

Chapter 7: 'In Separate Time' by Rodge Glass, after *The Book of Strange New Things*

+4hrs

Dear Claire,

I'm writing to you from Heathrow's Terminal 5, just outside the Multi-Faith Prayer Room on the first floor of the Departure Lounge. Yes, that one. There's still the same sign-in book by the door, I checked. Psalm 34:18, large and clear on page one: 'The Lord is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit'. (How typical of you to write something designed to give *others* solace.) Wi-Fi has been down for a while, but I'll send this once I get a signal.

For now, I'm sitting here on the cold tiles, a million light years away, or what feels like it, tapping with my two index fingers, pretending you can read my thoughts. My love, I hope you're warm, and well, and not too wobbly. As Corinthians reminds us, 'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'. Or roughly translated, 'Distance is a real killer, isn't it?' Of course, the two photographs in my wallet haven't changed the whole time we've been apart. One of Boo as a puppy, on the bed, licking his paw like it's an ice cream. And one of you, smiling outside the base. Just before you went in for intensive training and I flew home. The longer this all goes on, the harder it is to look at either of them.

My flight has been delayed for some time. Well, when I say 'some time', I mean, 'perhaps forever'. I'm sure it'll all be fine but what I'm discovering is, round here they pretty much leave you to stew. I've been circling the Departure Lounge for a while now – stretching to fill the next minute, then the next one, wondering what on earth our Maker's plan is. Every so often I find myself back at this spot, listening to the incantations of the faithful inside, hoping that just sitting here will somehow make a difference. But God refuses to magic me to you just yet, and you refuse to appear.

Inside the Multi-Faith Room, right now, there's a man singing in Arabic. At first, I assume he's a Muslim, but then I hear your voice in my head: 'presumption is prejudice, and prejudice is presumption'. And yes, for all I know he could be praying to a nearby radiator, or the cooling system, or nobody at all. He could be entering his allocated worry period. But either way, the man's voice is a trumpet being played softly, sonorous and slow, always searching out the minor notes. The sound of his song makes me think about what you and I might talk about when we're finally reunited. Whether maybe we just won't talk at all. I wonder if the trumpet man will write in the sign-in book, and if so what he'll write. Who or what he's singing for.

I know.

But I can't help it. Thinking of all those messages that we read, fingers interlocked, the last time we were in Heathrow, on the way to the first round of interviews. After all, they're still there. Exposed, like cuts, to the eyes of every visitor. There are now hundreds more names than there were then, the pages are filling up fast – and they say we live in a secular world! – but I keep coming back to the first page. Yuko Oyama from Hyoyo, Japan, praying to find a good partner; Pat and Ray Murchiston from Langton, Kent, praying for their son Dave, killed in a car crash yesterday; the anonymous mother praying for reconciliation with the family who can't accept her remarriage. It's not the words themselves, Claire. It's what's hiding between them. Without you here to keep me closed, my mind is all flung-open windows. The draft is a storm. I think about how Yuko Oyama is doing, and whether she's still alone. I worry about her burying herself in work. Neglecting family and friends. Reducing her chances of ever meeting the partner she hopes to find. I pray for Pat and Ray Murchiston too. I'm their cheerleader, waving my believer's pom-poms, willing them to tough out the future, to find a way to hold their family together through Jesus, though a Dave-sized hole has turned them into doughnuts, and who among us could really survive that? Only an hour or two ago, sitting right here, I was bawling. Who knows why? If Pat and Ray Murchiston walked past me right now, I wouldn't recognize them, would I? Or perhaps they'd be all too obvious. Pacing the Terminal like zombies. That look on their faces, both desperate for distraction.

Anyway, more soon. From the other side!

Your loving husband,

Simon

+9hrs

Dear Claire,

We were so sensible. We factored in all that spare time to ensure we'd see each other at the base, before your take-off into the great beyond. A *whole day*, just for us. And now, who knows? The presents in my bag are moaning. They can't bear the tension either. Initially my flight was just put back by a couple of hours, reason unspecified by the Departures Board. Then it was four. Then a message on the tannoy said there would be more information 'as soon as possible'. Which wasn't very soon at all. It was then that I headed for the Multi-Faith Prayer Room. Five hours ago, that filled some minutes up. But time, or possible time, was yawning out in front of me. After writing you that first message, I tried to think of something positive to do. Or something safe.

A map explained the layout of Terminal 5's restaurants, shops and cafés. I scanned it then found the Japanese place on the 1st Floor and asked for a seat with a view; the waitress showed me to the bar-like row of lone diners lined up at the side of the space, dangling over the precipice. That side of the restaurant hangs partially over the runway and partially onto the people waiting their turn at the departure gates: perfect. I soon recharged on warm Japanese vegetable broth with thick noodles, and I took my time too, not thinking about the price. I laughed at myself because really, I'd been starving, hadn't I? But was just too anxious to notice. My body was thankful. I was confident that a full stomach would give me strength for the long trip ahead.

I watched everyone below as I completed my meal – the families and singletons, the business suits and travellers' rucksacks, the grandmothers and small boys, the Africans and Asians and Europeans and North Americans – all those shades of colour and gait, all those perspectives, histories, all those cultural references beyond my ken, all those myths and marvellous legends, the myriad physical and mental ailments and talents all held tight in God's glorious big airport palm. I slurped at the last of my broth

and thought about how so many kinds of person can exist, in unknowing harmony, in one Terminal. I thought about what sorts of sentient beings you'll be meeting on your travels, and for a moment was at peace. I thought about how lucky we used to be, and how lucky we are today. As you go beyond our life, into the great starry unknown, I hope you'll remember our luck, and not leave me too far behind. Though even as I type that, I realize how it must sound. And my stomach groans in response.

