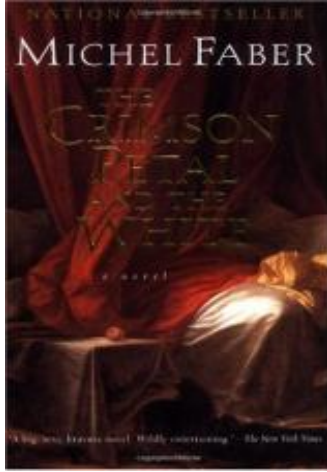


# The Crimson Petal and the White

by Michel Faber

---



## About the Book

Meet Sugar, a nineteen-year-old prostitute in nineteenth-century London who yearns for escape to a better life. From the brothel of the terrifying Mrs. Castaway, she begins her ascent through society, meeting a host of lovable, maddening, unforgettable characters on the way. They begin with William Rackham, an egotistical perfume magnate whose empire is fueled by his lust for Sugar; his unhinged, child-like wife Agnes; his mysteriously hidden-away daughter, Sophie; and his pious brother Henry, foiled in his devotional calling by a persistently less-than-chaste love for the Widow Fox. All this is overseen by assorted preening socialites, drunken journalists, untrustworthy servants, vile guttersnipes, and whores of all stripes and persuasions.

Teeming with life, this is a big, juicy must-read of a novel that has enthralled hundreds of thousands of readers-and will continue to do so for years to come.

## Discussion Guide

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 comprising 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 literary lions, 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?

## Author Bio

Michel Faber's books include the highly acclaimed THE CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE, THE FAHRENHEIT TWINS and the Whitbread-short-listed 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 and has won several short story awards, including the Neil Gunn, Ian St. James and Macallan. Born in Holland and brought up in Australia, he now lives on the south coast of England.

## Critical Praise

"Tell[s] a good story grippingly and colorfully.... An old-fashioned page-turner with pleasingly newfangled twists."

---

### **The Crimson Petal and the White**

by Michel Faber

**Publication Date:** September 1, 2003

**Genres:** Fiction

**Paperback:** 944 pages

**Publisher:** Mariner Books

**ISBN-10:** 0156028778

**ISBN-13:** 9780156028776