



2016

Lost On Planet God: A review of Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things*

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Recommended Citation

Machado, Carmen Maria. "Lost On Planet God: A review of Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things*." *The Iowa Review* 46.1 (2016): 190-193. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7717>

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Lost on Planet God

A Review of Michel Faber's The Book of Strange New Things

Before he begins the space mission that will comprise almost the entirety of Michel Faber's newest novel, *The Book of Strange New Things*, Peter Leigh's wife Beatrice begs him to pull the car over to the side of road. She wants to have sex with him one last time before he boards a plane at Heathrow and leaves her.

Peter balks. They'd had a lovely final day of lovemaking and togetherness—all of it so *right*—the day before. “You're wonderful,” he says hesitantly, stalling.

“I don't want to be wonderful,” she tells him. “I want you inside me.”

In many ways, this scene—startling, erotic, and over as quickly as it begins—is the embodiment of the approaching, sprawling narrative, a perfect diorama of the strain and tensions to come. Faced with her husband's long absence, Beatrice's sex drive kicks in, muddled with love and anxiety and missing him even before he's gone—a deeply human response. But Peter stubbornly clings to the symbol of their “last day,” the woman next to him—on him, around him—be damned. And after it's over, Peter is bundled onto an airplane, flown to the U.S., and then launched an unfathomable distance away from her.

A private company has settled a planet they call Oasis. It is habitable, with wet and living but breathable air akin to a rainforest's, and a stripped-down landscape that resembles the emptiest parts of Utah. Its indigenous population—referred to as residents of “Freaktown” by some and, more respectfully, as “Oasans” by others—have requested a Christian minister. And so the company has hired Peter, a deeply religious man with a troubled past: alcoholism, drug addiction, and crime, all of which he abandoned when he met the compassionate Christian nurse who later became his wife. He has the fervor of a convert and a fawn-like naïveté all his own.

The engineers, scientists, and medical personnel at Oasis are friendly but oddly muted, with the exception of a woman named Grainger with whom Peter develops a cautious, mercurial friendship. With its use of last names, its intense group workouts, and its flattened emotions, the atmosphere is almost military (“It's a bit like the army,” Grainger tells

Peter, “except we don’t harm people”), and often the strangeness of the human base outpaces the mysteriousness of the alien world. Ominously, the previous pastor—the one Peter has been sent to replace—and a linguist have vanished. Not dead, Grainger explains to him. Just missing.

The native inhabitants of Oasis—bipedal life-forms with thoughtful, serene dispositions that bring to mind *A Wrinkle in Time’s* Aunt Beast—call themselves Jesus Lovers. With Peter’s help, they set about building a church in their community while Peter translates the Bible (which they call *The Book of Strange New Things*) into a version of English they can speak and understand.

As Peter travels between the human base and the Oasan settlement, the world shifts dramatically. At the base, he agonizes, writes letters to Beatrice, reads her responses, and attempts to make sense of the human interactions happening among the crew. But among the Oasans, he is deeply content, as if he were meant to be there. The world of their civilization floats outside of time, even as the reader knows that reality is nearby and waiting to pounce. It is these sweeping brushstrokes of world-building—and the tension of seeing how everything has changed each time Peter returns from a stint with the Oasans—that keeps the engine of the novel humming.

In many ways, *The Book of Strange New Things* seems to be following the beat of Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow*, an interstellar journey with religious and philosophical implications—light on the sci-fi details because it’s not really about the tech—and an encounter with an alien race that seems like it will end in tragedy.

But here, the real horror is unfolding back on Earth: food shortages, catastrophic natural disasters, and a general dissolution of the social order, while the alien planet remains safe, womb-like, unchanging. The missives between Beatrice and Peter are the backbone of many chapters and the only insight into a fracturing Earth, giving the book the feel of an epistolary novel. Each letter from Beatrice is more desperate, terrified, and furious than the last, and the gulf between husband and wife becomes wider than mere interstellar travel could accomplish. Beatrice tells Peter that she’s pregnant with their child, and Peter’s response to this news and to her increasing fear is cruelly muted. As Peter writes pleasantly about his post, relating the joys and oddities of the planet and the Oasans, Beatrice struggles. She writes,

You’ve been given the cushiest treatment any Christian missionary has ever had in the entire history of evangelism. Other missionaries have been thrown into prison,

spat on, speared, pelted [with] stones, threatened [with] knives and guns, hacked to death by machetes, crucified upside down.... [But] you arrived to a hero's welcome....

Any other husband, once he got wind [of] what's been going on here would have offered to come home by now. Or at least made noises about it....

You devote so much time [and] energy to pondering exactly the right words to choose in your Bible paraphrases for the Jesus Lovers but when it comes to communicating with me your [infinite] attention to nuance deserts you.

And a few exchanges later, after she dares to use the word "Godforsaken" in a letter about the horrors of the dying world, Peter's response—equal parts condescending and gaslighting—confirms the truth of Beatrice's accusations:

Please don't use the word "Godforsaken." I know you're upset and rightly so but we must honor with our mouths the fact that no one is truly forsaken by God. In all your distress, I get the feeling you're not leaning on Him as trustingly as you might.

In the literary world, there is an ongoing discussion of the unlikeable character and the way this quality is discouraged in female protagonists but welcomed in male ones. Peter is a new entry in the long line of male literary characters who are permitted the space to be odious. But he is much closer to, say, Humbert Humbert than to Sherlock Holmes, as he's startlingly self-centered but wrapped in enraging gentility and euphemism. This quality is balanced by Faber's meticulous attention to psychological detail; Peter's personality does not feel random, but a natural outgrowth of his conversion, privilege, and zealotry.

And so *The Book of Strange New Things* is not so much a meditation on exploration or faith as it is an incisive portrait of the well-meaning narcissism of missionary work. Even while Peter muses over the mistakes of his colonist Earth predecessors and pleads with the human occupants of Oasis for tolerance of the Oasans' way of life, his obsession with his mission trumps everything—his wife, his child, his health, his former

life, and even the mission itself. He isn't just on Oasis; he's on, as Beatrice observes, "planet God." As he is broken down inch by inch, the novel's thesis reveals itself: a man must be pulled away from his faith, not toward it, in order to survive.

One of the most distinctive markers of Michel Faber's literary career is the diversity of his projects. Their settings have drifted between turn-of-the-century London and our own nebulous near-futures, each feeling natural and effortless despite their disparities. *The Book of Strange New Things* is a sort of hybrid of the author's previous novels, as if Faber needed to write each of them to master their individual elements. There's the delayed reveal and uncanny hum of *Under the Skin*, the comprehensive world-building and exploration of faith issues of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, and the social tensions of *The Courage Consort*. The result is something new entirely—urgent yet old-fashioned, optimistic but grim, exciting while measuredly paced. It's easy to devour, but don't be fooled: it will linger.

Last fall, Faber said in an interview that *The Book of Strange New Things* would be his last novel. "I think I have written the things I was put on earth to write. I think I've reached the limit," he told an interviewer. Given the novel's extraordinary achievement—and the exciting arc of Faber's singular career—one can only hope this isn't true.