

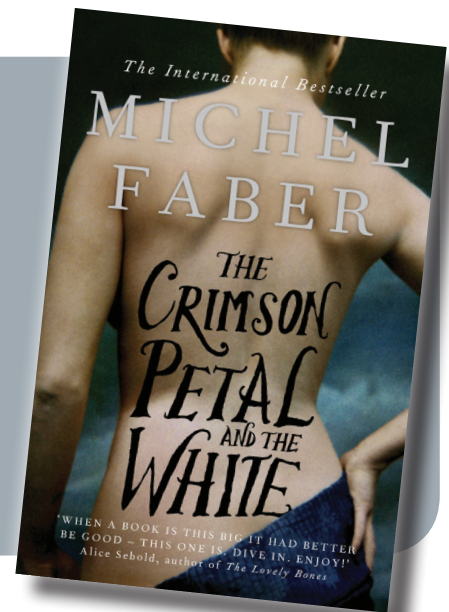
The Crimson Petal and the White

Michel Faber

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Fiction, Paperback



Praise

'A big, sexy, bravura novel that is destined to be surpassingly popular.' *New York Times*

'Irresistibly readable, cool and rather wonderful.' Ruth Rendell

'Down-and-dirty tale of an upwardly mobile Victorian prostitute ... a scintillating tour de force.' *Sunday Telegraph*

'An astonishing narrative sweep that encompasses Victorian society in all its colourful variety, it peels away the surface gentility and brings its world to vivid life. It's a feast for all five senses and in spite of its weight, it's impossible to put down.' Val McDermid

About Michel Faber

Michel Faber has written seven other books, including the highly acclaimed *The Fahrenheit Twins* and the Whitbread-shortlisted novel *Under the Skin*. *The Apple*, based on characters in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, was published in 2006. He has also written two novellas, *The Hundred and Ninety-Nine Steps* and *The Courage Consort*, and has won several short-story awards. Born in Holland, brought up in Australia, he now lives in the Scottish Highlands.

A reader's introduction to *The Crimson Petal and the White*

Published to international acclaim in 2002, *The Crimson Petal and the White* is an intoxicating and deeply satisfying read from the gripping first page. This is Faber's most ambitious fictional creation yet and affirms his position as one of the most talented writers working in Britain today. Sugar, an alluring, 19-year-old whore in the brothel of the terrifying Mrs Castaway, yearns for a better life. Her ascent through the strata of 1870s London society offers us a cast of loveable, maddening and superbly realised characters.

But at the heart of this panoramic, multi-layered narrative is the compelling struggle of a young woman

to lift her body and soul out of the gutter. *The Crimson Petal and the White* is a big, juicy, must-read novel that will delight, enthrall, provoke and entertain young and old, male and female.

Questions for discussion

1. The novel's title implies the distinction between virtue and immorality. In your opinion, who are the sinister characters in the book? Who are the heroes and heroines?
2. What makes the late nineteenth century such an appropriate time period for this narrative? How might the storyline have played out in the twenty-first century?
3. Temptation and cravings fuel much of the novel's plot. By your own standards, are the characters shockingly lacking in self-control? Or do you feel they cope well in the circumstances?
4. Do you detect any common denominator among the novel's female characters (especially Sugar, Agnes, Mrs Fox, and Mrs Castaway) in spite of their seemingly disparate motivations?
5. William receives nearly constant assistance from various hired women. In what way is Sugar's subservience different from that of the other servants, both before and after she becomes Sophie's governess?
6. *The Crimson Petal and the White* contains dozens of religious references, including Sugar's being mistaken for an angel, Agnes's superstitious hunger for Catholicism, the Rescue Society's moral mission, the radical proposals in *The Efficacy of Prayer*, and debates about creationism. Is religion harmful or beneficial to the characters in this novel?
7. The theme of cleanliness versus filth pervades the novel, with William's products nearly constituting an additional character. Considering the fact that even the upper-crust residents of Notting Hill had to do without indoor plumbing, what is the effect of these details about ablutions?



8. Critics have compared Michel Faber to many other writers, ranging from Charles Dickens to Tom Wolfe and Jonathan Franzen. In what ways does literature appear to have evolved over the past two centuries?
9. How does Michel Faber keep the reader hooked and entertained throughout a lengthy epic? Did the devices work for you?
10. Does any authentic love occur in the novel? Are Sugar and William in love?
11. William's pious brother is the extreme opposite of Ashwell and Bodley. Do these minor male characters in any way reflect aspects of William's persona? Do you believe that Ashwell and Bodley were merely included for comic relief? Discuss the irony of Henry's death.
12. The characters in *The Crimson Petal and the White* live under the shroud of considerable misinformation, including Doctor Curlew's inability to diagnose Agnes's brain tumor and Sugar's rudimentary birth-control methods. Would modern medicine have kept their lives trouble-free?
13. Discuss Sugar's transformation from no-nonsense prostitute to maternal romantic. What role did the ironically named Priory Close location play in this transformation? What choices would you have made had you been born into Sugar's circumstances?
14. For all its Victorian trappings, *The Crimson Petal and the White* also showcases some expert postmodern features, such as a narrator who frequently reminds us that we are reading a novel—his novel—and that he will decide which point of view we receive in each scene. In what way does this narrator act as a kind of literary seducer, luring us to follow him to the very end? How do the novels within the novel (Sugar's sadistic bodice-ripper, and Agnes's imaginative diaries) affect your reading experience?
15. The novel ends by posing a terrific 'what if'. Speculate about the futures of Sophie and Sugar. Why do you suppose the author chose to give the closing line to Caroline? What might this suggest about William's fate?