



Under the Skin

Michel Faber

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In this haunting, entrancing novel, Michel Faber introduces us to Isserley, a female driver who cruises the Scottish Highlands picking up hitchhikers. Scarred and awkward, yet strangely erotic and threatening, she listens to her hitchhikers as they open up to her, revealing clues about who might miss them if they should disappear. A grotesque and comical allegory, *Under the Skin* takes us on a heart-thumping ride through dangerous territory — our own moral instincts and the boundaries of compassion — to present a surreal representation of contemporary society run amok.

Under the Skin Details

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From Reader Review Under the Skin for online ebook

Cecily says

Michel Faber evidently likes writing about the seedier side of life, but with a twist. He wrote the wonderful *The Crimson Petal and the White*, which I've reviewed [HERE](#) about an aspirational Victorian prostitute, and in this contemporary novel, a rather strange woman picks up hunky male hitchhikers for nefarious, but initially unspecified purposes. The assumption that this would be an unpleasantly graphic account of sex crimes was unfounded.

This is also about alienation, which was an even stronger theme in his more recent novel, *The Book of Strange New Things*, which I've reviewed [HERE](#).

It's a tricky book to categorise, but in many ways, it reminded me of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, which I've reviewed [HERE](#): ultimately dystopian, and yet in many ways, seemingly "normal".

In spite of my relief at the content, I found this a very uneven novel, and nowhere near as good as wonderful *Crimson Petal*. I am not sure whether I want to see the film adaptation.

THREE SECTIONS, THREE STYLES?

The book falls roughly into three sections. In the first part, Isserley scours the roadside for suitable hitchers, and once she has one, the point of view switches from her motivation, assessment, expectation and thoughts of him, to his of her. The way she eyes them up is unsettling, as are occasional comments about her own oddness (very thick specs hiding odd eyes, strange scarring on her hands, spinal problems, strangely sculpted nose).

In the middle section, the reasons for her pickups are gradually revealed, starting with the word "vodsel" being used increasingly often to describe the hitchers. The more the motivation was exposed, the less realistic the whole thing seemed. Like *Never Let Me Go*, it seemed a ludicrously slow, expensive and complicated way to achieve something that could easily have been done, or approximated, in other ways.

The final section unexpectedly became a bit Mills & Boon ((view spoiler)), with a few dashes of pop psych and reincarnation that reminded me of Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, though that is perhaps because a friend was talking about it only yesterday.

It was redeemed by an ending that although rather sentimental, was slightly ambiguous (I hate tidy, happy endings), especially about how/when/where the story started. It also included some lovely passages about the beauty of the world, some of which I've quoted below.

IDENTITY, UNDER THE SKIN

The book starts off showing the difficulties of being an outsider. Isserley is an incomer to rural Scotland and is puzzled by aspects of life and language there. The hitchers are outsiders, too, albeit in a different sense.

As the book progresses, this idea becomes the more fundamental question of what makes us human, and what price is worth paying to be human and to sustain humanity. One person's idea of being human does not necessarily match another's (look at the shameful aspects of colonialism and slavery), and yet, under the skin, perhaps we're all the same - made of stardust.

(view spoiler)

THE FILM

I saw the film, starring Scarlett Johansson, a few years after reading the book. The film is dark, haunting, and atmospheric, but only loosely inspired by the book. Very good in its terms, but don't expect a traditional adaptation.

FAVOURITE QUOTES

- * "The nacreous hush of a winter dawn, when the mists were still dosed down in the fields... hours of such prehistoric stillness."
- * "Most distracting was not the thread of danger but the allure of beauty."
- * "He was the type who needed to swerve round the saying of thanks, as if gratitude were a trap."
- * "She could glimpse her feelings, but only out of the corner of her eye."
- * "The irises [of her eyes] were hazel and green, glowing like... slides of some exotic bacterial culture,"!
- * "Nothing happened, and time stubbornly failed to pass."
- * "Nervous moonlight hesitated into her bedroom, drawing a spectral line around the meagre contents.... Moonlight was sketching some detail into her bedroom."
- * "A swarthy old salt of heroic ugliness."
- * A brilliantly revolting description of a processing plant:
"The smooth cervix of a giant concrete crater filled with a luminous stew of decomposing plant matter. Huge roots and tubers turned lazily in the albumescent gleet, obese leaves convulsed on its silvery surface like beached manta rays, and billows of blueish gas ejaculated from sudden interruptions in the surface tension. All around and above this great churning cavity, the stifling air swirled with green vapour and particles of sphagnum."
- * Snow: "The idea of all that water vapour solidifying by the cloudful and fluttering to Earth was miraculous... It was a phenomenon of stupendous and unjustified, useless extravagance... It's as if there's another sea, floating in the air."
- * Rain: "Some water fell out of the sky... In little droplets... They seemed to be materializing out of nowhere...I opened my mouth to the sky... It was an indescribably feeling. As if nature was actually trying to nurture me."
- * Sand: "The variety of shapes, colours and textures under her feed was, she believed, literally infinite... The indiscriminate, eternal devotion of nature to its numberless particles had an emotional importance for

Isserley; it put the unfairness of human life into perspective."

