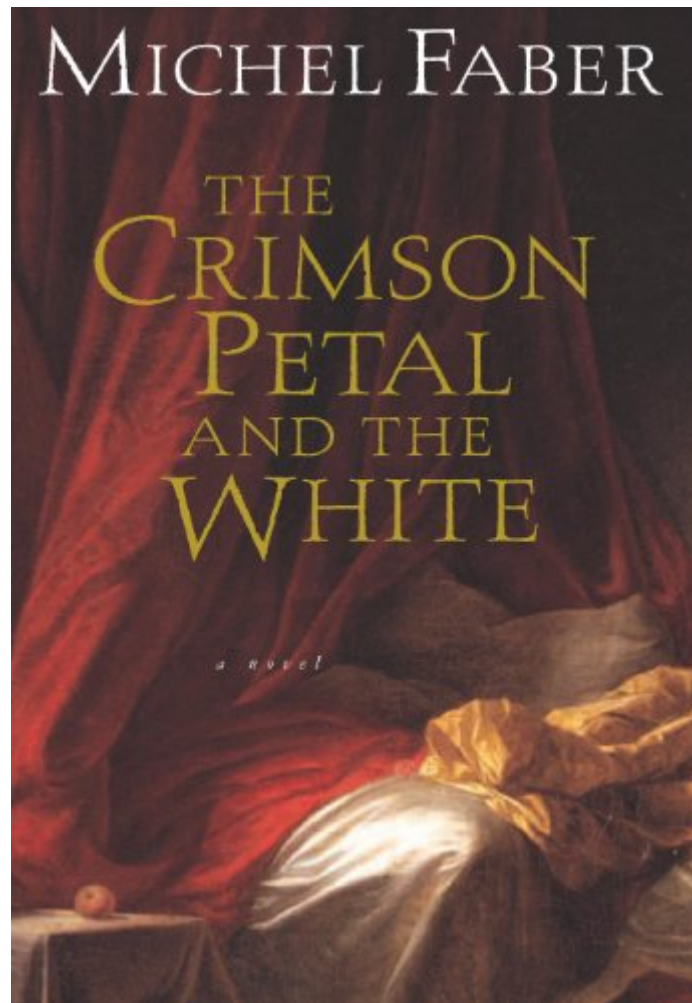




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The Crimson Petal And The White



Synopsis

At the heart of this panoramic, multidimensional narrative is the compelling struggle of a young woman to lift her body and soul out of the gutter. Faber leads us back to 1870s London, where Sugar, a nineteen-year-old whore in the brothel of the terrifying Mrs. Castaway, yearns for escape to a better life. Her ascent through the strata of Victorian society offers us intimacy with a host of lovable, maddening, unforgettable characters. They begin with William Rackham, an egotistical perfume magnate whose ambition is fueled by his lust for Sugar, and whose patronage brings her into proximity to his extended family and milieu: his unhinged, childlike wife, Agnes, who manages to overcome her chronic hysteria to make her appearances during the Season; his mysteriously hidden-away daughter, Sophie, left to the care of minions; his pious brother, Henry, foiled in his devotional calling by a persistently less-than-chaste love for the Widow Fox, whose efforts on behalf of The Rescue Society lead Henry into ever-more disturbing confrontations with flesh; all this overseen by assorted preening socialites, drunken journalists, untrustworthy servants, vile guttersnipes, and whores of all stripes and persuasions. Twenty years in its conception, research, and writing, *The Crimson Petal and the White* is teeming with life, rich in texture and incident, with characters breathtakingly real. In a class by itself, it's a big, juicy, must-read of a novel that will delight, enthrall, provoke, and entertain young and old, male and female.

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Customer Reviews

I had read, and loved, Faber's *Under the Skin* and *The Book of Strange New Things*, so I decided *Crimson Petal and the White* would be my first Kindle purchase. I read nearly 200 pages before admitting I was bored. Reading it became more and more of a chore, and by the end I detested all of the characters and the endless, go-nowhere plot. All of the characters are wretched in various ways, and while Faber does a masterful job of writing "in the period," I got the feeling that what primarily interested him was literary texture. I find it hard to reconcile this with his other two books, which were so imaginative and profound I couldn't put either one down (both resonate with me to this day). I would have given this one star except I have such respect for the author. If following the lives of a mass of unhappy people living in the seedy underbelly of England during the industrial revolution doesn't put you off, your reward is Faber's thorough knowledge of the period. I'm sure he has captured those wretched lives precisely.

I devoured *The Crimson Petal and the White* when it was first released in 2002. I still remember reading this 900 page brick in hardcover! Looking back I believe this was my first exposure to the seedy side of Victorian London with the prostitutes, slums, pollution, whore houses, beggars, urchins, drunks and streets filled with s*** and piss "literally." But upon a second reading I took a critical eye beyond the fancy window dressings of moral and physical filth and I realized that I now feel sort of underwhelmed by the plot itself. What Faber did right: 1. As already mentioned, the background scenery of Victorian London was outstanding. Bravo. 2. The utilization of *The Season* captivated me. I turned to Google to find out more and view pictures. 3. Portrayal of Agnes and her slow decline into madness. 4. Agnes's ladies maid Clara was perfect - so cunning and devious. She reminded me of Ms. Baxter from *Downton Abbey*. 5. The ending "I am not one to demand all loose ends be wrapped up at the conclusion so the ending itself did not bother me". What I am referring to here is my happiness about the final demise of William because he was such an A-HOLE!!! What I believe were low-points: 1. Lack of insight into character transformations. What I mean here is that characters suddenly changed but there was little introspection. One minute William is a carefree bohemian socialist and the next he is a rising capitalist in the business world. How did he get there? Of course we are told about his money woes and problems with daddy, but

Faber never got us "the reader" inside of William's head. It's the basic "ædon" tell me "show me." 2. Ditto #1 for Sugar. One minute she is an exotic whore not interested in the world outside her room and the next she is governess and a so-called "lady" as she described herself. But how did she arrive at that point? So there are more good than bad hence the 3 star rating. This was Faber's ode to Wilkie Collins with all the name dropping and references.

It can be unfathomable for readers to understand why an author chooses the stratagem s/he does. Take an omniscient (third person) narrative voice, as an example. In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Faber has chosen a third person narrative voice, perhaps because this omniscient presence enables the reader to be "in" the mind of more than one character. While this can be a superb way to show motivations, it can also be a reason that we, the readers, fail to bond strongly with any one character -- which is exactly what happened with me as I read through this cautionary tale of love, lust, and loss in late nineteenth century London. I believe I understand why Faber has been called a Dickens for the twenty-first century. His work has a nearly preternatural gravity - the reader has a sense of being introduced to a world where poverty, filth, disease, and "morality" are the real characters, and William, Sugar, and the circle of characters who revolve into, through, and ultimately out of their sphere are simply ghosts passing through the splendid squalor of a time that has, in the late twentieth century and beyond, been glamorized in costume historic films and novels. Faber does a particularly fine job of exposing the space known as "morality", gently nudging (and occasionally shoving) the subjective boundaries between the "good" citizens and the ones who are simply doing what they can to make their way in a world that is, all too often unkind, inhospitable, and frequently downright dangerous. It will come as a surprise to some that the "good" citizens are often more judgmental, more miserly, and far less generous than those they denigrate. I salute Faber for pulling back the curtain. When the big reveal is over and the applause has died down, we are left looking at the complexities of lust, love, life, and loss -- and the reflection we see in the mirror is our self.

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