

John Fraser has lived in Rome since 1980. Previously, he worked in England and Canada.

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'S' is a novel about what makes a person a person – and a 'good' person or 'bad' one – and poses the question: What do we become when we live in cities and improvise for ourselves something for us to do with our lives?

Gary, abandoned at birth, seeks his city, the city of 'S'. Once found, it should give direction – an origin, perhaps a destiny. Gary is a joker, a refuser – a music agent who can't stand noise. He seeks clues regarding his origins – camels? Sex? Friendship? He goes to rehab. Maybe punishment brings meaningful reflection and some purging, purity? He's sent to the Dark City – where life is precarious: there's smuggling; crime in the pool hall... He's dependent on Fancy, his crone landlady, but plague and rioting force him out.

Gary's first venture has been mythic, religious. The second is history – the city is divided into nationalities, exile quarters – each with a project: the Russians aim to copy the great bell of Kiev, but Gary's own efforts end in violence and defeat. He finds a post as gatekeeper, deciding who enters and who's excluded from the city – but his partner takes a less philosophical type, Puma, and he is set to wandering along the road, looking for the source of purity, the city of his birth which he now believes did not exist, or exists no longer.

Fraser's work is conceived on a heroic scale in terms both of its ideas and its situational metaphors. If he were to be filmed, it would need the combined talents of a Bunuel, a Gilliam, a Cameron. Like Thomas Pynchon, whom in some ways he resembles, Fraser is a deep and serious fantasist, wildly inventive. The reader rides as on a switchback or luge of impetuous attention, with effects flashing by at virtuoso speeds. The characters seem to be unwitting agents of chaos, however much wise reflection the author bestows upon them. They move with shrugging self-assurance through circumstances as richly detailed and as without reliable compass-points as a Chinese scroll.

John Fuller, Whitbread Award winner and Booker Prize nominee



S
JOHN FRASER

JOHN FRASER

'the most original novelist of our time'
John Fuller

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I had waited all my life to visit the town of S, where my parents had abandoned me. There were no cobbled streets, no church, no mosque. Nothing I'd imagined. A half-track loaded with cabbages came smoking up the street, and that was all the movement ... low houses without stucco, an open lockup full of rusty fruit machines.'

'I know those places – there's always people looking out, that you can't see.'

'The name had changed. It had no mayor, no governor – it was swallowed by an abandoned larger city, in a district with a new name, new people.'

'They'd have to do that.'

'Young kids like me – they wanted us so young we'd have no memory, and grow up grateful, swallowed in a new society. We were given refuge, but we'd always look like aliens. And I wandered, naturally. We were invisibly badged. Everyone knew we were under surveillance, watched to see if we had caught the sickness, the vendetta. The killing urge.'

Nothing more to say. A life history set out, a leitmotif, at least.

from 'S'

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