* Forest: "The barrier keeping out the light overhead was nothing more than a feathery canopy of twigs, beyond which lay a comforting eternity of sky."

Recommended by Paul (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>)

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Now here's a book that went from an intriguing premise, to gripping me at the first page, to totally taking over my mind - it's definitely going to be one of the best books I've read this year, I can tell you that now. I read this back in March and itched to write a review straight away, but made myself wait till it was next in line - I wish I hadn't now, because my thoughts were so buzzing at the time it would have made a more interesting and energetic review!

It's also a tricky one to review, or summarise, because part of the allure and the utter absorption is in the gradual reveal of the truth, in the not-knowing, in the speculation right from the beginning. So I can't tell you what it's *really* about, only give you much the same outline the blurb does (which, as I re-read it now, knowing the true story, is actually quite cleverly written in the way it acts upon our assumptions - playing with language is key to this novel, but I'll get to that). Which was enough to pull me in, but others might pass it by due to lack of information.

This is the story of Isserley, who drives back and forth along the Scottish highways looking for hitchhikers. Male, large, preferably unattached hitchhikers. With scars and large hands, her tiny petite frame is topped off by a pair of obviously enhanced breasts that are prominently on display. As she probes her male hitchhikers with casual questions and gets them talking, she quickly assesses whether anyone would really notice - or care - if they suddenly disappeared.

If that doesn't make you wonder about what Isserley's deal is, then you probably wouldn't care for the book. For me, the notion of a woman driving around looking for male hitchhikers to kidnap, is definitely an intriguing one - if Isserley were male, looking for young women, we'd know exactly what to think. But a tiny woman who seems nervous no matter how many times she does this...? I didn't know what to think, and that was part of the initial fun. As the story unfolds and more and more clues are carefully, smoothly revealed, my mind went nuts coming up with theories. Normally, I never make an effort to predict where a story is going - I love the reveal in the hands of a skilled writer, and I don't see reading as a race to be right and outwit the author. I certainly didn't want to outwit Faber; I loved the excitement, the not-knowing, the guessing and revising of said guesses, as the truth became apparent. And "excitement" is just the word for it: it was more fun than being on a roller-coaster! I got a kind of adrenaline rush and found it extremely hard to put the book down, even after the truth came out.

Even after every last truth is out, that's only half the book - by then you're hopefully hooked and in an odd way, sympathetic - at least, I was. I had no trouble identifying with Isserley, if I can use that word. I love being confronted in fiction, and having assumptions turned on their head. While the second half is quite different from the first - and I can't use the genre name I'd like to because that would be leading! - it was equally, if vastly differently, fascinating. I itched to know more and more, and without a doubt by the end I was sympathetic, despite it all. And that only adds to my fascination, because on a reasonable level, I shouldn't be. (Then again, I even found Humbert Humbert strangely sympathetic - in a disturbing way - in

Lolita . I actually enjoy being pulled out of my comfort zone, seeing a different perspective - even if it's ultimately "wrong" - and trying to understand a different way of thinking.)

Not being able to "reveal" what's really going on in the novel does make it hard to talk about all the things this book makes me so eager to discuss, especially language. I'm chaffing at the bit here! *Under the Skin* is such an intelligent novel, hugely thought-provoking and fascinating. I loved the way Faber used language to present an alien - to us - perspective, a different view of things, and turn our own comfort zone, assumptions and sense of righteousness on their head. I've read Fantasy novels (with blends of Sci-Fi) that do the same kind of thing, and they're some of my favourite books in the genre (sadly there aren't many of those around; most are disappointingly generic). For instance, the play on the words "human" and "animal" are hugely confronting and rather mind-bending, and really highlight the power of words, language and our ownership of them.

I wish I could go into it in more details but always when I write reviews I'm conscious of wanting to give others the opportunity to experience books the way I do, to start a book with a sense of anticipation and wonder and let the story tell itself, rather than have a reviewer's words tell them what to think and expect. So as much as I want to keep talking about this fantastic book - which, I must emphasise, is truly weird and not everyone's cup of tea - I will stop here.

Cassy says

Since you asked for my opinion on hitchhiking, don't do it.

My grandfather was on his way to pick up my uncle for the Christmas holiday when he stopped for two male hitchhikers. They forced him to an abandoned house, beat him with a two-by-four, and drove off. Police found his cold, naked body two weeks later. My mom was eleven years old.