When the waitress asked if everything was okay, I was far away in my own thoughts and didn't twig she was talking about the meal. 'It's enough to give you hope,' I said to her, peering over the handrail to the hum and clattering below. 'Even now. Don't you think?' It was unlikely, given the context, and amount of customers she had to attend to, that an opportunity would arise to mention Christ. But you can't be sure, and it's important to be ever-ready. As Proverbs tells us, 'If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.' But then, you know your Proverbs. What I should have said to the waitress was, 'My wife's an adventurer. She's a hero.' But I always think of the right thing too late. Besides, if I'd spoken those words out loud, I might have collapsed into my noodles. Which probably would have made her uncomfortable.

Anyway, more soon. And this time, hopefully from the other side!

Your loving husband,

Simon

+15hrs

Dear Claire,

The laptop is on low. Once I've finished this message, I'll turn it off until the Wi-Fi is fixed. If that ever happens.

Since I last wrote, I've tried to help time pass without doing too much damage, and without thinking too much about the flight. Drifting up a level to the toilet, then back down again. Revisiting the Multi-Faith Prayer Room to thumb the sign-in book and pray for your success in the world on the other side of the stars. (I also prayed for Pat, Ray

and for Yuko Oyama.) Later, I scanned the not-very-wholesome magazines in the newsagents, trying to find something we'd approve of, even gazing at the displays in Cartier and Chanel, wondering what kind of person spends thousands on a handbag while waiting for a flight. Who has the money for that? We don't know anyone who has the money for that, do we? I mean, under what circumstances would we blow three thousand pounds on a handbag? I'm not sure what I was playing at, God forgive me, but after a few minutes obsessing over this sort of thing, then a few more back in the main Terminal - or perhaps more like an hour? - I just lashed out at the nearest target. Such things remind me that salvation is not a straight line, Claire. And even a keen convert can be knocked off course. But of course, you're wondering what my trigger was.

Nothing much. There was a man sitting in a place called The Caviar House, a mock-fine-dining restaurant plopped, like a swear word, right in the middle of the ground floor. It was something in the way he was eating, maybe, while scrolling through his phone. Or something about his haircut. Or something in my perception of it. Anyway, I was wound tight. I walked over, tapped him on the shoulder and asked, 'Excuse me, but are you an ostrich? You do know there are 65 million human beings on earth with no home, right? You have heard of Calais?' He held his fork in mid-air, poor man, and said nothing. It wasn't so much that he ignored me, Claire. It was more like he couldn't see me. He turned away, wiped his mouth with a napkin and went back to his caviar, and I wondered if I'd become invisible. Not just to this man, but you too.

If you'd been here, you'd have touched my arm. Done something. Quoted just the right line of scripture to help me see beyond myself. In terms of my Heathrow prison sentence the ostrich incident was perhaps after only ten hours – that seems days ago now. But the truth is I'd had enough, even then. Time was passing both too quickly *and* too slowly for this weary passenger. It was turning in on itself then, and continues to do so now. No news from the boards. The minutes piling upon minutes. And with every minute, every quarter hour, my chances of seeing you receding. Now I'm trying to accept this turn of events. If this is what the Lord wills, then so be it. But talk about mysterious ways! What if you doubt me? Think I just haven't bothered to make the effort to come and say goodbye? What if you spin off into space and never come back, and die thinking I'm having some sleazy affair with the woman behind the counter at

Chanel? Perhaps this list of questions gives you a flavour of what preoccupies me in this place. And explains why I cannot sleep.

What followed after the ostrich incident was an age going back and forth, back and forth in the Terminal, trying not to crack. I listened to ambient music on my headphones. I listened to a Relaxation Podcast with my eyes closed. The sun set. Night fell. (Was it early morning when I arrived here?) Eventually I collapsed, feet tight in my shoes, one headphone dangling, into a pew at the bottom of the escalator between Gates 8 and 9. I tried to doze off. But you know what the seats are like in these places, Claire. Designed to keep you prickly. A reminder of how temporary this all is. And yet, the good citizens of the Republic of Heathrow love them! So many of my fellow travellers are, as I write this, stretched out, snoring away as if they were at home, in the warmth, with the lights off and loved ones close, like these cold, hard spots in the middle of nowhere are really soft mattresses in heaven. (Yes, I did persevere. Used my rucksack as a pillow. And yes, after a while I gave up.) Half-asleep, I wandered among the sleepers. Like the Jews in the desert! Like I used to in my darkest days. I've not been having flashbacks, exactly. More like, *vivid moments*. From the past, and future too. It's all very well having a designated worry period, but what if all time suddenly becomes a blob, one single period indivisible from the next, or the last?

I know.

