

We'll read and discuss these extracts together in the session – there's no need to read them in advance, though if you can manage it, it will be helpful. Please do print out a copy and bring it with you to the session.

Extract 1: Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002)
[Opening of the novel: Chapter One]

Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them. This city I am bringing you to is vast and intricate, and you have not been here before. You may imagine, from other stories you've read, that you know it well, but those stories flattered you, welcoming you as a friend, treating you as if you belonged. The truth is that you are an alien from another time and place altogether.

When I first caught your eye and you decided to come with me, you were probably thinking you would simply arrive and make yourself at home. Now that you're actually here, the air is bitterly cold, and you find yourself being led along in complete darkness, stumbling on uneven ground, recognising nothing. Looking left and right, blinking against an icy wind, you realise you have entered an unknown street of unlit houses full of unknown people.

And yet you did not choose me blindly. Certain expectations were aroused. Let's not be coy: you were hoping I would satisfy all the desires you're too shy to name, or at least show you a good time. Now you hesitate, still holding on to me, but tempted to let me go. When you first picked me up, you didn't fully appreciate the size of me, nor did you expect I would grip you so tightly, so fast. Sleet stings your cheeks, sharp little spits of it so cold they feel hot, like fiery cinders in the wind. Your ears begin to hurt. But you've allowed yourself to be led astray, and it's too late to turn back now.

It's an ashen hour of night, blackish-grey and almost readable like undisturbed pages of burnt manuscript. You blunder forward into the haze of your own spent breath, still following me. The cobblestones beneath your feet are wet and mucky, the air is frigid and smells of sour spirits and slowly dissolving dung. You hear muffled drunken voices from somewhere nearby, but what little you can understand doesn't sound like the carefully chosen opening speeches of a grand romantic drama; instead, you find yourself hoping to God that the voices come no closer.

The main characters in this story, with whom you want to become intimate, are nowhere near here. They aren't expecting you; you mean nothing to them. If you think they're going to get out of their warm beds and travel miles to meet you, you are mistaken.

You may wonder, then: why did I bring you here? Why this delay in meeting the people you thought you were going to meet? The answer is simple: their servants wouldn't have let you in the door.

What you lack is the right connections, and that is what I've brought you here to make: connections. A person who is worth nothing must introduce you to a person worth next-to-nothing, and that person to another, and so on and so forth until finally you can step across the threshold, almost one of the family.

That is why I've brought you here to Church Lane, St Giles: I've found just the right person for you.

I must warn you, though, that I'm introducing you at the very bottom: the lowest of the low. The opulence of Bedford Square and the British Museum may be only a few hundred yards away, but New Oxford Street runs between there and here like a river too wide to swim, and you are on the wrong side. The Prince of Wales has never, I assure you, shaken the hand of any of the residents of this street, or even nodded in passing at anyone here, nor even, under cover of night, sampled the prostitutes. For although Church Lane has more whores living in it than almost any other street in London, they are not of the calibre suitable for gentlemen. To connoisseurs, a woman is more than a carcass after all, and you can't expect them to forgive the fact that the beds here are dirty, the décor is mean, the hearths are cold and there are no cabs waiting outside.

Extract 2: Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (2002)

[This part of the novel is told by Sue, who has recently become Maud Lilly's maid. Both women are keeping secrets...]

There were three eggs there. I don't know what she saw in them, to be so choosy over. She passed them to me and, as I ate them, she sat watching me, taking bites of bread and sips of coffee, and once rubbing for a minute at a spot upon her glove, saying, 'Here is a drop of yolk, look, come upon my finger. Oh, how horrid the yellow is, against the white!'

I saw her frowning at that mark, then, until the meal was finished. When Margaret came to take the tray away, she rose and went into her bedroom; and when she came back her gloves were white again – she had been to her drawer and got a new pair. The old ones I found later, as I put coal on her bedroom fire: she had cast them there, at the back of the grate, and the flames had made the kid shrink, the looked like gloves for a doll.

She was certainly, then, what you would call original. But was she mad, or even half-way simple, as Gentleman said at Lant Street? I did not think so, then. I thought her only pretty lonely, and pretty bookish and bored – as who wouldn't be, in a house like that? When we had finished our lunch she went to the window: the sky was grey and threatening rain, but she said she had a fancy to go out walking. She said, 'Now, what shall I wear for it?', and we stood at the door of her little black press, looking over her coats, her bonnets and her boots. That killed nearly an hour. I think that's why she did it. When I was clumsy over the lacing of her shoe, she put her hands upon mine and said,

'Be slower. Why should we hurry? There is no-one to hurry for, is there?'

She smiled, but her eyes were sad. I said,

'No, miss.'

In the end she put on a pale grey cloak, and over her gloves she drew mittens. She had a little leather bag kept ready, that held a handkerchief, a bottle of water and scissors: she bade me carry this, not saying what the scissors were for – I supposed she meant to cut flowers. She took me down the great staircase to the door, and Mr Way heard us and came running to throw back the bolts. 'How do you do, Miss Maud?' he said, making a bow; and then: 'And you, Miss Smith.' The hall was dark. When we went outside we stood blinking, our hands at our eyes against the sky and the watery sun.