Clearly, picking up hitchhikers is a big no-no in my family. Now this book warns me against the other side of hitchhiking: standing by the road with your thumb in the air. Again, don't do it.

This book is all about The Reveal. It starts with a chesty woman on the look-out for hunky hitchhikers. Thereafter, Faber slowly releases clues about what does and does not motivate her. I would encounter words I didn't understand, such as *vosdel*, and think, "If only I knew this word. I bet it is the key to everything!" I considered pulling out the dictionary, but was either stuck on a plane or too toasty in bed to bother standing up. Now I can take comfort that the dictionary won't have helped. The words are made up and duly explained as the plot unveiled itself in those excruciating increments.

If you have absolutely no intention of reading this book and just want to understand the hoopla, here goes: (view spoiler)

Maybe 60% into the book, you understand the big secret and the plot falters. I kept waiting for reactionary measures, but the action remained quite subdued. Sometimes Faber was just a damn tease - hinting at the potential of huge drama, taking me right to the edge, only to back away. Part of me admired his restraint while the other part was bored and frustrated.

There were several discussion questions at the end of the book that made me wonder if I had read too superficially. I'll admit I checked out a little after The Reveal, but ultimately, no. I think the author and/or publisher took the "message" of this book too seriously. It wasn't that effective for me. Except, of course, for reinforcing my thoughts on hitchhiking. Don't do it.

Overall, I'd recommend this book, if only for Faber's masterful execution of *The Reveal*. And it is an interesting mix of several genres: thriller, horror, and social commentary, as well as (view spoiler).

MJ Nicholls says

Caution, spoilers! A modern fable on any number of potential issues—animal cruelty? corporate greed? human brutality?—set in a version of the Highlands where multiple people hitchhike each day (I go frequently to the Highlands and I've never seen no hitchhikers—maybe Faber ate them all?) The story begins with our big-breasted heroine Isserley picking up a series of unemployed assholes and stabbing them in the buttocks with a stun chemical activated via her dashboard. She drives her victims, known as vodsels, to a secret plant where they are carved up and turned into gibbering grunting animals to be farmed for boutique meat. The story focuses on Isserley's desire for freedom—she fled her homeland and her own kind (some human/bear hybrid creature) to take the fresh air of Scotland—as she struggles to adapt to her new vodsel body (her kind call themselves human beings) and fight the tyrannising corporate machine of her hometown, where she began life as a slave. The story is endearingly strange, extremely brutal, and is left pantingly open to interpretation. As a lapsed vegan I read the story from an animal perspective: vodsel farming being almost as brutal as cow or chicken farming (but not quite). On the whole: Faber invokes the warped worlds of Will Self, especially *Great Apes*, David Twohy's underrated sci-fi thriller *The Arrival*, and early Gene Hackman flick *Prime Cut*. It's all here in this subcutaneous chillerfest.

Adina says

I was supposed to write this review a month ago but life happened and the right moment did not seem to materialize. I wanted to write a detail and spoilery analysis of the themes present but time passed and I don't feel capable to do it anymore. However, I feel obliged to write a few words.

I will begin with the strong recommendation not to read any blurb before starting *Under The Skin*. The plot it is better to be explored without prior knowledge of the main mystery. Unfortunately, most blurbs and reviews include major spoilers.

Please do not dismiss this novel because you see that the main genres is Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy. There might be a touch of SF but the main ideas have nothing to do with space travel and the such. Also, although I agree that there are a few creepy and disturbing scenes, I would not classify it as horror either.

At its core, *Under the skin* is a moral story and asks the question of what makes us human? It might be consider an animal activism novel but i don't think this was the objective. It is more a discussion about identity, alienation, perception of humanity. Ultimately, the conclusion is that we all same under the skin.

Grazia says

Bandito il piacere della carne.

Faccio outing. Non sono né vegana né vegetariana. Non sono un'amante dei piatti di carne, vivo ai limiti di una anemia che mi spossa, ma imperterrita evito, se appena posso sottrarmi, di nutrirmi con ciò che, essendo

di origine animale, potrebbe rimpinguare le mie scarsissime scorte di ferro.

Ma essendo nata nella terra che dà i natali al crudo, al salame di Felino e al culatello, devo dire che l'astensione totale del consumo di carne, non è cosa mia.

Ehm. Diciamo però che questa lettura ha ulteriormente minato la mia già scarsa propensione al consumo di carne.

Una curiosa satira fantascientifica sui rapporti di potere, sulla labilità del concetto di umanità e su quanto siamo pronti a differenziarci dal nostro prossimo se questo può evitarci problemi. Solitudine e diversità protagonisti assoluti.

Fantascienza noir direi essere il genere. Pure un po' horror.

