

FINALIST FOR THE WHITBREAD AWARD

UNDER THE SKIN

Original and unsettling...an *ANIMAL FARM* for the new century." —THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

a novel

MICHEL FABER



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K J I H G F E D C B A

Praise for
UNDER THE SKIN

"A fascinating book...The fantastic is so nicely played against the day-to-day that one feels the strangeness of both....Remarkable."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Original and unsettling, an *Animal Farm* for the new century...Michel Faber is a strong, moral voice, and this first novel promises great things for the future."
—*The Wall Street Journal*

"A ride deep into a misanthropic hinterland."
—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"[A] riveting horror novel...perfectly chilling."
—*Mademoiselle*

"A fantastic first novel, a great first novel, so intelligently and beautifully made a book as to deserve a wide readership."
—*The Boston Book Review*

"Alternately gorgeous and terrifying, lyrical and brutal, *Under the Skin* compels and teases...satisfying and successful."
—*Newsday*

"Faber constructs a compelling, unusual tale about species difference and the limits of compassion. *Under the Skin* blends elements of science fiction, grotesque comedy, horror, and thriller into a genre-jumping meditation."
—*The Washington Post Book World*

“A fascinating psychological thriller...[that] hovers between the real and the fantastic.”
—*The Baltimore Sun*

“A satiric novel eerie and touching in equal parts... *Under the Skin* sits squarely within the tradition of the British satire, and one is bound to recall the features of Swift’s boorish Yahoos...and peaceful Eloi of H. G. Wells dark, technological century’s-end fantasy, *The Time Machine*.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“[*Under the Skin*] uses devices borrowed from the suspense-thriller and science-fiction genres to create a vivid portrait of a world that is both wildly improbable and frighteningly real.”
—*The Globe and Mail*

“As suspenseful and creepy as the first third of *Psycho*. An artful moral parable...in the mode of *Brave New World* and *Animal Farm*.”
—*Booklist* (starred review)

“An eerie debut novel, turns the Scottish Highlands into a landscape from *The Twilight Zone*...highly compelling, enhanced by the superbly evoked imagery of the Highlands.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“[Faber] has written a wildly imaginative, scorching, bizarre, and insidious first novel that is generating critical praise and word-of-mouth buzz.”
—*Bookpage*

“Bizzare, speculative, unsettling but mostly creepy (and at times silly) debut novel.”

—*San Diego Readers & Writers Magazine*

"This inventive and disturbing novel is an elegant reconsideration of the idea of predator and prey, human and non-human. Faber is part Hans Christian Andersen, part Franz Kafka. We are in an altogether different world in *Under the Skin*, and it's a frightening, unforgettable place."

—*New Orleans Times-Picayune*

"One of the most innovative, fresh, compelling novels to hit print in the last few years....Faber artfully explores topics ranging from agribusiness to industrial outcast to our own inherently predatory nature."

—*Willamette Week* (Portland, OR)

"A wonderful book—painful, lyrical, frightening, brilliant...I couldn't put it down."

—Kate Atkinson, author of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*

"An extraordinary book that touches on the most profound issues of the human condition." —*The Times* (London)

"Notwithstanding the clever characterization, the real triumph is Faber's prose. This is a man who could give Conrad a run at writing the perfect sentence."

—*The Guardian* (London)

"A coolly imaginative and shocking novel."

—*The Times Literary Supplement* (UK)

"An extraordinary, bizarre, and intriguing read...compulsive from page one and highly thought-provoking."

—*Bookseller* (UK)

"*Under the Skin* is a compulsive read and remains a lyrical and disturbing allegorical meditation on human appetites, morality and essence." —*The Independent* (London)

"Thought-provoking. An *Animal Farm* for the next century." —*The Face* (UK)

"Profound and disturbing." —*The Sunday Times* (London)

"Masterly, *Under the Skin* surely has Michel Faber headed for the shortlists of literary prizes this year." —*The Herald* (London)

"Strong satire in the Swiftian tradition, rendered with outstanding narrative power." —*Time Out* (London)

"A strange, but most bewitching book....If you have diverse tastes and like both Stephen King and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* then you will love this." —*Belfast News Letter*

UNDER THE SKIN

Thanks to Jeff and Fuggo
and especially to my wife, Eva,
for bringing me back to earth

1

ISSERLEY ALWAYS DROVE straight past a hitch-hiker when she first saw him, to give herself time to size him up. She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs. Puny, scrawny specimens were no use to her.

At first glance, though, it could be surprisingly difficult to tell the difference. You'd think a lone hitcher on a country road would stand out a mile, like a distant monument or a grain silo; you'd think you would be able to appraise him calmly as you drove, undress him and turn him over in your mind well in advance. But Isserley had found it didn't happen that way.

