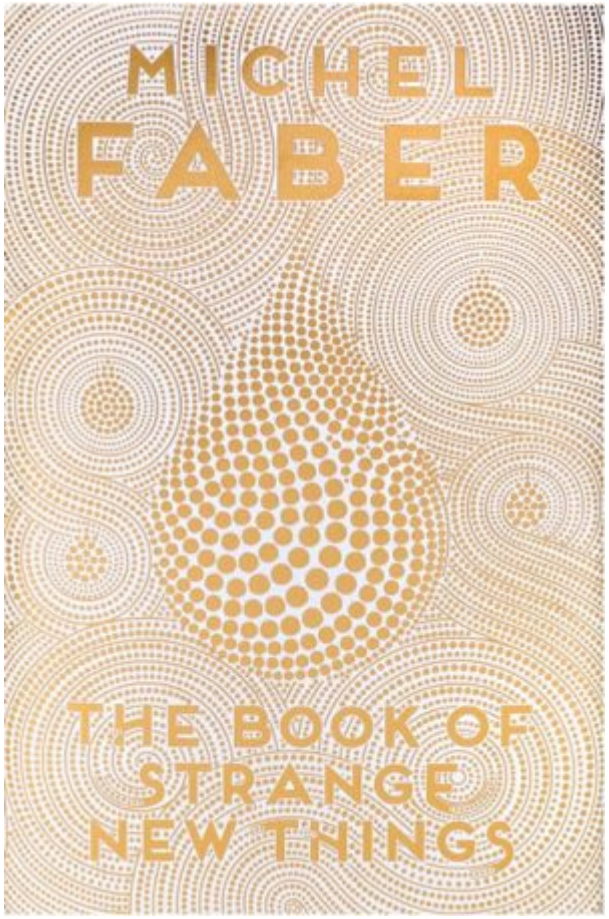
Facing the Other, Reflecting on Ourselves: Michel Faber's 'The Book of Strange New Things'

By Evan Gottlieb



'I have been a stranger in a strange land' (Exodus 2:22). These famous words are spoken by Moses, as rendered in the King James Bible, when explaining his choice of name, Gershom, for his son with Rebekah. Gershom means, roughly, 'sojourner', and is thus an apt commemoration of Moses' famously ambiguous status in Egypt, a place where he both did and did not belong, where he was alternately local and foreigner, friend and enemy.

Names are equally significant, and just as ambivalent, in Michel Faber's haunting novel, *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014). Within the novel's near-future setting, 'The Book of Strange New Things' is the title given to the New Testament by mysterious aliens on a newly discovered distant planet, but of course it's also a meta-description of Faber's text itself, which contains no shortage of things both strange and new. Yet for all its strangeness and novelty, the novel's themes and emotional tones – of loneliness, belonging, disillusionment, and hope – are unmistakably familiar. Other names in Faber's work amplify and variegate such reverberations. The novel's main protagonist, Peter, has ambitions to minister to

the aliens on a par with those of his biblical namesake, who founded the Catholic Church; where St. Peter was Jesus's 'rock', however, Peter harbors doubts not only about the true intentions of the mega-corporation that has hired him at great expense to minister to an utterly 'ither' species, but also about whether he will be able to discharge his pastoral duties many millions of miles away from his home and wife. Her name, in turn, is Beatrice; and although she's a flesh-and-blood woman rather than an ideal of beauty like her Dantean namesake, she promises to provide a guiding light of faith, support, and love to Peter as he undertakes his perilous quest while she remains on Earth.

Or so we're lead to expect at the novel's outset, which opens *in medias res* as Peter and Bea say goodbye at Heathrow airport. Soon, he'll fly to Orlando and from there board the spacecraft that will take him on a hyperspatial 'Jump' to Oasis, the name given to the new planet by the American multinational, USIC, that has begun mining operations on it. Even in her sadness, Bea sheds rays of kindness in abundance: 'Your wife's a bit of an angel, Pete. Is she always taking pity on waifs and strays?' asks a man at the airport whose frazzled children Bea has helped to calm. She also reassures Peter that, despite the mystery surrounding the nature of his mission, he's up to the job. When Bea asks how he envisions his first meeting with the aliens, however, Peter demurs:

> *'I don't picture it in advance', he said. 'You know what I'm like. I can't live through stuff until it happens. And anyway, the way things really turn out is always different from what we might imagine.'*[1]

This turns out to be more prophetic than Peter himself can possibly imagine.