Disturbante, doversi definirlo con una parola.

Un libro che dice tutto ciò che aveva da dire nella sua prima metà.

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Annnnd now I can see the movie, whose trailer is the reason I read this book in the first place. The whole book-to-screen experience should have some degree of order to it, even if nothing else does in life. Especially if nothing else does in life. Book first 4 eva!

On the film's trailer/synopsis/general promotion, just a couple of things: 1) There's a spoiler innit concerning the who-what of the main character that the book opted to slow-reveal, which creates this weird situation where the trailer makes you want to see the movie which makes you want to read the book, while also ruining the book a little, a book which you (me) wouldn't even have known about had it not been for that book-spoiling trailer, so it's not that big of deal because it was kind of a necessary sacrifice in order to know about the trailer about the movie about the book, but still. Ya follow me? This is a wordy warning. 2) I guess you aren't playing when you say something is "loosely based on the novel." Vulgar, juvenile joke about how loose it is. That movie that I haven't even seen yet can't possibly be much like this book that I actually have read, just based on these imagery buzzwords: hotchick, cityscapes, sexyclothes, at-the-mall, out-in-public, seduction, lipstick, no-glasses, no-scars, normal-naked. <---Not featured in this book. Isserly, our main ladymam, does/is/experiences none of these things. On the contrary, her profound social awkwardness and startling appearance, her total dependence on her prosthetic tits and only her prosthetic tits to lure in her prey are major contributors to her inherent creepiness, and to what creates the feeling of panicked claustrophobia in all the "doomed hitch-hikers in her car" scenes in what is otherwise a sort of "Taxicab Confessions from Purgatory" tale. Oh yeah, I am so actually talking about the book all the sudden. Betcha didn't see that coming.

This novel moves along pretty swiftly for one so technically slow-paced. At times, the metaphors at play feel a little ham-fisted, or long-winded, or both. Slivers of clever here and there, a few really great, really disturbing scenes. The romantic sub-plot reads like sloppy afterthought. The ending feels like a cheat. The animal rights theme is as subtle as a 10 car pile-up.

*** I liked it.

Es Summer says

“ISSERLEY ALWAYS DROVE straight past a hitch-hiker when she first saw him, to give herself time to size him up. She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs. Puny, scrawny specimens were no use to her.”

Minor spoilers

Disturbing, strangely compelling and original: Under the Skin is unlike anything I have ever read before. The story follows, Isserley, a female driver who picks up hitchhikers for secret purposes. She needs a certain type of guy: big muscled, tall and fit. What her reason is of needing these guys remains a mystery for a long time.

During the rides, Isserley observes the hitchhiker while they try to get to know each other. We get an insight in the thoughts of the hitchhikers as well and that makes it very interesting. Especially since the hitchhikers are more busy ogling Isserley than seeing the threat she actually is for them.

“Most distracting of all, though, was not the threat of danger but the allure of beauty.”

The roles are reversed in Under the Skin and the female driver is the creepy one. There is something darkly amusing about the fact that a small woman chooses the biggest guys she can find, she lures them in with her femininity and outer appearance with the purposes of harming them in the meantime.

Isserley is utterly creepy and it is difficult to really understand her throughout the novel.

That made it harder to connect with her.

Although the creepiness of the main narrator provided a grimy atmosphere, sometimes it dragged on a bit. The story had a very slow built-up and I wished for more action.

Nevertheless, it was an interesting read and I would recommend it to horror lovers.

3 stars.

Jen Campbell says

4.5 stars. Will talk about it in my next wrap up :)

Paul Bryant says

UPDATE!

This is a very unusul situation for me, but this is a very unusual book. I'm actually looking *extremely* forward to seeing the movie. The director Jonathan Glazer doesn't do many movies but he did do *Sexy Beast* which is a must-see, and he did do this amazing advert :

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-ut_2...

So bring it on!

And now, the original book review.

Things I love about Under the Skin

- the heroine is really creepy
 - the whole situation is really mental (that's a literary term coined by F R Leavis in his seminal 1938 essay "Ezra Pound : Fucking Mental")
 - you only find out bit by bit and it gets weirder until you *just can't stand it*
 - it didn't put me off hitchhiking because I'd already served my time as a dedicated hitchhiker, I've got a car now, and anyway the heroine was looking for the beefy type which I could never be mistaken as, even in the mysterious Scottish gloaming, even if you were wearing sunglasses and you had a heavy head cold in the mysterious Scottish gloaming
 - Michel Faber wrote the Crimson Petal and the White which is my favourite 1000-page gonzo Modern Victorian skankfest and which is in a *completely different style* to this one and it never seems like he's dressing up in front of the mirror
 - it's a book where i can say *here, cop yer whack for this flamboyant grotesquerie, it'll make you gag but you'll be a better person for it*
 - it's suitable for vegetarians
-

Roberto says

Vita da capponi

Ho fatto caso da qualche tempo che non esistono spot che pubblicizzino la carne, che sia bovina, equina o suina. Le uniche che si vedono sono quelle relative a pollame e salumi. Ma curiosamente ho notato che in nessuno dei due casi si vedono mai né polli né suini "vivi"; in effetti siamo così abituati a vedere polli allo spiedo e salami che raramente ci soffermiamo a pensare ai relativi animali come esseri viventi.

