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which treats both human and non-human entities as "actants" that shape networks. Harlan Coben's ' I Will Find You ' revolves around David Burroughs, whose life is destroyed when his son is murdered, and his subsequent breakout from prison to find the truth.

Actants (Human and Non-Human Actors)

In ANT, an actor (or actant) is anything that acts or shifts a situation.

Human Actants: David Burroughs (the fugitive), prison guards, detectives, the true killer, and family members. They utilised influence through actions, secrets, and emotions. ANT posits that both people and objects have "agency" because they act and cause others to act.

The Photograph: A central non-human actant. A vacation photo with a boy in the background functions as a mediator. It does not just reflect reality; it transforms it by triggering the protagonist's (David Burroughs) escape and the subsequent collapse of his "guilty" status.

DNA and Forensic Evidence: These objects were initially "black-boxed" as absolute proof of David's guilt. The novel's tension arises when these actants' "black boxes" are reopened, revealing that they were part of a manipulated network involving a decoy child.

The Network (Heterogeneous)

The story is not just about David; it is about the "heterogeneous network" connecting him to the murder.

The Prison Network: A rigid, restrictive network of walls, guards, and surveillance (non-humans) combined with rules and inmates (humans). David's escape is a "trial of strength" that breaks this network.

The Truth Network: A hidden, complex network of secrets and aides that must be uncovered by tracing associations among people, locations, and objects.

Translation

Translation describes how David attempts to shift the network from "convicted murderer" to "innocent father".

Problematization: David must convince others (and the reader) that his son is alive, establishing himself as the center of a new, true story. Truth in the novel is a process of translation, where actors are enrolled into a specific version of reality. : The antagonist (Hayden Payne) creates a network that convinces the legal system and David's family of David's guilt.

Enrollment: To reclaim his innocence, David must build a rival network. He enrolls his godson (a prison warden), his ex-sister-in-law (a reporter), and even eventually FBI agents into a new network where he

is "innocent".

Punctualization and Black Boxing

Punctualization: This occurs when a complex network is treated as a single, stable entity. For five years, the "guilty father" label was a punctualized fact.

Depunctualization: When the photograph introduces a contradiction, the "guilty father" network breaks down. As David escapes, the various components of the "justice system" (the prison, the FBI, the mob connections) become visible again as individual parts that can be challenged or re-aligned.

Black Box: The official conviction of David acts as a "black box"—a complex, hidden set of events, police work, and potentially coerced testimony that is accepted as "truth" without question until he breaks it.

Unpacking the Box: David's investigation is the act of opening this black box, revealing the messy, broken, and unreliable "actors" (evidence and testimony) inside.

Quasi-Objects (Tokens)

Items passed between actors that hold the network together.

Evidence: The key piece of evidence showing his child is alive acts as a "token" or "quasi-object" passed between the true culprit, the authorities, and David, shifting the power dynamic of the entire story.

Summary Table of ANT Concepts

ANT Concept	Application in ' I Will Find You'
Mediator	The theme park photograph that changes David’s "guilty" state to "seeker of truth".
Black Box	The initial murder investigation and DNA results that no one questioned for five years.
Network Breakdown	The moment the prison security and legal certainty fail, forcing all actors to renegotiate their roles.
Translation.	The process by which David convinces others of his innocence and enrolls them into mission.

II. APPLICATION OF ANT TO THE NOVEL

Applying Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as developed by Bruno Latour, allows us to analyze how non-human actors (objects, technology, locations) act alongside human characters to shape the narrative. In ANT, human and non-human actors are treated with generalized symmetry, meaning objects can have agency equal to people.

1. Actants and General Symmetry

The Snapshot: The primary non-human actant is the photograph Rachel brings to the prison. It is not a passive object; it possesses agency because it triggers the entire plot, "enrolling" David into a new mission and destabilizing his five-year resignation to prison life.

Prison Infrastructure: The prison itself acts as a confining network. David's escape is a process of "opening the black box" of the prison's security systems, transforming them from invisible, functional

barriers into visible, circumventable nodes.