The time dragged on. Every time I noticed one new sleeper settling down for a rest close to me, several more seemed to appear around them, like shadows, or mirrors. It was night, after all. I needed to escape, but before moving away I just stood in front of one of these sleepers for a while, watching, up close. He was an unusually tall specimen, Scandinavian perhaps, lips fluttering in the midst of a shock of blonde hair. I was holding my bag. Thinking about how jealousy is a sin. And judging others is a sin. And envy is a sin. And alcohol is a short cut to nearly every sin you can think of. As is being in possession of 'feet that be swift in running to mischief' – which, until I met you, were the kinds of feet I was very much in possession of! But I should tackle one sin at a time. And anyway, I'm doing what the counsellor calls 'grasshoppering'. Jump, jump, into the possible horrors of the future, spoiling any chance of peace in the present. That's something else you do – keep me in the now. It sounds corny, but as you say yourself, some of the truest things in Creation are corny as corny can be. I wish I could

un-set the sun and go back in time to my arrival at Departures. At first, on entering the main Departure Lounge, post-scanner, post-pat-down, I thought it wouldn't be long. Soon this place would be in the past, and I really felt quite sunny about all this. Or at least, I think so. I can't really remember.

The timings are getting fuzzy here, I've been up so long. But by the time my flight was, I think, fourteen or fifteen hours late, I'd done countless laps of the circuit, checked the departures screen eighty or a hundred times and harassed the poor workers at the information desk to within an inch of their plastered-smile wits. No conspiracy, I don't think. They said nothing because they knew nothing. And though yes, technically, I was entitled to compensation and a hotel for the night, I really could receive news on my flight at any moment! – so they advised I just wait here. No, sorry, they couldn't confirm how far away 'any moment' might be. Still, safety is gainful, accident is painful and all that, eh sir? They were sure there was a perfectly good reason for this delay, there always is, and they recommended I come back in short while, keeping a look-out for Departures board news in the meantime. Perhaps a coffee, to keep your energy levels up? Or a nice meal? Claire, I tried not to betray what was within me. I asked, how could *nobody know where my plane was?* Had it *folded into itself?* Had it been *plucked from the sky?* I glanced around, thinking about my fellow passengers. How they were coping with the silence. Where they were hiding. Whether they were used to this kind of thing. Or didn't want to go home anyway. Perhaps they were quite happy going back to Wagamama's for another helping of noodles.

I hope this is my last message to you from the airport. If not, I won't be seeing you at all. And anyway, there's still no Wi-Fi. So basically I'm just a madman, talking to himself.

Your tired but loving husband,

Simon

+21hrs

Dear Claire,

Finally found a free charger!

It's probably too late now, but I can't help hoping that the Lord has seen fit to also delay you in your great mission to spread His word on other planets. Just long enough, perhaps, for us to appreciate each other one more time. I recognize that hope is a mirage. Which means you're already in mid-air, the rocket already launched. You're probably already lost to me. I think about Peter and Bea, that lovely couple who also made it to the final round of interviews, both stuck here on earth – but *together*. In the last few hours, I've been thinking about them a lot. Bea at home, as Peter zipped up his bags. Peter, looking at her one last time, here in Heathrow. Making promises. Imagining the unimaginable. Then waving weakly and leaving for another corner of the galaxy. It never happened, because you happened instead. I wonder if they're lying in bed right now, arms clamped possessively around each other, thanking God for being rejected at the last. Sure, they don't get to convert anyone on Oasis. They won't make *The History of the 21st Century*. But they do get to have breakfast in bed every single Sunday morning, touching toes. What, I ask you, am I going to do now? I don't even have Boo to distract me. The thought of going to church without you makes me want to set up camp in Heathrow for good. And to hell with the sleeping conditions.

You've probably worked out that since the last time I wrote, I've been losing my mind. The sign 'information pending' – flashing, flashing, like a nervous tic – has continued appearing and disappearing, for so many hours now it's quite unreal. The thing is, you get in the habit of checking and rechecking. Making sure, just once more, that you haven't read the message wrong. Aren't reading the wrong line. Haven't somehow missed your flight. You find yourself running a hundred yards further down the terminal, to another board, to see if that one by the charging ports says the same thing. Suddenly it seems likely that the boards might keep secrets from each another. Tell lies. What you imagine is, watching the damn thing take off without you. That gut-punch as the wheels tuck under the body of the plane and it slips into the pocket of a cloud. How could I ever explain it? That missing you was unnecessary? The longer this cursed between-time went on, the more it seemed likely. That my seat would skip off into the sky, and I wouldn't be in it. That somehow this would be my fault. Eventually, after I-don't-know-how-long, I started to get the shakes.

By the seventeenth or eighteenth hour of my wait I'd given in to the facts. Clearly I'd be here for hours longer, maybe days, and though I didn't know what to label the meal – second dinner? supper? breakfast? – it was probably time for more food. So I decamped to a colourful ground floor spot called the Giraffe Stop, apparently a 'funky, child-friendly chain serving international favourites'. My love, it seemed like a decent choice, right up to the moment it was too late to leave. I looked around, suddenly so tired, unable to even see properly. I sensed harassed parents as I scrubbed at my reddened eyes. I heard bored toddlers. Businessmen shouting into their phones. I let my eyes close and I heard two teenage girls calling each other names. Clearly, Giraffe Stop was a magnet for everyone in Heathrow Airport who didn't want to be there. The vibe was what my Relaxation Podcast would call 'an unproductive setting for contemplation'. The time, officially, was 'Breakfast Menu Time'. Though the sun wasn't up yet, at least not in this part of the world.

