



## The Crimson Petal and the White

By Michel Faber

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### The Crimson Petal and the White By Michel Faber

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, enthral, provoke, and entertain young and old, male and female.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Although it's billed as "the first great 19th-century novel of the 21st century," *The Crimson Petal and the White* is anything but Victorian. The story of a well-read London prostitute named Sugar, who spends her free hours composing a violent, pornographic screed against men, Michel Faber's dazzling second novel dares to go where George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and the works of Charles Dickens could not. We learn about the positions and orifices that Sugar and her clients favor, about her lingering skin condition, and about the suspect ingredients of her prophylactic douches. Still, Sugar believes she can make a better life for herself. When she is taken up by a wealthy man, the perfumer William Rackham, her wings are clipped, and she must balance financial security against the obvious servitude of her position. The physical risks and hardships of Sugar's life (and the even harder "honest" life she would have led as a factory worker) contrast--yet not entirely--with the medical mistreatment of her benefactor's wife, Agnes, and beautifully underscore Faber's emphasis on class and sexual politics. In theme and treatment, this is a novel that Virginia Woolf might have written, had she been born 70 years later. The language, however, is Faber's own--brisk and elastic--and, after an awkward opening, the plethora of detail he offers (costume, food, manners, cheap stage performances, the London streets) slides effortlessly into his forward-moving sentences. When Agnes goes mad, for instance, "she sings on and on, while the house is discreetly dusted all around her and, in the concealed and subterranean kitchen, a naked duck, limp and faintly steaming, spreads its pimpled legs on a draining board." Despite its 800-plus pages, *The Crimson Petal and the White* turns out to be a quick read, since it is truly impossible to put down. --Regina Marler

#### From Publishers Weekly

Faber's bawdy, brilliant third novel tells an intricate tale of love and ambition and paints a new portrait of Victorian England and its citizens in prose crackling with insight and bravado. Using the wealthy Rackham clan as a focal point for his sprawling, gorgeous epic, Faber, like Dickens or Hardy, explores an era's secrets and social hypocrisy. William Rackham is a restless, rebellious spirit, mistrustful of convention and the demands of his father's perfume business. While spying on his sickly wife's maid, whom he suspects of thievery, he begins a slow slide into depravity: he meets Sugar, a whore whose penetrating mind and love of books intrigues him as much as her beauty and carnal skills do. Faber (*Under the Skin*) also weaves in the stories of Agnes, William's delicate, mad and manipulative wife, and Henry, his pious, morally conflicted brother, both of whom seek escape from their private prisons through fantasies and small deceptions. Sin and vice both attract and repel the brothers: William, who becomes obsessed with Sugar, rescues her from her old life, while Henry, paralyzed by his love for Emmeline Fox, a comely widow working to rescue the city's prostitutes, slowly unravels. Faber's central characters, especially the troubled William and the ambitious Sugar, shine with life, and the author is no less gifted in capturing the essence of his many minor characters--the evil madam, Mrs. Castaway, and William's pompous father-in-law, Lord Unwin. The superb plot draws on a wealth of research and briskly moves through the lives of each character--whether major or minor, upstairs or downstairs--gathering force until the fates of all are revealed. A marvelous story of erotic love, sin, familial conflicts and class prejudice, this is a deeply entertaining masterwork that will hold readers captive until the final page.

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#### From Library Journal

Set in 1870s London, Faber's second novel (after *Under the Skin*) is a powerful portrayal of a young prostitute named Sugar. Intelligent and ambitious, Sugar yearns to escape from the livelihood forced on her at age 13. Enter William Rackham, a besotted philanderer and idle heir to a family perfume business, who

installs Sugar as his secret mistress in a fashionable hideaway. When the incompetent William is forced into managing the family firm, he initially seeks advice from Sugar, who, fearful of losing his affection, schemes to gain closer proximity to the Rackham family. She succeeds by becoming governess to William's only child, young Sophie, who is cruelly ignored by her father and his insane and sickly wife, Agnes. As William's interest in Sugar wanes, she seeks to maintain her position both by earning Sophie's respect and by gaining possession of the intimate diaries that Agnes has foolishly discarded. Faber's mastery of character, evocative descriptions of Victorian England, and rich dialog, together with his weaving of enduring themes throughout a complex plot, creates a remarkable novel. Strongly recommended for most literary and historical fiction collections.

*Joseph M. Eagan, Enoch Pratt Free Lib., Baltimore*

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