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Tony Jarrells
University of South Carolina

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**Fresh Air:
Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (2000)
with a comment on *Trainspotting***

In an iconic scene from Danny Boyle's 1996 film, *Trainspotting*, a passenger train departs Corroul station, in the Scottish Highlands, leaving four of the story's main characters standing together on an otherwise empty platform. The scene makes for quite a contrast with the urban squalor and drug-fueled underground life portrayed in the film thus far. Tommy, at this point still the healthiest of the four characters, proposes a walk up Leum Uilleim, perhaps to get away from relationship problems, as Sick Boy suggests, or perhaps more generally to escape the violence and poverty of life back home. Whatever the case, his mates are not having it. "This is not natural, man," says Spud, gripping a grocery bag filled with cans of lager. "It's the great outdoors," Tommy says in response, "it's fresh air!" With hands outstretched and eyes gesturing to the imposing Highland hill behind him, he exclaims, "doesn't it make you feel proud to be Scottish?" It's at this point that Renton enters the conversation to give his now-famous "colonized by wankers" speech and to label the Scots "wretched ... pathetic trash." "It's a shite state of affairs to be in," he concludes, "and all the fresh air in the world won't make any fucking difference."

In the novel, Renton's speech—minus the "fresh air" bit—is delivered as an interior monologue directed in part at some skinhead "nutters" who have just come into the pub and in part at another of the story's main characters, the menacing Begbie, who, like the skinheads, is "intae baseball-batting every fucker that's different" (78). Boyle's take on the scene is clever for the way it transplants Renton's thoughts from the chaos of what will become a barroom brawl to the quiet peace of the Scottish countryside, effectively making the Highlands, long a symbol of escape from modernity's ills and divisions, a synecdoche, of sorts, for those very ills and divisions: nationalist bigotry, violence, unemployment, anomie, and rampant consumerism.

Part romantic escape, part symbol of national decline, these same Highland hills feature in Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000)—though the scene is set about 75 miles to the north east of Corroul station. *Under the Skin* is Faber's first novel and the only novel of his that is set in Scotland. It tells the story of Isserley, an alien from a planet populated by "humans" who is sent to earth by a corporation that farms "vodselts"—that

is, us—and sells their meat as a culinary delicacy to consumers back home. As Isserley cruises the A9 looking for “specimens,” she is mesmerized by the beauty and “prehistoric stillness” of her surroundings. “It was as if she had been set down on a world so newly finished that the mountains might still have some shifting to do,” Faber writes. But as Isserley also understands, “there was always more going on than picture postcards allowed.” In addition to animals and slippery patches and mist there are drivers coming up from behind and hitch hikers standing alongside the motorway. Drifters, losers, outsiders: the hitchhikers that Isserley encounters are men without family, who can’t find work, and who often reveal themselves to be sexist, xenophobic, violent, and given to substance abuse.

Of course, Isserley is an outsider herself—an alien who is both running away from relationship problems and escaping the ugliness of underground existence back home (although the “underground” in question is more H.G. Wells than Iggy Pop: work estates populated by “trash” and built below ground because a thoroughly-destroyed atmosphere has made out-of-doors existence impossible). She has sacrificed much, including displacement from her home and having her body deformed to make her look more like the vodsels she picks up, drugs, and brings back to the farm to be processed. But unlike her fellow “humans,” including all but one of the colleagues she works with here on earth, Isserley gets to wander about outside, something that counts as an enormous boon. Indeed, we might say that for Isserley it is *only* fresh air that makes any fucking difference, as everything else in her life has reduced her to what she and other humans consider to be a savage state of existence. “She’d have been shambling around spiritlessly, along with all the other losers and low-lives, in underground corridors of bauxite and compacted ash,” writes Faber of what her life would have been had she had stayed at home. “Instead, here she was, free to wander in an unbounded wilderness swirling with awesome surpluses or air....” By the novel’s end, Isserley will take things a step further, from wandering in to actually becoming (she hopes) the air itself: “part of the sky” and “the snow” and the mists “that wreathe the fields.”

Under the Skin’s mix of gruesome terror, sci-fi speculation, and biting satire has earned it comparisons with *Animal Farm*, *The Time Machine*, *Brave New World*, and *The Twilight Zone*. In addition, and despite it being a first novel, *Under the Skin* has become one of Scotland’s favorite books. But the novel also should be celebrated for the way it finds its own distinctive place in a long line of literary (and filmic) works representing the Highlands. Indeed, in Faber’s telling, the Highlands become a setting for playing with savage / civilized distinctions that go back at least as far as James Macpherson’s Ossian poems. The book, too, slyly extends

arguments from the same period about how societies pass through progressive stages on their way to a fully civilized commercial society. Like other recent treatments of the Highlands, from the Harry Potter films to the *Outlander* books (and television series), the Highlands in *Under the Skin* are a place of magic and mists and sometimes of things lost. But they are not only this; they are not merely some representation of a romanticized past to be favorably compared with the excesses of commercial society's present. Faber's Highlands also represent this present moment, a present marked, of course, by the class conflicts and near political hopelessness that Welsh's novel chronicles, but one that contains, as well, a strong sense of beauty and an appreciation for the environment that Faber just manages to pull back from the brink of Romantic cliché. The fitting comparison here, then, is not really with some projected past but rather with a future which, on the one hand, is sufficiently advanced to demote those of us living on this end of capitalist modernity down a notch or so on the food chain, and, on the other, is eerily close to what our own scientific predictions suggest, speaking here of fresh air if not quite yet of advances in farm-to-table cuisine, is just around the next bend.

Tony Jarrells

University of South Carolina