The "Runaway" Note/Digital Evidence: Similar to other Coben works, electronic, or paper trails often function as agents that expose long-buried secrets, acting to reveal the truth.

2. The Network of Association

ANT focuses on how different elements are linked together to create a stable network.

The Escape Network: David's escape is a network built of various actants: the prison (location), the evidence (information), and his own desperation. These elements connect to force his actions.

Family/Hidden Network: The story revolves around the "re-association" of the family, previously torn apart by the murder accusation. The network includes the ex-wife, the new husband, and the "deceased" son.

The Investigation Network: The federal agents searching for David are part of a network that includes communication devices, vehicles, and forensic tools, all working together to try to stop him, illustrating how technology acts alongside humans in the chase.

3. Mediators vs. Intermediaries

ANT distinguishes between entities that simply transport force (intermediaries) and those that transform it (mediators).

Mediators: Characters like the FBI agents Max Williams and Sarah Greer are mediators; their investigation constantly shifts the network's direction based on new clues or shifts in their belief in David's guilt.

Intermediaries: Routine police procedures or standardized records often act as intermediaries until a "breakdown" occurs, forcing characters to re-examine them as complex, flawed networks.

4. Hybrid Collectives (Human-Nonhuman)

ANT suggests that what we call "society" is actually a mix of humans and things.

The "Wrongful Conviction" Collective: The prison system, the court records, the lawyers, and the evidence form a "hybrid collective" that holds David. The plot is about breaking this network.

The Search Party: David's desperate, high-stakes search becomes a new collective—himself, the stolen information, and the cars he uses—which defies the state-sanctioned network trying to capture him.

III. ENTANGLED ACTORS: Human and Non- Human Agency

- Analysis of Human Actors

' I Will Find You ' by Harlan Coben, the narrative is driven by a firmly woven, often stifling, web of entangled human actors, where secrets, guilt, and past actions connect the characters in ways that blur the lines between victim and perpetrator.

1. The Central Troika: David, Cheryl, and Rachel

David Burroughs (The Imprisoned): Convicted of murdering his three-year-old son, Matthew, David lives in a "metaphorical life sentence" of guilt and, initially, self-doubt, believing he might have done it during a blackout. His character arc is defined by breaking out of this mental and physical prison to regain his identity as a father.

Cheryl Dreason (The Ex-Wife): David's ex-wife who, believing he killed their son, remarries and rebuilds her life. Her entanglement is rooted in a secret, desperate action: she used a fertility clinic to get pregnant without David's knowledge, a decision that inadvertently leads to the chaos.

Rachel Anderson (The Catalyst): Cheryl's younger sister and David's former sister-in-law. A disgraced journalist seeking redemption, she acts as the conduit for the plot's twist by bringing the photograph that

shows Matthew may still be alive. She ultimately falls in love with David, with their bond built on shared tragedy.

2. The Manipulators: The Paynes and Nicky Fisher

Hayden Payne (The Antagonist): A wealthy, obsessive figure from Rachel's past who acts on an crooked sense of entitlement. He steals Matthew, believing the child is his own (due to a mix-up with donor sperm/identities). Hayden acts as the antagonist who capsizes everyone's life to fulfill his own desire for a family.

Gertrude "Pixie" Payne (The Protector): Hayden's grandmother, who embodies the corruption of extreme wealth. She recognizes the moral failings of the men in her family but uses her influence to cover up Hayden's crimes, acting as a direct counterblow to David's desire for truth.

Nicky Fisher (The Underworld Broker): A semi-retired mobster whose connection to the family is intimate, though initially hidden. He controls the "evidence" by manipulating witnesses, forcing them to lie to protect the family's secrets.

3. The Law and Its Proxies: The Blurred Lines

Philip and Adam Mackenzie: Philip, the prison warden and David's godfather, is initially bound by law over love. However, upon realizing the injustice of David's confinement, he swivels to help him escape, showing that personal loyalty can supersede professional duty. His son, Adam, further aids this escape.

Max Bernstein and Sarah Jablonski: FBI Agents who, while seeking to catch David, act as a lens to explore the tension between the letter of the law and justice. Their evolving, sometimes conflicting, views on David's guilt drive the investigation forward.

