

*The Crimson Petal and the White* is not just an historical novel. It’s the next best thing to a time machine, transporting us back to the London of 1875, surrounding and overwhelming with sights, smells and sounds.

Michel Faber has borrowed the techniques of the novelists of the Victorian era to conduct his readers spellbound through the story. He starts by addressing us directly: ‘Watch you step. Keep your wits about you: you will need them.’ Like Anthony Trollope, he makes no pretence of invisibility and quite explicitly leads the way through the pages, explaining how he chooses which of the characters will be most rewarding to follow next. This is not a gimmick, though, and like any good narrative device is maintained only as long as necessary. Once the reader has been hooked into the story, the narrator backs away and becomes invisible until the very end.

*The Crimson Petal and the White* is thoroughly researched. This can often be an historical novelist’s downfall, but Faber has used his information to serve the story, rather than the opposite. His reader is assumed to be ‘an alien from another time and place altogether,’ and therefore needs to be initiated into the secrets of the time. There is detailed information about female fashions, London shops, contraception, medical treatment, transport, household management – all the minutiae of daily life in 1875. Sometimes it is integral to the plot, sometimes it is part of the background, but it all plays its role discreetly, like the servants in a well-run household.
The major departure of this novel from its nineteenth century models is that it is explicitly about sex in a way Trollope and Thackeray could only have dreamt of. Of course their novels are full of sex, repressed though it necessarily was. However, *The Crimson Petal and the White* has sex at its core. The relationship between Sugar, the upwardly-mobile prostitute, and William, the upwardly-mobile businessman, is pure sex. The narrator promises at an early moment, ‘If you are bored beyond endurance, I can offer only my promise that there will be fucking in the very near future, not to mention madness, abduction, and violent death.’ But despite this jocular, and accurate, forecast this is not a sensational novel. Like the historical details, the sex and violence are used only in service of the narrative, never the other way around. Faber’s technique is almost flawless, and his judgment is impeccable. Each character is a perfect whole, though they remain mysterious and intriguing: their views of each other – and themselves – are often wildly dissimilar.

This is an unusually long novel, with well over 800 closely-printed pages. It never palls: it is one of those books, like some of its nineteenth-century counterparts, that suck you in and release you only grudgingly to face the real world, with senses dazed and a reluctance to acknowledge its claims.