On this occasion, I didn't bother to engage the waitress in conversation and couldn't help but clock the prices. I ordered a veggie breakfast, which I wanted to un-order as soon as the sad little thing arrived. Still, I ate it, and too fast. Half way through I realized that my stomach was confused. Hadn't I just eaten broth? Or was that twelve hours ago? Before I finished, the waitress left a bill on the table and I understood that, unless I wanted to get up, I'd need to order something else. Otherwise it'd be out of the comfy chairs and back onto the cheap seats. I then spent the next half hour pecking at a decaf I didn't need, biting my nails and fingering my 'Postpone Your Worry' help-sheet, now creased and double-folded, wearing at the edges.

The list makes it seem simple –

- a) Create a Worry Period
- b) Postpone Your Worry
- c) Come Back to Your Worries at the Designated Worry Period

That's all very well, as far as it goes. The idea that, by filing tension away, you limit it. Box it. Teach yourself to get on with living and forget for a while. It even makes sense that somehow this worry period, when it finally arrives, will be somehow liberating. But what happens when your flight is delayed by an indeterminate amount of time? What

happens when your wife is due to leave for another planet, you're not going to catch her before she has to leave, you're already sweating, scratching, overheating, pawing at your red watering eyes, desperate for a shower and busy imagining untold grasshoppers – and that's all before you realize that you've forgotten you ever agreed to do a) on the worry sheet, never mind that you forgot to do b), or feared you'd not live to see c)?

And where, might I ask, is God in all this?

I didn't think I'd ever be here. In this kind of situation. With these kinds of choices.

The menu was back on the table and the description of the Superfood Scrambled Eggs seemed to blink at me, like the sleep I never had. The menu, it suddenly occurred to me, was in direct competition with the help sheet. This seemed an important revelation. So I folded up the sheet and put it in my back pocket. Help sheets don't help if you expect them to provide all the answers. You have to use your agency. And in this circumstance, I could be pretty sure that whenever my designated worry period was supposed to be, it certainly wasn't now. Watching the twitch of the Departures Board. Thinking about how each passing second was loosening my hold on the one person who knew how to talk me down. So I counted to ten, ordered the Banana and Strawberry Porridge with Honey and Toasted Seeds (yes, you read that right – porridge soon after a full breakfast, even though I just said I wasn't hungry), tried to tune out the sounds of the parents and toddlers around me, and focused on God's London sunset. Which – if you're also able to tune out to every horror, every natural and human-made disaster, every broken heart, every couple separated, every love lost and war fought and faith abandoned and every piece of nonsense being spewed simultaneously in the universe while the sun dips behind the horizon, suddenly leaving light a memory – is really quite...*uplifting*. Even in Terminal 5 of Heathrow Airport.

What next, for your loving husband, Simon?

+?

Dear Claire,

'For I know what plans I have for you', declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 29:11). Well excuse my English, but I certainly bloody hope so! Even as I write, our world is shifting, bubbling. What I recently believed was concrete is now sand, what was sand now seems more like the sea. There's STILL NO WI-FI HERE, and maybe there never will be, but if I don't use try to write to you, then all I'm left with is a faint whoosh, the sound of what's being swiftly and silently removed from below my shoes. Even our Lord and Redeemer can seem disappeared when I am isolated from those who see Him with me. I try to push down those thoughts, and remember that once you are on Oasis, I will be able to send you all of these messages, and they will draw you into me once again.

After what seemed an age, I asked for the bill at Giraffe Stop, the porridge untouched. The Terminal was now cloaked in a strange mixture of the brightness of inside and the darkness of outside which somehow flooded in, eating up the artificial light. All those windows, perhaps. They have a wearing effect. Meanwhile, the parents at the table next to me wheeled their children off to their on-time Lanzarote flight and, as a clutch of other flights also seemed to depart in a flash, suddenly the Terminal began to feel too big for the amount of people it was holding. I looked around and could only see spaces, empty cups and sandwich wrappers. I thought, what if God plans to leave me here, as a test? Or a punishment? What if the whole building collapses, or I'm lifted from this place and abandoned in the middle of the desert to die? What if all other passengers get called, every last one of them, leaving only me and two-hundred staff and all that caviar? 'If only my wife was here!' I wanted to cry out. 'She's the one who stops me coming out with this sort of claptrap!' Claire, I don't think I've ever loved or needed you more than I did while sitting in fucking Giraffe Stop, holding the money in my hand, wondering whether it really could be that expensive for porridge.

Perhaps I'm confusing 'loving' and 'needing' there. Thinking about the difference between those two things, I get a headache. Thinking about *time*, I get a headache. Perhaps there's no difference between 'loving' and 'needing' at all. Perhaps time is a joke God is playing on us. Still, it's not all darkness. God is with us always, that's what you'd tell me if you were here. And despite our distance, we are with each other in spirit. Also, the sun has come back up now, and I must force myself to remember that the Oasans are going to love you. I keep hallucinating, in drifting half-sleep, that I'll make it to the USIC base after all, in time to wave you off. But each time I process that thought,

I remember it's already too late. Unless everything I thought I knew was wrong, it's too late. Claire, by the time my flight was a full day late, I couldn't take it anymore. I thought about going to the enquiries desk, one more time. I was Yuko Oyama. I was Pat and Ray Murchiston, in mourning. Darling, you've probably guessed what's coming here.