Hilde Winslow/Harriet Winchester: A former neighbor forced to lie in court by Nicky Fisher. Her eventual confession to Deception is key to exonerating David and highlights how ordinary people become entangled in the desperate games of the powerful.

IV. STRATEGIC ENTANGLEMENTS: POWER DYNAMICS AND SURVEILLANCE

In 'I Will Find You (2023), Harlan Coben explores power relationships and control through the lens of an intentionally imprisoned father, David Burroughs, battling a corrupt system, manipulative elite figures, and his own guilt.

--- The explorations of power and control

1. The Power of "Accepted Truth" and Gaslighting

Conviction vs. Reality: David has spent five years in prison, having subconsciously accepted his guilt because of a hazy memory of the night his son was murdered. This highlights the power of external narratives to control personal identity.

The Photograph as Catalyst: The central conflict begins when a photo shows a child who looks like his deceased son, Matthew. This piece of evidence breaks the controlling power of the accepted, false narrative.

2. The Manipulation of Justice by Elite Wealth

The Payne Family: The antagonists, particularly Gertrude "Pixie" Payne, represent unchecked power. They use wealth and influence to cover up crimes and manipulate the justice system to protect their own.

Control over Information: The Payne family uses their resources to hide the truth about Hayden Payne's, crimes and kidnapping, disclosing how the powerful can rewrite reality for those without resources.

3. Institutional Control vs. Individual Agency

Prison Environment: The narrative contrasts the stifling, total control of a maximum-security prison with David's desperate, fast-paced quest for freedom.

Law vs. Justice: The novel explores the tension between legal processes and true justice. FBI agents Max and Sarah represent the legal system, with Max struggling to reconcile his duty to capture David with the nascent truth of his innocence.

4. Familial Control and Psychological Power

Familial Doubt: David is not just imprisoned by the state, but by his own family, who previously believed him capable of murder. This emotional control is only broken by the new evidence. David's ex-wife, Cheryl, struggles with the potential, disturbing truth, having rebuilt her life on the hypothesis of David's guilt.

-- Surveillance and tracking as key network Dynamics

Harlan Coben's thriller 'I Will Find You' (and its upcoming 2026 Netflix adaptation), surveillance and tracking function as central, high-stakes network dynamics that drive the plot forward.

Photographic Surveillance & Facial Recognition: The entire plot is initiated by a "chance" photographic spotting. A gateway pic shared through, social networks, reveals a child in the background with a distinct, port-stain birthmark similar to David's supposedly murdered son. The investigation relies on, forensic examination of this, photo, turning a random image into a key piece of evidence.

The Hunt and Evasion : Once David Burroughs escapes from prison, the story becomes a high-stakes cat-and-mouse game. He is tracked by the FBI, specifically, Special Agent Max, who uses modern, forensic techniques to, anticipate his moves.

Surveillance as a Tool for Truth : David, and his sister-in-law Rachel (a journalist), must use, tracking skills to uncover a deeper, conspiracy, and find the real killer.

Conclusion

ANT suggests that truth is not a pre-existing fact but an "ongoing achievement" of a network. In 'I Will Find You', justice is not discovered as an absolute; it is constructed through the successful reconfiguration of social and material associations. Power in the novel resides not in individuals, but in their ability to enroll and align these heterogeneous actors into a stable alliance. By applying an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) lens, the Novel transforms from a simple prison-break thriller into a study of how disparate, non-linear elements (a photograph, a past relationship, prison security protocols, medical records) are assembled to either preserve a false narrative or, ultimately, reveal the truth. The novel's strength lies in showing how in a world dominated by surveillance and rigid, (in)correct narratives (the prison system, the FBI's, the court's), the truth only emerges when a new, more comprehensive network of actors—both human, like a determined sister-in-law, and non-human, like a, "crucial," photo—are, assembled and, linked.

Final Outcome: The unraveling of these, intricate, and deeply hidden connections (the "entanglements") leads to a "satisfying" conclusion, as the "true" web of events is finally brought to light and the "wrongly" imprisoned hero is Exonerated.

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