Science fiction, of course, has always pushed the limits of what we can imagine. According to the literary critic Darko Suvin, the genre's primary purpose is 'cognitive estrangement', or 'the ability to defamiliarize the present (and implicitly to criticize it)'.[2] Nonetheless, defamiliarization — making the ordinary extraordinary, and in doing so revealing its essential strangeness — has been a defining quality of 'the literary' since the days of the Russian Formalists; moreover, science fiction has long been denied precisely such literary status, relegated for much of its generic existence to the realms of popular magazines and cheap paperbacks with lurid illustrations on their covers. Among the many new paths being forged by writers like Faber — and, to name just a few more,

Margaret Atwood, Ursula LeGuin, and of course Scotland's own Iain M. Banks — is thus the hybrid of 'high' Literature and 'low' science fiction for which Atwood has proposed the name 'Speculative Fiction'. By her own account, Atwood prefers this term for her recent Maddadam trilogy — as does Jeff Vandermeer for his Southern Reach trilogy (both highly recommended, by the way!) — because they extrapolate dystopian futures here on Earth, rather than spin grand visions of intergalactic, 'space cowboy' adventure. Such speculation also echoes the contemporary philosopher Quentin Meillassoux's definition of 'regular' science fiction as 'inhabiting a world where physics (theoretical, natural) differs from ours, but in which laws are not purely and simply abolished — i.e. in which everything and anything cannot happen in an arbitrary way or at any moment.'[3] By contrast, there's a possible sub-genre Meillassoux calls 'extro-Science Fiction', in which the laws of probability and causality that we take for granted are themselves entirely suspended, although this threatens to undo the very narrative conventions that make the telling of stories possible in the first place.

Faber is nothing if not a master story-teller, however, and so *The Book of Strange New Things* forges a hybrid path here too: some laws of physics are entirely broken in his novel, even as the future he extrapolates is all-too-probable, and the characters who try to navigate it all-too-human. On Earth, Bea's letters to Peter, sent through an inter-galactic messaging system nicknamed 'The Shoot', begin in the quotidian but become increasingly desperate as a series of extreme global weather events (implicitly caused by unchecked anthropogenic global warming — an all-too-probable future, indeed) begin causing irreversible breakdowns in both the social fabric and the material infrastructure. Adding to Bea's desperation to maintain contact with Peter, she discovers she's pregnant. By contrast, as Peter becomes more involved in his mission, his life back home with Bea begins to feel increasingly unreal — an irony that doesn't escape him, given the improbability of his situation, on which the novel primarily dwells.

Peter's new life on Oasis is initially divided between the corporate base to which human activity on the planet is mostly restricted, and the aliens to whom he's come to minister. At first, like the other USIC employees, Peter prefers the spartan comforts of the base to the oddities of venturing outside, where torrential rains that move in bursts around the planet combine with extended periods of night and day to make a thoroughly strange — yet, again, not entirely unfamiliar — atmosphere. But after his first encounters with the planet's aboriginals,

nicknamed Oasans, Peter slowly begins to spend more time in their village. Here is Peter's description of his first glimpse of an Oasan, filtered through Faber's omniscient narrator:

> *'The creature – the person – stood upright, but not tall. Five foot three, maybe five foot four. (Funny how those imperial measurements – inches, miles – stubbornly refused to be left behind.) Anyway, he, or she, was delicate. Small-boned, narrow-shouldered, an unassuming presence – not at all the fearsome figure Peter had prepared himself to confront.' (120)*

Notice how Faber includes naturalistic hesitations as Peter attempts, quite literally, to size up the Oasan ('[f]ive foot three, maybe five foot four'); notice, too, how he's aware of using a system of measurement, of perception and increment, that's intrinsically foreign to what he's trying to understand. Gender, too, becomes blurred and therefore inconsequential as a means of assigning characteristics and identities; since the Oasans all wear plain tunics and cloaks that shroud their bodies, Peter initially teaches himself to individuate them based on the color of their robes and gloves. Finally, their native language presents huge problems for outsiders to learn; although the Oasans themselves have picked up some English, their alien mandibles both allow them to make sounds that humans can't even approximate, and mean that when they pronounce English words, 'Where the 's's should have been, there was a noise like a ripe fruit being thumbed into two halves' (121). Fittingly, Faber represents this syllable with a unique icon to convey its literal untranslatability.

The question of the Oasans' language leads inevitably to the question of why they've requested USIC to provide them with a new pastor in the first place. To enter into those proceedings, however, would be to spoil the fine mysteries at the core of Faber's plot. (To hint at just one of them, which also returns us to the question of redolent names in *The Book of Strange New Things*: the USIC pastor who preceded Peter prior to disappearing was named Kurtzberg — a clear echo of Conrad's mad colonizer in *Heart of Darkness*.) So let's look instead at the source from which issues the Oasans' untranslatable, even unpronounceable language: their faces. Here, again, is Peter's first glimpse:

> *The Oasan turned to look at Peter, tilted his head slightly, so that the shadows from the hood slid back. Peter, having been lulled by the Oasan's familiar shape*

and five-fingered hands into expecting a more-or-less human face, flinched.