Ecco, per farmi capire meglio questa associazione, questo bel libro di Faber mi ha trasformato in un bel capponi.

E mi ha fatto parecchio male, direi, dato che il trattamento riservatomi non è stato tra i più piacevoli.

Bisogna sempre cambiare prospettiva, per capire veramente le cose.

Un libro strano, crudo, duro, che parlando di extraterrestri racconta di noi, di solitudine, di diversità, di capponi, di ingiustizia. Non è un capolavoro, ma fa pensare parecchio.

K.D. Absolutely says

Surprisingly good. The book will keep you turning the pages because of the slow tease. In the end, I was expecting something like *The Silence of the Lambs* but Faber probably anticipated it and he brought me to a place I've never been before. That's despite that I already have 700+ books in different genres in my read

folder. Definitely my first time to have encountered and read something like this.

It is a story of a pickup lady named **Isserly**. She drives back and forth in a Scottish highway looking for beefy young hitchhiking men. When she sees one, she assesses him first by passing through them and when she is certain, she makes a U-turn and picks the young man up. Then... I will not go on as this is a highly *spoilable* book. I will not even dare to put a spoiler (hide/show) because I have friends here who does not know how to behave and they just click on them. Just trust me when I say that, if you are any of the following, you will love this book:

(1) *A lover of good storytelling that uses slow-tease.* The reason why Isserly picks the beefy young men and what do "they" do with those men;

(2) *Mystery/suspense/sci-fi/fantasy aficionados.* The twists are just not easy to predict so I just lumped all those genres in there so as not to reveal too much. What I am trying to say is that if you love one of these genres, there is something in this book for you.

(3) *A writer who is interested on how to play with POVs.* The bulk of the book is told in Isserly's point of view but every time there is a hitchhiker who has just got in her car, the POV shifts to him and I just loved knowing what the young man thinks of Isserly. I did enjoy these parts.

(4) *If you are a meat-loving person.* I had the same feeling while reading Douglas Adams' *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. Remember the talking giraffe?

I think I have to stop now. Otherwise, I will spoil your fun! One last note (so I can remember if someone asks): the title comes from **Amlis** saying "We're all the same *under the skin*" when Isserly says that she does not really doubt if there's much similarity between the way he and she (Isserly) live and breath. (p. 164).

This is a proof that not all 1001 books are serious or literary. This one is just different. The variety is one of the reasons why I am sticking to that list. It provides me with an unbelievable breath and width when it comes to reading experience. Just great!

Kinga says

Sometime in March Craig posted on our book group Facebook page the following message:

"Hello Group,

At the risk of sounding alarmist, I want to alarm you all.

I am currently rereading Under The Skin for about the sixth time, and I noticed today from tube adverts that the film adaptation is out March 14 or 15. Now, I utterly hate it when things are oversold to me, but if you ever want to experience this novel - which is among the most extraordinary I've ever read - in the manner in which it was intended, I beseech you to read it within the next 4-6 days, before the hype machine amps up and partially spoils it for you.

I may have spent a portion of this afternoon drinking 15% beer, but I assure you, you should not allow Hollywood to ruin this for you.

Well, I tried.

Regards."

See, I'm not normally the one to go out and buy a book right after someone's recommend it to me. Usually I just add it to my never-ending to-read list where it sits waiting to be chosen like a puppy in a dog shelter. But

then, Craig is not normally given to being dramatic, so I thought maybe I should heed his warning and to my amazement I dropped everything I was reading, went and downloaded 'Under the Skin' and started reading it right away.

Craig was right, ladies and gentlemen. Now all I want to do is tell you nothing about this book but somehow convince you to read it. Maybe I will say that it's about a woman who drives around Scottish frontiers and picks up hunky hitch-hikers. The opening might be erotically charged but the irony of it will hit you later. It's a book that asks the readers for their definition of what it means to be human and then forces them to take sides.

Nothing new here but presented in a such mind-bending way that we just have to admit that our claim to evolutionary superiority is very weak. Our arguments are arbitrary and self-serving. We're all animals.

