

Michelle Lovric, *The Book of Human Skin* (Bloomsbury, 2010)

Had the publication dates not been so close, I might have wondered whether Michelle Lovric had read Terry Eagleton's treatise *On Evil* (2010) before she created two of her bad, and mad, protagonist narrators in *The Book of Human Skin*: Minguillo Fasan, an unrelentingly cruel and sadistic heir to a Venetian pile, and Sor Loreta, a murderous, megalomaniacal, self-mutilating, anorexic nun. In neither case, does Lovric offer readers a redemptive back-story. The refrain 'this is going to be a little uncomfortable' recurs between sections of the text. This is not a book for the squeamish.

Early in the novel, Fasan loses the confidence of his father and, cut from the will, commences a campaign to undermine, torture and, finally, attempt to murder Marcella, his only surviving sister. Tropes of gothic and psychopathic genre reveal his sadism: he skewers birds, throws a kitten into the canal, reads Marquis de Sade, and collects books (anthropedemic bibliopegy) with covers made from human skin. Fasan's crackling black humour and constant flirtatious addressing of his target readers (the Kind, the Comprehending, the Empathetical, the Dullest, the Sentimental, the Travelled Reader), upstage any attempt at agency by his sister, a sixteen-year-old with chronic incontinence and a hip deformity. This might result in the Horrified Reader feeling complicit in his cruelty or thinking that the narrative has descended into a kind of schlock similar to tales of the machinations of the poisonous Borgias in an earlier period. Lovric uses Fasan's metafictional diary to tease and harangue the reader: 'If the Reader does not relish dismal accounts of Poor Things done in a pungent style, He should not read on' (170).

Set mainly in Venice but also in Arequipa, Peru – both beautifully evoked – at the turn of the eighteenth century, this historical novel uses a third narrator, Dr Santo Aldo Brandini, to report on his sometime patient Napoleon Bonaparte and his falling political and social capital, brought about by his 1797 looting of Venice, closing of many of its convents, subsequent 1812 defeat in Russia, and perhaps by his chronic itch. Lovric has a passion for the history of Venice and of medicine, and her encyclopaedic knowledge of these two subjects enrich this, her fourth adult novel. Exquisite and inventive similes and metaphors finesse her disturbingly clever narrative: forsaking even 'whores so ugly that they had to give change', Fasan reports after his marriage to a fat heiress, 'I worked my wife like a peasant works the dough' (183).

The brother and sister, the nun, the doctor and Gianni elle Boccolle, a loyal family retainer, alternately narrate the story in first person; each of the five voices is distinctive and instrumental for exposition.

Boccolle's diary opens the narrative and it took me several attempts to get over the large font, phonetic spelling and outrageous malapropisms that signify his lowly class, but his actions underpin the plot and Marcella's survival. Eventually, this character's wholesome love for her buoys up the energy of the narrative, offering readers the only respite from Fasan's sadism and Marcella's victimhood.

The Book of Human Skin is partly a love story, albeit one slow to incubate and thwarted by Marcella's evil brother. A host of minor characters provide interest and relief from Fasan's unrelenting bad deeds and debauchery: a Scottish widower, a

feisty portrait painter, and mentors and slaves who put themselves in danger to keep Marcella alive over 500 pages. Brandini falls in love with the girl's gentle resignation and her marmoreal skin. Her lack of self-belief brought about by despair and excruciating circumstances repeatedly stymies their love in this captivity narrative.

Despatched by her brother to a mad house on one of the lagoon islands, she develops an unjust reputation for hypersexuality, turns mute, anorexic and depressive, and survives only because of the desperate secrecy and watchfulness of her few surviving loyal friends. When she is packed off to a convent in Peru she becomes the object of attention of yet another psychopath. Enter Sol Loreta. Lovric puts us through the mincer relating this dislikeable nun's invention of sado-masochistic rituals to get God's attention, and her demented and violent treatment of the first object of her obsession, Marcella's friend Sofia. Tension ramps up when Loreta turns her attention to Marcella.

Apart from Sor Loreta, none of the female characters have much agency. Fasan's bovine wife, paraded by him like a whore at social gatherings, becomes no more than a disappointing breeding machine and the special receptacle for his venom: 'I advanced on her with the neck of the bottle still fisted. Now the Married Reader is accustomed to such scenes of domestic bliss in His own household, so I'll not do the tedious and spell out every letter' (184). Fasan subdues a maidservant by slashing her face, his mother fails to protect her daughter and his sister, and women living at the island asylum are typecast as fallen women with no social or economic capital. Marcella's failure to act will try a Feminist Reader until the final scenes.

My other reservations might lie with some of the more laboured references to human skin, especially that of the luminescent Marcella, and her boyfriend and Fasan's fetish for it. I sometimes wearied of the latter's smug and toadying address to various imagined readers, which in the final pages pulled me up short to consider, why, in fact, I had read on through so much blood and gore and torture: 'Do not tell me you did not flick through the pages, eager to be revolted. And do not tell me that I failed to provide a vividness to console you for the pale commonplace of your own life' (466), Fasan challenges.

The answer lies with Lovric's sardonic and masterly manipulation of her material, and the brilliance of her figurative writing. The text will delight lovers of story and of fine writing.

Readers who crave further epidermal titillation might move on to Mary Rose Cuskelly's *Original Skin: Exploring the Marvels of the Human Hide* (2010) or Patrick Süskind's *Perfume: the Story of a Murderer* (2006).

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