Here was a face that was nothing like a face. Instead, it was a massive whitish-pink walnut kernel. Or no: even more, it resembled a placenta with two fetuses – maybe three-month-old twins, hairless and blind – nestled head to head, knee to knee. Their swollen heads constituted the Oasan's clefted forehead, so to speak […]

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Rationally, Peter knows he needs to put aside his preconceptions; otherwise, as the above passage goes on to explain, 'he would probably always have to stare at [the Oasan's face] dumbfounded, reliving the initial shock' (121). But instinctively, he can't help being horrified and reaching for comparisons to the familiar, however grotesque.

To be sure, Faber could have invented an alien race with no faces at all, like the cephalopods in *Arrival* (2016; dir. Villenevue), who communicate via a kind of airy script that renders mouths and faces equally unnecessary. Instead, by giving his Oasans faces that are nonetheless almost impossible to register as such, Faber engineers a brilliant variation on what the twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas believed was the quintessentially ethical situation: how to respond to (and in) the face of the Other.

A little background here may be in order. Levinas was unhappy with the normative ethical frameworks that had dominated Western philosophy since Immanuel Kant's first formulation of his categorical imperative, which instructs us to behave in such a way that if our behavior were made into a universal law, it would still be generally acceptable. Finding this maxim too lofty and abstract to be effective, Levinas argued that ethical behavior can and must be grounded in actual situations and encounters. These, in turn, can be reduced to and thereby exemplified in the most basic, immediate human confrontation outlined in Levinas' masterwork, *Totality and Infinity*:

> *It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign (and the epiphany of the face coincides with these two moments) that constitutes the original fact of fraternity. […] In this welcoming of the face […] equality is founded. Equality is produced where the other commands the same and reveals himself to the same responsibility; otherwise it is but an abstract idea and a word. It cannot be detached from the welcoming of the face, of which it is a moment.*[4]

Put simply, the responsibility one feels instinctively when looking into the other's face is the only authentic source of truly ethical behavior. There is some debate surrounding just how literally to take Levinas' emphasis on faciality, but especially in passage like above, it seems clear that he is quite literal about the face-to-face meeting. Moreover, this precise situation is raised repeatedly in *Totality and Infinity*; it appears again, for example, when Levinas explains that even in the case of an encounter between a powerful and a weak figure, 'The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which […] gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.'[5]

But what happens when the other a face so foreign that it fails to register as such? What happens when, as befalls Peter on his first encounter with an Oasan, one can't even tell where the other's eye(s) reside(s) in its 'face'? To his great credit, Peter simply does his best to act as he would in 'normal' circumstances:

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But is such an attempt compatible with Levinas' vision of the unknowable and therefore infinite otherness of the other as established via the face-to-face, eye-to-eye encounter? Peter can only hope so – especially as he has such 'good news' about salvation through Christ to impart. And in this case he is rewarded for his optimism by the Oasan's hesitant but correct identification of the source of Peter's 'good news': "The Go[s]pel?". (123)

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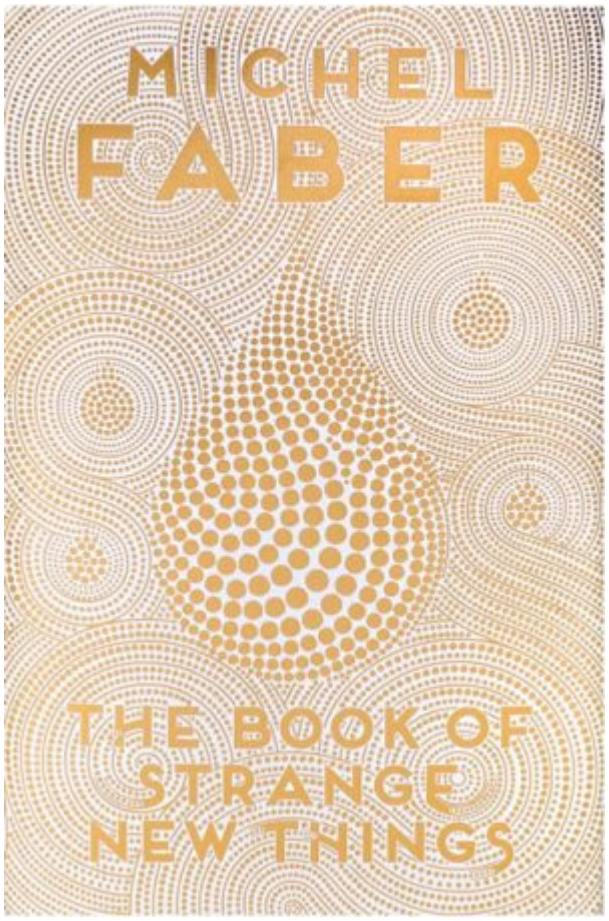

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