While including as few graphic details as possible, it manages to be one of the most disturbing things I have ever read. At some point I really wanted not to want to read it anymore. I think the greatest twisted strength of this book was that it made me form alliances with the characters before I knew the whole story, or at least all the sides to the story. Once all is revealed, you can't get out of it without exposing yourself as a hypocrite. And yet, in all of this, there is somehow room left for gentle emotions, melancholy, evocative descriptions of the landscape and a hint of a love story.

The descriptions in this book are superb. You can see clearly all the characters, sense something off about some of them but at first can't quite lay your finger on what it is. You see Isserley, the main character, through the eyes of different hitchhikers and it is quite amazing how different their impressions are but in the end they form in your head a cohesive picture of the woman. I don't know what Scarlett Johansson is doing starring in the adaption of this book. This makes no sense whatsoever. Read the book.

It might or might not be a coincidence that some time after finishing this novel I had this genius idea: hey, maybe I should try to be vegan for a while. Of course, the message of this book not subtle but somehow I had no problem with it at all. Michel Faber is currently the best thing you can find in Scotland.

Rebecca Foster says

This was the perfect book for reading on rainy Scottish highways last week. I'm so glad I decided at the last minute to bring it along on our trip to Wigtown.

Isserley drives along Highland roads picking up hitchhikers – but only the hunky males – to take back to her farm near the Moray Firth. It's likely that you already know the setup of this even if you haven't read it, perhaps from the buzz around the 2013 film version starring Scarlett Johansson. It must have been so difficult for the first reviewers and interviewers to discuss the book without spoilers back in 2000. David Mitchell, in his introduction to my Canons series reprint, does an admirable job of suggesting the eeriness of the contents without giving anything significant away.

Shelve this under science fiction, though it veers towards horror and then becomes a telling allegory. I knew the basic plot beforehand, but there were still some surprises awaiting me, and I was impressed with how Faber pulled it all off. Keep an eye open for how he uses the word "human." This has a lot to say about compassion and dignity, and how despite our differences we are fundamentally the same "under the skin."

An atmospheric line: "The fields all around her house were shrouded in snow, with patches of dark earth poking through here and there as if the world were a rich fruit cake under cream."

Originally published on my blog, Bookish Beck.

Maciek says

Under the Skin is a reviewer's nightmare - it's literally impossible to discuss this book without touching the plot, and the whole thing hinges on mystery that surrounds it. This is a novel which is all about *the big reveal*, and Michel Faber delights in *teeeeeasing* the reader with the smallest of hints and nudges.

All I can tell you, spoiler free, is this - an attractive, lone woman, Isserley, drives on the A9 motorway through the Scottish Highlands, searching for hitch-hikers. She drives along the A9 all day long, every day, looking for specific type of travelers: male, with lots of muscle mass. Isserley often drives past the same person twice to decide if he is worthy of picking up, and if he is she takes him into her car. Why is Isserley picking up the hitch-hikers? Who is she, and who are they? What is going on?

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive! This quote, wrongly attributed in the book to William Shakespeare (it's from *Marmion*, an epic poem by the famous Scottish poet, Sir Walter Scott) is a perfect summary of the book - which is a tangled web of deception, where nothing is quite what it appears to be. Faber throws a hook straight into our curiosity, but never explains anything directly - he only implies and insinuates, pulling us in more and more. At the beginning, when we know nothing of Isserley and her road trips and yearn to learn more, it works wonders - the book is compelling and few readers will be able to resist the call of its riddle.

But once the puzzles begin to fall into place it runs out of steam amazingly quickly, and by the time the big reveal finally happens it's more embarrassing than clever - as it *literally makes no sense*, and doesn't hold up to any close scrutiny. Long explanation follows in the spoiler section:

(view spoiler)

With what begun as an eerie and compelling novel, *Under the Skin* quickly became unimpressive and turned into unbelievable, logic-defying mess. What was subtle becomes heavy handed and obvious, as if Faber became tired of hints and winks and had to literally spell out his message. The novel is not without its merits

- there is a chase scene which is particularly chilling and grotesque, and Faber can operate with a scene and create good imagery when he wants to - but ultimately these things are simply not enough to save the book from itself. *The Wall Street Journal* described it as "an *Animal Farm* for the new century", but the reviewer who wrote that sentence has probably never read *Animal Farm* as the only thing that the two books have in common is the physical building. I know that *Under the Skin* was his debut novel and hopefully he got better with time - I still want to read his historical epic, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, but now I'm not in such a big hurry as I was before. Fool me once...

Carmen says

ALL SPOILERS FOR THIS BOOK ARE HIDDEN UNDER TAGS

Isserley, too, often ventured out at hours of such prehistoric stillness that her vehicle might have been the first ever. It was as if she had been set down on a world so newly finished that mountains might still have some shifting to do and the wooded valleys might yet be recast as seas.