Driving through the Highlands of Scotland was an absorbing task in itself; there was always more going on than picture postcards allowed. Even in the nacreous hush of a winter dawn, when the mists were still dosed down in the fields on either side, the A9 could not be trusted to stay empty for long. Furry carcasses of unidentifiable forest creatures littered the asphalt, fresh every morning, each of

them a frozen moment in time when some living thing had mistaken the road for its natural habitat.

Isserley, too, often ventured out at hours of such prehistoric stillness that her vehicle might have been the first ever. 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 and the wooded valleys might yet be recast as seas.

Nevertheless, once she'd launched her little car onto the deserted, faintly steaming road, it was often only a matter of minutes before there was southbound traffic coming up behind her. Nor was this traffic content to let her set the pace, like one sheep following another on a narrow path; she must drive faster, or be hooted off the single carriageway.

Also, this being an arterial road, she must be alert to all the little capillary paths joining it. Only a few of the junctions were clearly signposted, as if singled out for this distinction by natural selection; the rest were camouflaged by trees. Ignoring junctions was not a good idea, even though Isserley had the right of way: any one of them could be spring-loaded with an impatiently shuddering tractor which, if it leapt into her path, would hardly suffer for its mistake, while she would be strewn across the bitumen.

Most distracting of all, though, was not the threat of danger but the allure of beauty. A luminous moat of rain-water, a swarm of gulls following a seeder around a loamy field, a glimpse of rain two or three mountains away, even a lone oystercatcher flying overhead: any of these could make Isserley half forget what she was on the road for. She would be driving along as the sun rose fully, watching distant farmhouses turn golden, when something much

nearer to her, drably shaded, would metamorphose suddenly from a tree-branch or a tangle of debris into a fleshy biped with its arm extended.

Then she'd remember, but sometimes not until she was already sweeping by, narrowly missing the tip of the hitcher's hand, as if the fingers might have been snapped off, twig-like, had they grown just a few centimetres longer.

Stepping on the brake was out of the question. Instead, she'd leave her foot undisturbed on the accelerator, stay in line with the other cars, and do nothing more than take a mental photograph as she, too, zoomed past.

Sometimes, examining this mental image as she drove on, she would note that the hitcher was a female. Isserley wasn't interested in females, at least not in that way. Let them get picked up by someone else.

If the hitcher was male, she usually went back for another look, unless he was an obvious weakling. Assuming he'd made a reasonable impression on her, she would execute a U-turn as soon as it was safe to do so — well out of sight, of course: she didn't want him to know she was interested. Then, driving past on the other side of the road, as slowly as traffic allowed, she'd size him up a second time.

Very occasionally she would fail to find him again: some other motorist, less cautious or less choosy, must have slewed to a halt and picked him up in the time it had taken her to double back. She would squint at where she thought he'd been standing, and see only a vacant hem of gravel. She'd look beyond the road's edge, at the fields or the undergrowth, in case he was hidden in there somewhere, urinating. (They were prone to do that.) It would seem inconceivable to her that he should be gone so soon; his body

had been so good – so excellent – so *perfect* – why had she thrown away her chance? Why hadn't she just picked him up as soon as she saw him?

Sometimes the loss was so hard to accept that she just kept driving, for miles and miles, hoping that whoever had taken him from her would set him down again. Cows blinked at her innocently as she sped by in a haze of wasted petrol.

Usually, however, the hitcher was standing exactly where she'd first passed him, his arm perhaps just marginally less erect, his clothing (if rain was setting in) just that little bit more piebald. Coming from the opposite direction, Isserley might catch a glimpse of his buttocks, or his thighs, or maybe how well-muscled his shoulders were. There was something in the stance, too, that could indicate the cocky self-awareness of a male in prime condition.

Driving past, she'd stare straight at him, to verify her first impressions, making totally sure she wasn't pumping him up in her imagination.

If he really did make the grade, she stopped the car and took him.

Isserley had been doing this for years. Scarcely a day went by when she didn't drive her battered red Toyota Corolla to the A9 and start cruising. Even when she'd had a run of successful encounters and her self-esteem was high, she'd worry that the last hitcher she'd picked up might prove, with hindsight, to be her last truly satisfactory one: perhaps no-one in the future would measure up.

In truth, there was for Isserley an addictive thrill about the challenge. She could have some magnificent brute sit-

ting in her car, right next to her, knowing for sure that he was coming home with her, and she could already be thinking ahead to the next one. Even while she was admiring him, following the curves of his brawny shoulders or the swell of his chest under his T-shirt, savouring the thought of how superb he'd be once he was naked, she would keep one eye on the roadside, just in case an even better prospect was beckoning to her out there.

Today hadn't started well.