In the few minutes it took me to walk across the grey, neutral landscape towards its cheerful bright green entry point, I tried to concentrate on nothing at all: 'Wetherspoon Express' said the big sign, which I could see shining brightly from the other side of the Terminal. Nothingness, I thought, would protect me from changing my mind, from considering what I was planning on doing in Wetherspoon Express. I was right. Nothingness was a delicious warm blanket which covered me until I approached the bar. Even in these uncommon circumstances, surrounded by these strange energies and even stranger smells, it all felt exquisitely familiar. The order burst from my mouth, like I'd been holding it in for months and was only just ready to exhale. 'Dear God Almighty give me a drink!'

As I reached down for my wallet, I didn't think of you. As I handed the money over, I didn't think of you. When the drink was placed in front of me, I just supped deep and long, feeling the liquid slip down my dead dry throat, the bubbles worming their way into my thirst. And how thirsty I'd been! It was only after swallowing the first sip that you re-entered my head. Where is she now, I thought? Time had closed around me, or split into two roads, with you on one fork, foot hard on an accelerator, and I trapped on the other, frozen still. The presents in my suitcase would never be given, never received. So, in fact, what was the point in remaining sober? All this gave me a feeling of seasickness. Terminal 5 seemed like a tiny cabin on a vast ocean liner, helpless in the storms, and I, the only bloodless passenger, weak and needy, was being thrust from wall to wall, just blindly hoping everything I ever thought I knew was a lie. I thought about you, in your own departure lounge, taking a deep breath as the rockets fired up. Putting on your helmet. Facing the unknown. I wanted to throw up.

Airports and addicts, Claire. How many people do you think have been unable to resist? It's one thing to stay home, out of temptation's way. Keep the house on lockdown. It's quite another to be forced to spend a whole day and night, running out of ways to pass the time, in a place fully stocked with poison. I gulped at the pint like a man who knows it's too late. As I drained the last of the glass, I was already

grasshoppering. Thinking about the last time we saw each other, how you said there was no badness in me, how I was the kindest man in the solar system, and how nothing on earth or the sky could change that. 'There's seventy-four days down the drain, then,' I said to the boy behind the bar, slapping the empty glass back down, my insides sinking and flying. I don't think he understood. Or he did, and had just seen it all before. 'It's okay mate,' he said, eyes drifting to the departures board. 'Tomorrow's another day'.

Soon, I knew, I would return to the Multi-Faith Room. Wrap myself in the sounds of all those different beliefs and confess this to you and to God. Start again once more. I'd be at seventy-four days again in no time. Perhaps, in seventy-four days, this Terminal would feel like home. But before the confessions, another drink. If the toxins are already doing their thing, I thought, if the executioner is on his way, axe swinging from his fist, and your head is already on the block, then you might as well get comfortable and keep drinking.

A Compassionate Fictional Universe: Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things* and the Art of the Creative Response

Rodge Glass

'In Separate Time' is a creative response to *The Book of Strange New Things*, a novel by Michel Faber about a man, Peter, selected to be a Christian missionary on the planet Oasis, leaving his beloved wife Bea behind on earth. Any carefully composed novel is multifarious, containing many untold stories, multiple potential interpretations, with lots of possible points of departure, and Faber's novel is bursting with possibilities. So, what exactly is my story a response to, and how do the mechanics of it work? The following commentary is in two parts. First, a look at Michel Faber's engagement with the art of the creative response, using case studies from his oeuvre. Second, an interrogation of my own creative process.

Faber and the Creative Response: Three Short Case Studies

At a reading hosted by Edge Hill University (7th February 2017), I asked Michel Faber a question about form. Over the last fifteen years he had hopped between the novel and the short story, also across various genres and forms, often working in hybrid forms. Recently, his first collection of poems had been published. I asked him, for each project, which came first – the form or the story itself? He answered, ‘You have to listen to the story, and give it what it needs.’ This is exactly the sort of corny statement of faith in the unknown that frustrates those who prefer to think of writing as a process in which the writer’s intentions, influences, designs and actions can be broken down into concrete elements. It may be frustrating, but this is something Faber has been unashamed about exploring throughout his writing life. As Peter states in *The Book of Strange New Things*, ‘most true things are kind of corny don’t you think?’ (Faber, 2014)

I am not sure whether I entirely agree with Peter about that – but I certainly agree that experiments, both artistic and scientific, are a far-from-precise mixture of exploring the known and the unknown. And, in terms of writing, I know from my own experience that the process of creating imagined worlds is primarily about the interplay between what writers know and what they intuit. So this is not unique to Michel Faber. But, based on the evidence of his literary output, it is an idea that applies to his work in particular. This is not vague abstract theory, but something evidenced clearly by Faber’s various works, ranging through projects as dissimilar as *The Crimson Petal and the White*, *The Fire Gospel* and *Undying: A Love Story*.

