

Michel Faber. *The Fire Gospel*

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Since publishing its first edition in 2005, the Myths Series has presented a wide variety of volumes, each by different authors, which capture multivalent aspects of the mythic in literature. In the broadest terms, the qualities that make a tale mythic should include exploration of the connection between human and sacred worlds (tracing the metaphysical element to our lives, as Joseph Campbell urged) and explorations of narratives so pervasive that they work to structure the very way we think (as pointed out by Claude Lévi-Strauss). While the publishers may be accused of stretching this in their stated aim to convey tales of 'universal and timeless stories,' they can certainly be said to have succeeded in providing a richly textured set of examples that make mythic themes and concerns contemporary, exciting and valid, both as entertainment and as spiritual nourishment. Some of the ways myth's enduring relevance have been captured in the series includes Margaret Atwood's evocative telling of the faithful wife awaiting her Wandering Prince in *The Penelopiad*, Victor Pelevin's image of an internet chat room as the contemporary labyrinth, complete with Minotaur at its voracious heart (*The Helmet of Horror*), and David Grossman's investigation into the very human psychological aspects of the myth around Samson in *Lion's Honey*.

Like *Lion's Honey*, Michel Faber's *The Fire Gospel*, the latest edition in the series, asks searching questions about its subject – but this time, we are concerned with the far more central and controversial Western myth surrounding the life and death of Jesus Christ. *The Fire Gospel* explores

the explosive contents of a newly discovered set of scrolls, which were inked into existence by a follower of Christ who actually witnessed the crucifixion and wrote soon afterward. The lines between fact and fiction are blurred in multifarious ways by Faber, who explicitly plays on the outrageous success (and spurious research) of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as well as other examples of the Jesus 'industry.' In brief, Faber's protagonist Theo Griepenkerl 'finds' nine scrolls, in the rubble of a looted museum in the midst of war torn Iraq, which tell the story of Jesus' life and death in graphic detail. Theo is presented as a character of dubious ethics, with a lust for fame and fortune that is equally cynical and mundane. The fact that marks his find out from the 'money-grubbing exercises in imaginary scholarship, cackhanded hokum and Mickey Mouse theology' of the Dan Brown school of speculative fiction, as he defines it, is that the original author of the scrolls, Malchus, is an eye-witness follower of Jesus and writes in Aramaic, the language of Christ and Theo's academic specialty.

As translator of the first genuinely new Biblical literature since the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, Theo is thrust into the international limelight when they prove to be a massive international publishing success. Meanwhile, the action rolls on thick and fast, with Theo's previous relationship ending while he discovers (and welcomes) the spoils of fame. *The Fire Gospel* registers a scathing indictment of the declining standards of the publishing industry (both academic and popular) as Theo sees it, as well as being a character study of Theo's own ambiguous relationship with the ancient papyri, their language and his associated discipline. And although *The Fire Gospel* tells the story of Theo's miraculous find and the violent ramifications of its publication as an exploration of the enduring power of myth, it does so in a detective-style fashion, creating an atmosphere of suspense that make it an easy, even rollicking read. The actual contents of the scrolls, for instance, are tantalisingly hinted at by television talk show host Barbara Kuhn when she asks about the effect Jesus' *real* dying words will have on the faithful. They are quite different, in this version, from the traditional "It is accomplished," and when Theo's translation of them follows a little later in the book, it is amidst Malchus's almost astonishing description of Christ's physical torment on Golgotha. The crucifixion is detailed in a manner that would not only seem irreverent, even sacrilegious, to most Christians (you might say Faber is 'taking the piss'); it is also, significantly, intellectually inventive in the way it still manages to reveal the fundamental message of any saviour – that the ultimate truth beneath all our suffering and alienation is one of absolute, transcendent harmony.

Faber achieves this with a passage that is both absolutely physical and utterly otherworldly, unverifiable and powerfully illuminating in terms of

poetic truth, real and impossible at once – in other words, in a way that is truly mythic. And this mythic element carries whether or not Faber's irreverence is meant to maintain Christ's saving grace; because if there is one thing certain of the truly mythic, it is that it will slip past the guardianship of its editors (or of reason itself, as Hans Blumenberg put it in *Work on Myth*). The collective reception and the high level of energy and excitement Jesus' communication of the divine engenders amongst his followers mark it out as exactly the kind of momentous spiritual import expected at the origins of such a phenomenally powerful religious movement as Christianity proved to be. The corporeal details of Christ's dying moments, according to Faber's eyewitness Malchus, trump the other gospels for authenticity, inspiring fervent opposition from modern Christian readers as well as admiration from fellow atheists who, like protagonist Theo, yearn for an end to the parochialism and irrationality of religion. Like so many of us in modern secular society, Theo himself is no believer. But even while he is happy to ascribe to the myth of Christ a history of fabrication and exaggeration, he also maintains facets of religious thinking he cannot condone in any organised or hierarchical manner. An atheist, Theo still believes in fate: the coincidence of the scrolls' appearance, combined with the fact they are written in the language of his academic specialty, 'was too astounding to ignore. These scrolls were meant for him. There was no other explanation for it.'

The existence of the kind of 'higher agency' necessary for this belief, combined with the spiritual malaise exposed when the Christian faith is undermined, reveals the combination of factors involved in the resurgence of interest in myth in modern western society. Just as in the times of Christ, we witness increased social upheaval and a powerfully pervasive questioning of formerly sacred truths. The ongoing tensions in the west (and now in much of the modernised world) between scientific reason and religious faith (or between self-satisfied materialism and any symbolic quest whatever) is explored by Faber in aspects cynical, innocent, compromised and insouciant. And hence the clever strategy that enables Faber's tale to transcend the inadequacies of others of the genre, as it both humanises Jesus and maintains his enigmatic spiritual promise in one (but I won't give away the shocking 'truth!').

The explosive nature of Theo's new truth provokes huge publicity, with a wide variety of strong responses from ideologues of all ilk arising in its wake, many of which Faber includes as Amazon website customer reviews in a chapter aptly titled 'Judges.' Some readers harbour an anger that spills over, however, beyond pluralist (and consumerist) tolerance and into *The Fire Gospels'* final, terrorist-inspired culmination. This brings me to the two weaknesses that jarred the pleasure I took from reading this book. In one

scene, the audience at a reading are reduced to doing the 'usual pluralistic thing,' which lumps all the booklovers present into one amorphous mass, regardless of whether they respond to the words of Malchus with unconcerned cool or anguish. This is unfair use of postmodern phrasing in the service of dismissing postmodern diversity. Secondly, and more importantly, the amalgamated political persuasions of the 'terrorists' involved in the final action section of the book don't ring true, as if they represented a cross-section of the kind of crazy thinking involved in fundamentalisms of any type, rather than the authentically organised cell we would probably expect in such shenanigans. These weaknesses do not in any comprehensive way detract from the achievement of *The Fire Gospels*, however, which on the whole represents an entertaining new addition to the Myths series.

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