Okay. This book is not what you are expecting at all. I am going to put the general (non-ending, non-detailed) description of the plot under a spoiler tag, because I don't want to ruin anyone's day. If you read it, it's not going to spoil what happens to the CHARACTERS, but some things will be revealed to you that honestly probably won't be too big of a surprise IF you made the mistake of reading GR's summary/blurb/thing. But read at your own risk. I love going in cold, I know the feeling.

(view spoiler)

THINGS YOU WILL FIND IN THIS BOOK:

1.) A huge, overarching vegan agenda. It's not forced, it's not preachy - but it is huge and it is undeniable and it is everywhere.

If you are vegan, considering becoming vegan, or trying to open up people's minds about being vegan - this is definitely the book for you. NOT PREACHY, just perfect.

2.) Classism - This book is really great at talking about classism, the haves and the have-nots - again, VERY SUBTLE, not preachy.

3.) Animal rights activists - This book both gently mocks them and their concerns, while simultaneously showing you that they have an undeniable, amazing point that is impossible to ignore. Which is perfect.

4.) Great and very rare gender-danger-switch, akin to Whedon's initial Buffy genesis of, basically, "a blonde cheerleader is walking home at night. A huge monster is stalking her. But she's not the one in danger - it is. She's not the one who's prey - it is." I'm paraphrasing, but you know what I mean. Isserley - a small, weak-looking female who deliberately and purposefully picks up the beefiest, strongest, most muscly men she can find as hitchhikers - is the predator here. The men are the victims, even when often times they are thinking it's their lucky day and plotting how soon they can pull a knife on her and rape her.

5.) This book has a more minor subplot which is pro-marijuana. This is nowhere NEAR as huge as the vegan push, but it is definitely noticeable. The author is Dutch, I have no idea if that has anything to do with it.

6.) Fake breasts - Isserley has a huge, surgically implanted pair of "perfect" breasts that she got because it

helps her lure men into the car with her. Not that she really needs a lure, actually, I'm sure hitchhikers wouldn't hesitate to ride with practically any woman - young, old, fat, thin, big or small breasted.

However, Faber seems to use these breast implants as a kind of character test. If the man who accepts a ride from Isserley feels sad that her breasts are fake and thinks to himself that women's natural breasts are the most beautiful - regardless of size or shape - then this is Faber's way of letting us know that this man is a good person. If, however, the man *loves* Isserley's huge, hard, rather obviously fake breasts - than that guy is at best a terrible person and at worst a rapist. It's the breast-test. o.O LOL

Isserley doesn't care about any of this, of course. She has close to zero feeling in her breasts and only uses them as tools to lure men. But it's interesting to see the inner workings of Faber's mind on this topic.

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Very much to my surprise, I loved this book. I felt it was all the things that *The Sparrow* should have been - but wasn't.

It is in equal parts hilarious and depressing. I laughed out loud *at least* 30 times in the course of reading this book - Isserley's comments and observations are TOO FUNNY and likewise the observations and thoughts the men she picks up are having about her. OMG So funny, I was laughing up a storm.

But obviously the book isn't all laughter and hilarity. The strong vegan theme is of course very depressing, not to mention the classism and the misogyny. But I thought Faber was genius in the way he wove these two very different emotions into the book.

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Now, is Faber's book perfect? Of course not. He has a weird way of putting things. For instance:

Ogling her in fascinated pity, they had ganged up to douche her with reassurance.

This is very unfortunate wording, and it is completely said in earnest, I assure you. o.O

But the writing can also be very beautiful:

As soon as he'd entered her car and sat down, Isserley sensed he was trouble. It was as if the laws of physics were unsettled by his presence; as if the electrons in the air were suddenly vibrating faster, until they were ricocheting around the confines of the cabin like crazed invisible insects.

Not to mention filled with truth. I think Faber was great at getting to the heart of things in this book, and laying things bare. Excellent honesty about humanity and the human condition in this novel.

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Tl;dr - A great book with a fascinating premise that is used to promote the ideas of veganism, equality, and legalized marijuana use. But in a completely subtle and non-preachy way (I know you don't believe me, just... read it and you'll see what I mean.) This book does everything that *The Sparrow* wanted to do and does it 100x better (in my opinion). Despite my best efforts to resist, I felt myself succumbing and by the end grudgingly had to admit that this book was wonderful. I would highly recommend if it sounds remotely interesting to you.

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TRIGGER WARNING: I always feel very betrayed and upset when I read a book that features rape or other subjects that make me very upset and no review has mentioned that this is an element in the book. So I'm telling you now - because I would want to know

There is a forced blowjob (at knifepoint) in this book and

There is an attempted but unconsummated vaginal rape.