In the first of these, Faber responds to the familiar patterns and concerns of the Victorian novel by rendering his own attempt in the present tense, in all its ‘foul language and sadism’. (Interview with Genevieve Fox, *Daily Telegraph*, 2011) He has described himself as ‘open-eyed about what poverty does to people’, and this compassionate consciousness about the distance, the tension, between the canonical Victorian novel and the nineteenth-century London he wished to portray explains the creative approach taken in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (Faber, 2002). He strips readers of the ability to read in comfort, at arm’s length, instead engaging fully with the visceral trauma, dirt and downright jeopardy of the period, his protagonist Sugar leading

readers by the hand, making promises, drawing attention to the extremities of experience. Or, as Professor Kathryn Hughes, biographer and Victorian history specialist wrote at the time of publication:

Michel Faber has produced the novel that Dickens might have written had he been allowed to speak freely. All the familiar tropes of high-Victorian fiction are here - the mad wife, the cut-above prostitute, the almost-artist, the opaque governess - but they are presented to us by a narrator with the mind and mouth of the 21st century. Where once the Victorian novel was lace-like with decorous gaps and tactful silences, now it is packed hard with crude fact and dirty detail. (Hughes, 2002)

What interests me about this quote is the suggestion that Faber sought to refresh the Victorian novel by using its tropes as triggers for his own story. Without knowledge of the Victorian canon, the reader's experience is undoubtedly diminished. Without the author's intimate knowledge of that canon, the novel could not have been written. But once completed, Faber's novel is designed to, as Hughes has it, 'skip free of its literary borrowings', as any good creative response should. Faber's next novel, *The Fire Gospel* (Faber, 2008) was a very different kind of response. But there are notable commonalities.

The Canongate Myth series (2005-2013) was a hugely ambitious multi-national, multi-lingual publishing project conceived by Jamie Byng, the MD of Canongate, Michel Faber's only publisher since his debut collection of stories, *Some Rain Must Fall*, in 1998. Byng commissioned major writers to pen novella-length creative responses to world myths, and featured writers as diverse as Russia's Victor Pelevin (*The Helmet of Horror*, 2005) responding to Theseus and the Minotaur, China's Su Tong (*Binu and the Great Wall*, 2006) responding to the myth of a mourning woman's tears at the Great Wall of China, and the Brazilian Milton Hatoum (*Orphans of Eldorado*, 2008) responding to the myth of Eldorado and the Enchanted City of the Amazon. In Faber's case, he already had the idea for a next book, but his idea fitted Byng's model.

His eventual contribution was, on the surface, the contemporary story of Theo Griepenkerl, an academic who, in looted museum in Iraq, stumbles upon a fifth Gospel written by an eye witness of Jesus Christ's last days. Griepenkerl publishes the Gospel,

and the reception unleashes the fire of the novel's title. But *The Fire Gospel* was also a creative response to the story of Prometheus, the enduring Greek myth remade countless times through the ages. This rich tradition stretches right across the arts, but in literature it reaches, in just the last three centuries, from Goethe's eighteenth-century eponymous poem, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the nineteenth, to Alasdair Gray's playful twentieth-century hybrid novel *Poor Things*. Each of these perceived the myth differently, focused on differing elements, and each tackled Prometheus afresh. In *The Fire Gospel*, alongside Prometheus, Faber also slipped in responses to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, a novel ubiquitous at the time of writing, as well as a few notable swipes at the workings of the publishing industry, on which this novel was a satire. The work, then, was not just one but multiple responses, to multiple texts, multiple realities, all housed in one new work you could read perfectly well without having the slightest clue who Prometheus is. (That word, 'Prometheus', is only used once in the whole of Faber's novella.)

Despite being a creative response to an established work, what struck me on first reading *The Fire Gospel* was that, despite being thematically different from his previous works, it is immediately recognizable as the writing of Michel Faber. It contains his own mark, what Raymond Carver famously called 'the author's particular and unmistakable signature.' (Carver, 1997) But what was that signature? Another question I asked at the Edge Hill reading was about what he felt he carried throughout his oeuvre. Did all these disparate works of his have anything in common? 'Compassion,' was his one-word answer. The schools of critical thought that consider the author's intentions and considerations irrelevant are well documented. Perhaps, as a writer, I am bound to reject any definition that entirely sidelines an author's intention. As discussed, there are mysterious elements in the process, but surely not *all* elements are mysterious? With Faber, I wish to assert there is a conscious attempt by the author to suffuse all his major literary works with compassion, a factor which, as evidenced in *The Book of Strange New Things*, is a key driving factor not just in the narrative arc but in the creative process itself. Though I could not label it at the time, it was the compassion in the work which first drew me to Faber's early short stories. It is also what I sought to respond to with my short story, 'In Separate Time'.

The first two examples used so far, *The Crimson Petal and the White* and *The Fire Gospel*, give a sense of just how common it is for contemporary literary writing to be triggered by an existing work. Also, they show the kinds of fictional worlds Faber has engaged with when working over an unusually varied writing life, and how he has experimented with various triggers. But the most potent example of Michel Faber as a ‘creative responder’ is the most recent example.

As described in his eventual Foreword, Faber was sitting in Room 212 of Parkside Hospital in London by his wife Eva’s side in June 2014, while she was sleeping, when he composed two poems. These became the first in what became a series eventually published in 2016 as *Undying: A Love Story*, the book which would document Eva’s death and Faber’s raw grieving process. This is how Faber describes the key event:

On Eva’s laptop, on the bottom of an untitled Word document I’d been using for all sorts of purposes including a final copy edit of my last novel and drafts of emails to well-wishers, I suddenly wrote two poems, ‘Cowboys’ and ‘Nipples’. Both were alarmingly grim but were imbued with whatever it is that poems must have in order to go deeper than the words.

I wrote only those two poems, and then it was time for Eva’s cancer to kill her.