Driving the car across the railway overpass near the comatose village of Fearn, before she'd even reached the highway, she became aware of a rattle somewhere above the wheel on the passenger side. She listened to it, holding her breath, wondering what it was trying to tell her in its quaint foreign language. Was the rattle a plea for help? A momentary grumble? A friendly warning? She listened some more, trying to imagine how a car might make itself understood.

This red Corolla wasn't the best car she'd ever had; she especially missed the grey Nissan estate she'd learned to drive in. It had responded smoothly and placidly, made almost no noise, and had lots of room in the back — enough to put a bed in, even. But she'd had to dump it, after only a year.

Since then, she'd had a couple of vehicles, but they were smaller, and the customized bits, when transplanted from the Nissan, caused trouble. This red Corolla handled stiffly and could be temperamental. No doubt it wanted to be a good car, but it had its problems.

Only a few hundred metres short of the junction with

the highway, a hairy youngster was ambling along the side of the narrow road, thumbing a lift. She accelerated past him, and he threw up his arm lazily, adding two fingers to the gesture. He knew her face, vaguely, and she knew his, vaguely. They were both locals, though they'd never met except at moments like this.

Isserley had a policy of steering well clear of locals.

Turning onto the A9 at Kildary, she checked the clock on the dashboard. The days were lengthening fast: only 8:24, and the sun was already off the ground. The sky was bruise blue and flesh pink behind a swaddling of pure white cumulus, hinting at the frigid clarity to come. There would be no snow, but frost would sparkle for hours yet and night would fall well before the air had a chance to get warm.

For Isserley's purposes, a clear raw day like this was good for safe driving, but wasn't so good for assessing hitchers. Exceptionally hardy specimens might go short-sleeved, to show off their fitness, but most would be bundled up in overcoats and layers of wool to make things difficult for her. Even a starveling could look musclebound if he had enough gear on.

There was no traffic in her rear-view mirror and she gave herself permission to pootle along at 40 miles an hour, partly to test out how the rattle was doing. It seemed to have fixed itself. That was wishful thinking, of course. But it was a cheering thing to think when setting out in the morning, after a night of nagging pain, bad dreams and fitful sleep.

She sniffed deeply and laboriously through her narrow, barely patent little nostrils. The air was fresh and

sharp, slightly intoxicating, like pure oxygen administered through a mask, or ether. Her consciousness was hesitating at a crossroads between hyperactive wakefulness and a return to sleep. If she didn't get the stimulation of some action soon, she knew which way it was likely to go.

Isserley drove past some of the usual spots where hitch-hikers were set down, but there was no-one. Just the road and the wide world, empty.

A few stray drops of rain spattered the windscreen, and the wipers smeared two filthy monochrome rainbows across her line of vision. She squirted bottled water from inside the bonnet, a seemingly endless stream of it against the glass, before she was able to get a clear view again. The manoeuvre left her more tired somehow, as if she'd had to give up vital fluids of her own.

She tried to project herself forward in time, visualizing herself already parked somewhere with a hunky young hitch-hiker sitting next to her; she imagined herself breathing heavily against him as she smoothed his hair and grasped him round the waist to ease him into position. The fantasy was not enough, however, to keep her eyes from drooping shut.

Just as Isserley was considering finding a place to pull in and doze for a while, she spotted a silhouetted figure just below the horizon. Instantly she roused herself and dilated her eyelids attentively, pushing her glasses on straight. She checked her face and hair in the rear-view mirror. Experimentally, she pouted her lips, which were red as lipstick.

Driving past the hitcher the first time, she noted he was a male, quite tall, broad-shouldered, casually dressed. He

was using both thumb and forefinger, rather slackly, as if he'd been waiting ages. Or maybe he didn't want to appear too eager.

On the way back, she noted he was quite young, with a very short haircut in the penal Scottish style. His clothing was drab as mud. What he had inside it filled up his jacket impressively, although whether with muscle or fat remained to be seen.

Driving towards him the final time, Isserley realized he really was uncommonly tall. He was staring at her, possibly figuring out that he had already seen her a couple of minutes before, as there wasn't much other traffic. Nevertheless, he didn't beckon to her any more urgently, just kept his hand lazily extended. Begging was not his style.

She slowed down and brought her car to a standstill right in front of him.

'Hop in,' she said.

'Cheers,' he said breezily as he swung into the passenger seat.

Just from that one word, delivered without a smile despite the smiley facial muscles involved, Isserley already knew something about him. He was the type who needed to swerve round the saying of thanks, as if gratitude were a trap. In his world, there was nothing Isserley could do for him that would put him in her debt; everything was only natural. She had stopped to pick him up off the side of the road; fine. Why not? She was giving him, for free, something a taxi would have charged him a fortune for, and what he said to that was 'Cheers', as if she were a drinking pal and had just done him a trifling, perfunctory favour like sliding an ashtray into his reach.