Read at your own risk. I'm very sensitive to this sort of thing, but I got through it in one piece, but you've got to make that judgment call for yourself. Like I said, I would feel remiss if I did not mention that this content was in the book, because personally I would really want to know this before reading.

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P.S. Scarlett Johansson plays Isserley in the film, which is nonsensical - Isserley is very unattractive. VERY UNATTRACTIVE, unless of course you count her perfect, huge, completely fake breasts. (Have you ever seen the movie Mars Attacks? This is akin to that fake woman the aliens put together in order to seduce men.) I understand Hollywood can't really accept putting anyone who is not gorgeous on the screen, though, regardless of source material or plot points. (I haven't seen the film.)

P.P.S. You could obviously classify this novel as a horror novel, however, I was not horrified and therefore it was not shelved as a horror by me. The idea of (view spoiler) didn't bother me in the least. But I can see Faber was trying to shock and horrify me with this - and I think it would most people. So this is (more or less) a horror novel, is what I'm saying.

Kevin Kelsey says

Posted at Heradas

Literary science fiction that is compulsively creepy and disturbing in all the right ways. Orwellian by way of Ursula Le Guin or Octavia Butler. More Animal Farm than 1984. I think fans of Jeff VanderMeer's style of New Weird fiction would have a lot to enjoy here.

It's a moral story, without particularly taking any one side, mostly just intended to provoke some discussion I imagine. It could easily be interpreted as an animal rights activism novel, but I'm not so sure it actually is. I thoroughly enjoyed Under the Skin; very unnerving and hard to put down.

I read this before watching the film, and loved both. They are as different from one another as they are similar.

Edward says

I thought I knew what to expect, having seen (and enjoyed) the movie. But the book is entirely different, taking the story of this lone woman who picks up exclusively male hitchhikers in very creepy, bizarre and surprising directions. Faber does a good job at slowly lowering the curtain into Isserley's life and motivations... but the less said about these, the better: so much of the fun is in the revelation. *Under the Skin* certainly has its weak points, but overall I found it so strange, unexpected and original, and the grotesque spectacle so compelling, that any faults were easy to overlook, and it was a pleasure to be picked up and taken along for the ride.

Agnieszka says

It's an uncanny novel. Although it starts out as a classic thriller, Faber from first pages is playing with readers and misleading them. Repeating for The Times *here nothing is what it seems* and you become more and more disoriented, for this book is nothing like you had ever read before. At the same time engaging and repulsive. Unsettling. Disturbing.

I'm not sure what I expected but was absolutely suprised. Faber consistently builds tension and leads us out of the atmosphere of horror in total fantasy, mixes so many genres and then serves extraordinary dish, neither thriller nor a crime story, nor science fiction. And finally leaves us with clear message that, after all, we are all the same under the skin.

Scott says

I used to pick up hitchhikers. Alone and starved of conversation on long-distance trips I'd stop for anyone short of an obvious axe murderer. Most of the people I picked up were guys in their 20s - fit, healthy men who would have been perfect targets for the protagonist of *Under The Skin*.

In Michael Faber's novel a lone woman named Isserley cruises the backroads of Scotland, picking up healthy, muscular male hitchers. She chats awkwardly with her new passengers, determining their health, their level of connectedness to their friends, their family and society. Then, with the flick of a switch on her steering column she sedates them and delivers them to a mysterious backwoods farm.

Isserley's days are spent driving, her nights trying to sleep through the torment her surgically altered body inflicts upon her. And the surgeries that have left her so pained were profoundly altering. Isserley is not a normal woman, and the things done to her so she can pass as a regular person have left her a mess of physical and psychological scars.

This is a suspenseful story, filled with tantalising mysteries that will pull you through the novel like a jet-skier behind a boat. Why is Isserley abducting people? What happens to them on the farm? Who, or what exactly is our protagonist? *Under the Skin* slowly reveals the answers to these questions and I stayed up late with this book, caught up in Isserley's pained and conflicted life to the point where the novel consumed my thoughts all the following day.

This isn't a book for the easily triggered. There is genuine horror in what is revealed. Some of the darker stuff has lodged in my mind - a disturbing mental burr in my psyche that I can't quite pluck free - and I find myself involuntarily recalling it while reading other books.

(view spoiler)

My only real gripe is that, in the early parts of the book at least, Faber pulls the rather tired trick of deliberately obscuring the appearances of his characters (or at least, parts of them) by simply not giving any details about how they look, when any observer on the scene would see them quite clearly. While this increases the sense of mystery it felt a little artificial.

This annoyance aside *under the Skin* is a standout novel - a thoughtful, poignant and sad story with a strong message. It left me with a lot to think about, and I while I'm still happy to pick up hitchhikers I'm now doubly sure that I'll never risk thumbing rides myself.