Afterwards, as I tried to cope in a world that did not have my dearest friend in it, I wrote more. Sometimes none for several weeks, sometimes five in a day. I have never known such need for poetry before. I wish I’d lived into my nineties, with Eva by my side, and never written these things. (Faber, 2016)

This was both an emotional response to a critical situation, and a creative lashing out. Those moments by Eva’s bed, typing onto that unnamed document, are a clear and concrete example of the author ‘giving the story what it needs’. In this case, what the story needed was to exist in a different form, specifically one which, spare and unforgiving, fragmentary and concentrated, seemed suited to the situation at hand. Prose, that had served the author in all contexts for over twenty years, seemed suddenly inappropriate. Or perhaps, seemed to be the wrong language for this new horror. But it wasn’t only that. When explaining the chronological events of the start of this project borne in traumatic circumstances, Faber alludes, even here, to an element of mystery, saying he noticed the new work contained ‘whatever poems must have in

order to go deeper than the words'. As if there is no way he, as the mere author, could know.

I recognize something in this corny, vaguely spiritual view of the creative process. Yes, creativity can be broken down into some constituent parts. You can plan, revise, read widely, research thoroughly. When writing novels, writers make conscious decisions about key elements in prose in terms of character, plot, prose quality, tone and delivery. Also, I believe writers are always creatively responding to *something* in the world around them. (With *Undying*, it was cancer, or the grim prospect of its end.) But, as the great Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas writes in *There Is Never any End to Paris* (Vila-Matas, 2014), a novel almost entirely a discussion of the creative process, many literary lifetimes are spent 'seeking the mirage of a future beyond reach'. Not only is there no shame in this, in admitting to an element of mystery in writing – but, on the contrary, I think it is a crucial element, necessary to embrace, though it is a ghost you cannot really embrace at all.

The following commentary explores the process of writing 'In Separate Time'. As the writer, that process will always be partly a mystery to me. Though other parts of it seem, on reflection, to be clear, identifiable, traceable.

A Response in Time

What I wanted to do at the outset of this experiment was take one part of *The Book of Strange New Things* which had spoken to me as a reader, and respond to it as a writer, giving that story what it needed. That is, to lift some representative or symbolic element and make it new, 'skipping free' of literary borrowings, in a way that spoke to the original but also lived independent of it.

I could have chosen one of many possible ways in. I did consider trying to write my way into Peter and Bea's existing narrative. Before Peter's departure for Oasis, perhaps. Or after he tries to return to earth. Or zooming in on a moment of drama Faber had skipped over. I also considered exploring something that nearly happened, but did not happen, like Peter's potential affair that never was, a kind of alternative history hidden inside the novel. But these options seemed obtrusive to my mind. Creepy, by

being too close. After all, the director Jonathan Glazer had permission to recast Isserley, Faber's protagonist, in his own creative response, the critically-acclaimed film adaptation of Faber's novel *Under the Skin*. I had no such thing. So, instead of stepping on the original I chose to only lift several marginal details instead – ones most readers of the novel might not even notice, but to me contained something of the spirit, the mystery and crucially, the compassion of *The Book of Strange New Things*.

In my alternative fictional world, Faber's Peter did apply for the missionary job on Oasis with Bea, as he does in the original. Also, he did make it down to the last two candidates interviewed by USIC for the mission, but in my story world he simply fell at the last hurdle. Instead, another couple – also devoutly religious, also devoted to each other – get close to succeeding together. I imagined these two new characters, Simon and Claire, might have spent time with Peter and Bea in and around the interview rooms. Noticed them as kindred spirits. Empathized. Talked about their cats. In my reading of *The Book of Strange New Things*, USIC, the company hiring missionaries for interplanetary travel, seemed to have an unusually clear idea of the kind of candidate they were looking for. It therefore was not too outlandish to imagine the shortlisted applicants might have plenty in common. This gave me the excuse to make the interviewees similar, but not the same.

I imagined my story would take place several weeks after my character Claire accepted the job. Since then Claire has been busy in training at the base, her husband Simon (like Bea, rejected at the last) at home. The story opens as he is back in Terminal 5 of Heathrow, returning to her one last time to say goodbye before she leaves earth. He has presents in his bag. He is delayed. And he is trapped for the duration of the story, surrounded by temptation, powerless to escape his own otherworldly surroundings. This allowed me a stable setting in which to explore Faber's ideas in the novel, without simply repeating them. The fact that I myself happened to be delayed, waiting for a flight in Heathrow Airport Terminal 5 on my way back from Belgrade on July 2nd 2016, when I was working on an early draft of this story, was also certainly a factor in my decision-making. The Japanese noodle restaurant that features in 'In Separate Time' was the one I ate in that day, the perspective looking onto the travellers below the same as the one described by Simon. The entire geography of the story's setting is exactly as I experienced it in those moments of frustration in London, checking

the board for news of my connecting flight to Manchester that refused to come. Though Heathrow was a part of the opening of Faber's story in *The Book of Strange New Things*, it was passed through quickly. In mine, that landscape comes to feel as alien, then as familiar, to Simon as Oasis does to Peter, or earth does to Isserley in *Under the Skin*. As in Faber's original, my Simon uses technology to communicate with his wife, writing heartfelt letters. Though in this case, technology refuses to co-operate. Soon, his resolve is tested.