The house had seemed grim when I first saw it, at night, in the fog, and I should like to say it seemed less grim when you saw it by daylight; but it seemed worse. I suppose it had been grand enough once, but now its chimneys were leaning like drunks, and its roof was green with moss and birds' nests. It was covered all over with a dead kind of creeper, or with the stains where a creeper had long ago crept; and all about the foot of the walls were the chopped-off trunks of ivy. It had a great front door, split down the middle; but rain had made the wood swell, they only ever opened up one half. Maud had to press her crinoline flat, and walk quite sideways, in order to leave the house at all.

It was odd to see her stepping out of that gloomy place, like a pearl coming out of an oyster.

It was odder to watch her going back in, and see the oyster shell open, then shut at her back.

But there was not much to stay for, out in the park. There was that avenue of trees, that led up to the house. There was the bare bit of gravel that the house was set in. There was a place they called a herb-garden, that grew mostly nettles; and an overgrown wood with blocked-off paths. At the edge of the wood was a little stone windowless building Maud said was an ice-house. 'Let us just cross to the door and look inside,' she would say, and she'd stand and gaze at the cloudy blocks of ice until she shivered. At the back of the ice-house there started a muddy lane, that led you to a shut-up old red chapel surrounded by yews. This was the queerest, quietest place I ever saw. I didn't like to go to it, but Maud took that way often. For at the

chapel there were graves, of all the Lillys that had come before her; and one of these was a plain stone tomb, that was the grave of her mother.

She could sit and look at that for an hour at a time, hardly blinking. Her scissors she used, not for gathering flowers, but for keeping down the grass that grew about it; and where her mother's name was picked out in letters of lead she would rub with her wet handkerchief to take off stains.

She would rub until her hand shook and her breath came quick. She would never let me help her.

Extract 3: D.J. Taylor, *Kept* (2006)

It turns colder, and a flake or two of snow – grey snow, soiled by the reek of a thousand chimneys, but snow nonetheless – drifts down over the street, where it is seen from out of the window of the Tite Arms and Refreshment Emporium by Mr Phelps as he descends to the kitchen to relay orders for beefsteaks and whisky-punch, and by the ancient proprietress of the milliner's shop, now retired to a comfortable back bedroom with her hair done up in curl papers and a copy of the *St James's Chronicle* in her ancient hand, and Mrs Farthing, who, knowing that it means wet underfoot, and pattens and footbaths, and all manner of inconveniences which Mrs Farthing isn't prepared to countenance, drats it with all her heart.

The person concealed in Mrs Farthing's parlour sees it, and twists her shawl more tightly around her shoulders and thinks – but who knows what she thinks? – of certain former passages in her life, in which predominate the figure of a pleasant-faced old gentleman wielding a quill pen above a sheet of paper quite as if he means to stab it through and through, until her thoughts altogether sail away with her, go running up the wallpaper of Mrs Farthing's parlour – which is all coy shepherdesses and their bucolic swains – to take sanctuary on the curtain pole.

It is at a late hour, unconscionably late for Tite Street – the meek papas, arrayed now in night shirts and slippers are yawning crossly for the candles while their wives wonder how it is that the winter nights *do* go on so [...] – when a cab comes briskly into view at that thoroughfare's nearer end. So muted is its passage through the receding slush – the snow has vanished now, gone to fall on Clerkenwell and Whitechapel and Wapping Old Stairs – that no one in Tite Street hears it except Mrs Farthing who, like an old bloodhound taking the scent, sees it from her front door and steps out into the road almost before the vehicle pulls up and an oldish gentleman in a wide hat and an Ulster begins to descend laboriously onto the pavement.

'D—d cold for the time of year, I should say,' the gentleman remarks, and Mrs Farthing bridles, as if to say 'This is not language I would use, but the sentiment is, at any rate, sound.' A casual observer, overhearing them, would perhaps deduce that the gentleman and Mrs Farthing were formerly acquainted. Certainly Mrs Farthing gives a little bob, hinting at great things in the curtseying line were further encouragement to be offered, while the gentleman gives her a glance that might be interpreted to mean 'I would not dream of being so impolite as to suggest I never met you before.' This impression is reinforced in Mrs Farthing's hallway, an immensely gloomy passage lit by a single lantern. Here the gentleman, having declined Mrs Farthing's offer of refreshment, fixes her with a look and presumes that the patient – the young lady – has passed a pretty comfortable night.

'Pretty comfortable, sir,' Mrs Farthing assures him. 'Leastways, nothing *I* would complain of.'

'She has been quiet, has she?' the gentleman continues.

'Quite quiet, sir. Except that she took on once or twice, sir, which I never could abide, sir, and told her plainly that I would not.'

'Took on, has she?' The gentleman's voice is very low now, very low and confidential.

'Crying sir! Walking about the room! Not answering when spoken to!' Mrs Farthing particularises these failings as if each of them should be dealt with at Snow Hill by Mr Ketch in front of a baying crowd.