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The Book Of Strange New Things: A Novel



Synopsis

A monumental, genre-defying novel that David Mitchell calls "Michel Faber's second masterpiece," *The Book of Strange New Things* is a masterwork from a writer in full command of his many talents. It begins with Peter, a devoted man of faith, as he is called to the mission of a lifetime, one that takes him galaxies away from his wife, Bea. Peter becomes immersed in the mysteries of an astonishing new environment, overseen by an enigmatic corporation known only as USIC. His work introduces him to a seemingly friendly native population struggling with a dangerous illness and hungry for Peter's teachings: "his Bible is their book of strange new things." But Peter is rattled when Bea's letters from home become increasingly desperate: typhoons and earthquakes are devastating whole countries, and governments are crumbling. Bea's faith, once the guiding light of their lives, begins to falter. Suddenly, a separation measured by an otherworldly distance, and defined both by one newly discovered world and another in a state of collapse, is threatened by an ever-widening gulf that is much less quantifiable. While Peter is reconciling the needs of his congregation with the desires of his strange employer, Bea is struggling for survival. Their trials lay bare a profound meditation on faith, love tested beyond endurance, and our responsibility to those closest to us. Marked by the same bravura storytelling and precise language that made *The Crimson Petal and the White* such an international success, *The Book of Strange New Things* is extraordinary, mesmerizing, and replete with emotional complexity and genuine pathos. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed Faber's earlier novel *The Crimson Petal and the White*, so I was excited to see that he'd written another one. The premise was also intriguing: a Christian missionary travels to another planet to work with the native population there, while receiving updates from his wife about the increasingly apocalyptic conditions back home on earth. The book interweaves the story of Peter's missionary work among the aliens with the story of his increasingly strained relationship with his wife, which suffers from the vast distance between them and the enormous difference in their circumstances. There are some themes here that I don't normally find very compelling, namely issues of faith and marital difficulties. But I found myself completely absorbed in Faber's creation, tearing through this hefty volume in a matter of days. The characters all felt very real to me, with vivid personalities and abundant flaws. There were times when I would have liked more detail about certain events, particularly Peter's early days among the natives, but ultimately the book as a whole comes together very well. Various mysteries are satisfactorily resolved. The only aspect of the story that I found somewhat unsatisfying was its open-endedness; there are hints about how everything may turn out, but we don't actually see it all through to the end. I can understand why Faber stopped where he did; important decisions have been made and events have been put in motion, so that it might actually have been anticlimactic to pursue each thread down to its final resolution. I just wasn't quite ready to leave this story yet, which might speak as much to its power as to anything else. A word of warning: despite the central role of faith, this is definitely not what I would classify as "Christian fiction". It opens with a sex scene and contains plenty of profanity, along with descriptions of bodily functions, masturbation, etc. This is the sort of content that could have come across as gratuitous, but instead it adds an element of gritty realism. The religious message is also not entirely unwavering, which I appreciated as a non-Christian reader. I'd like to say more about the plot and the various issues that arise in the course of Peter's mission, but I think it's best to approach the story without too much prior information and just allow yourself to get caught up in the flow. There are plenty of surprising elements here whose impact might be diminished by reading about them beforehand. Peter sets off on a journey into the unknown, and I'm very glad that I had an opportunity to travel along with him. I just wish I could do a better job of explaining why I liked this book so much; it's a powerful novel whose impact I can't seem to express in words. Reading it was a fully immersive experience.

3.5 stars out of 5 -- "The world changes too fast. You take your eyes off something that's always been there, and the next minute it's just a memory." This novel was definitely NOT anything like

Faber's book, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (my favorite of all his books) set in Victorian London. Instead, the reader is transported to a brave new world far away from Earth where a mysterious mega corporation known as USIC has set up a colony of scientists to make the planet liveable. The new world is named Oasis in a contest and Peter Leigh is sent there as a missionary to cater to the needs of the native inhabitants -- to bring them the word of Jesus and his Book of Strange New Things -- The King James Bible. Peter is no ordinary pastor -- once a drug addict and alcoholic, the reformed preacher is eager to begin his work spreading the good news to the Oasans (as he calls them). Surprisingly, many of these natives are already converted and hungry for the Word. Unfortunately, Peter's wife, Bea, has had to stay behind on Earth putting a severe strain on their marriage as billions of miles separate them and they can only communicate by messages sent through a device called the Shoot. While Bea sends messages of calamity in England and disasters around the world, Peter finds himself in his element tending to his new flock. Overcome with his success, he neglects Bea and their relationship starts to unravel. Caring less about the world he left behind, Peter becomes even more involved with his community of believers and stays with them in their settlement. The creatures are not human in any way, their language is almost unpronounceable, but they attempt to speak English, though without the ability to say some of the consonants *s and *t, for example. Although Peter still interacts peripherally with the others at the USIC base, he finds his heart and soul with the natives and works beside them getting to know them better. I'm not quite sure what to say about my reaction to this book. I have read other glowing reviews calling this a masterpiece. I'm not feeling it. On one hand, it was interesting, on the other, I can see that if you are not a Christian, you will get very tired of the religious theme that is pervasive throughout the book. Peter often quotes long passages from the Bible and delivers sermons to the Oasans and, when he writes Bea -- admonishes his wife to pray and trust in God though her life is falling apart. The concept of new world building is scientifically interesting, but the main story here is Peter bringing Jesus to the natives who want more of this Book of Strange New Things -- in fact, dedicate themselves to its study even as Peter tries to explain concepts of the passages in words they can understand since they don't have knowledge of sheep, flock, gender, and so on. I found myself totally irritated with Peter's self-absorption and selfishness as God-sent missionary and totally empathetic to poor Bea. And, if this bothers you, be warned -- there's a sort of cliffhanger at the end. Knowing how Faber ended *Crimson Petal* should give you an idea. Would make a great book club book for discussion and I'd love to hear more about what others think of its literary merit.

This book has few strengths and many weaknesses. Strengths are a reasonable writing style and a

potentially interesting study of a Christian missionary proselytizing to an alien race while his wife remains on an earth that is in increasing environmental and social decline. But the weaknesses: flat characters, racial and sexual stereotypes, little plot, poor elaboration of the aliens, and extreme wordiness. The last was in my view the worst of these transgressions (might as well sound biblical). The book should have been half its length at most, maybe much less than that. Perhaps a novella at best. Pick almost any succession of long paragraphs and you'll see what I mean. I was reminded of early school days when essays were padded to meet requirements of minimum length. I bring to this no prejudice about the author or the genre. The book is simply mediocre at best. Like many others who have commented before me, I do not understand the praise that this book has received from so many professional reviewers. Well, there is one explanation: past success leads to easy grading.

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