Once the rest of the first draft of 'In Separate Time' had been written, and after inserting those initial minor details, I hardly thought about Faber's novel at all. A new story cannot aim to speak only to those who are familiar with the text from which the story's epitaph is lifted. Bearing that in mind, at a certain point I was happy to forget the original for a while, set myself free from the text I was responding too, and concentrate on making my own characters believable, their world too. Only in later line-to-line editing did I return to my copy of *The Book of Strange New Things*, making decisions over what to include or exclude based on the author's world. I tried to give the story doubt, and anxiety, and separate time, also the draining effect of distance, a quiet danger which seems to hover darkly over the original. I gave my story belief, shaken. These ideas seemed to contain the spirit of Faber's novel – or at least the spirit *as I experienced it*. Of course, the story also needed compassion. And plenty of it.

Compassion Editorial

It was compassion specifically that drove me, in a second draft, to include the other seemingly minor details that directly link my story with the original text it is responding to. Faber's novel starts with Peter and Bea's difficult lovemaking, then painful parting at Heathrow. In my story, Simon is the one left behind (the alternative, unincorporated narrative of life back on earth was a key driver in Faber's original), and he stumbles across the very same sign-in book in the Multi-Faith Prayer Room referenced in *The Book of Strange New Things*.

In my story, I've used a few lines of that imagined text, lifting a few walk-on characters from the sign-in book which features in Faber's Chapter One. Pat and Ray Murchiston,

whose son has recently died in a car crash. Yuko Oyama, who is looking for someone to love. (Faber, 2014: 19) These are characters who never appear in person, and only appear once in Faber's novel. We readers experience them as Peter does in *The Book of Strange New Things*. Fleeting, as part of a list containing others; wondering for a moment about the lives hiding behind the messages. As my boarding card from Heathrow reminds me (Faber's novel was in my hand luggage the day I was working on that early draft, the boarding card since kept inside it as a bookmark), I also used several other short quotations which were triggers of a kind, or seemed to suggest who my own characters might be.

In the time between that day in Heathrow and when I returned to 'In Separate Time' to complete it some months later, I forgot about the existence of this bookmark, much less its contents. Looking back at this now, some of the intentions behind my scribbles are a mystery to me, but I can connect up how certain notes ended up influencing the final story. For example, I notice that one quote in particular was key. I've written on the boarding card, 'p12 – She was the one who stopped him coming out with claptrap'. Turning to my same copy of Faber's novel again now, I see I underlined the following:

He sighed, squeezed her hand. What was he going to do without her, out in the field? How would he cope, not being able to discuss his perceptions? She was the one who stopped him coming out with claptrap, curbed his tendency to construct grand theories that encompassed everything. (Faber, 2014: 12)

I had forgotten this was the case, but this quote explains the personality I eventually gave my own protagonist: his dependence, his inevitable unravelling, also his over-thinking, his hyper-perceptiveness, his inner life. In examining this now, I notice I had even subconsciously stolen 'claptrap', which seems to be the kind of word only a certain kind of repressed, self-contained person would use. Certainly 'claptrap' is not a word that any characters from my novels or other short stories have spoken before. Even this part of my protagonist's make-up was directly impacted upon by Faber's original.

For me, the above examples from *The Book of Strange New Things* represented possible alternative narratives for my own tale, even possible appropriate language, as we have seen. But they were also examples of Faber's ability to sketch characters compassionately in just a few words. This was what made me want to respond to his

work in the first place. Crucially, I noticed on rereading *The Book of Strange New Things* that what defines Peter as a character is just how desperate he is to reach out. Through missionary work. Through contact with the woman he loves. In every scene, he is seeking connections with others. Maybe it's because I am oversensitive myself, but I felt I could feel that sensitivity in every line of the novel, underpinning the linguistic choices and narrative twists and turns. Carver's unmistakable author's signature.

From that point of departure, that desperate need to reach out, it seemed a natural (though mysterious) next step to imagine my own protagonist Simon, in tears, on the floor of the airport outside the Multi-Faith Prayer Room, crying for Pat and Ray Murchiston from Langton, Kent, two people he has never met and knows virtually nothing about. And only another small step to show him collapsing under the pressure of distance from his wife, utterly incapable of coping without her. After all, at least for this reader of *The Book of Strange New Things*, here is the implied threat hovering over the entire narrative. That distance is a real killer.

(Fig. 1 - Boarding Card, Dr. R. Glass, Belgrade to London Heathrow, 2nd July 2016. Later scribbled on, while awaiting news of connecting flight to Manchester)

WORKS CITED

Books

Faber, Michel (2000) *Under the Skin*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Faber, Michel (2002) *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Faber, Michel (2008) *The Fire Gospel*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Faber, Michel (2014) *The Book of Strange New Things*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Faber, Michel (2016) *Undying: A Love Story*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Hatoum, Milton (2008) *Orphans of Eldorado*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Pelevin, Victor (2005) *The Helmet of Horror*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Tong, Su (2006) *Binu and the Great Wall*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Vila-Matas, Enrique (2014) *Never Any End to Paris*, trans. Anne McLean. London: Harvill Secker.

Websites

Hughes, Kathryn (2002) 'The Crimson Petal and the White – review', *The Guardian*, 28 September, URL (consulted February 2017):

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/sep/28/fiction>

Fox, Genevieve (2011) 'Interview with Michel Faber', *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 April, URL (consulted March 2017):

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8418821/Week-One-Interview-with-Michel-Faber.html>