

Getting Under the Skin of a Novel

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Sitting on a stool at a counter, eating some sushi: nothing particularly extraordinary about that. On a platform of vinegared rice, wrapped in some dry wafer-thin seaweed, sits a slice of some fish, with a dab of green horseradish spread beneath it. Dipped into a shallow basin of soy sauce it is consumed in one go, chewed and swallowed. The focus has moved from the consumer to the consumed. We started looking at the sushi-eater sitting on a stool and then turned to look at the sushi being eaten, the fish sitting on a platform of rice.

I am sitting on a stool eating some sushi. In front of me there is a glass cabinet. Inside there are slabs of tuna, cut and stacked on trays. Some slabs are pink, veined with fat, while others are a darker red, with just one or two white sinews running through them. The pink meat is from the tuna's underside and once cut and served will cost the consumer 500 yen for two mouthfuls. The dark red meat is from the tuna's tail and cost only 140 yen for the same amount. The sinews in the meat are tough and chewy if eaten raw, so they are first heated with a blow torch to melt them, and then garnished with a dollop of mayonnaise, grated ginger and spring onions.

Sitting on my stool, I concentrate on the taste of the meat as it sits on my tongue. I am awoken from my gastronomic reverie by the conversation between the sushi chef and the customer sitting to my right. "Where do your horse mackerel come from?" "The sea." There is some laughter. Behind the chef is a tank of fish. The customer orders some mackerel sashimi. A junior chef pulls up his sleeves, sticks his hand into the tank, trying to catch hold of one of the fish.

They slip through his fingers. Eventually he grabs hold of a mackerel behind its gills and pulls it out. He disappears into the kitchen with the fish gazing up at the ceiling. Less than five minutes later he reappears with two fillets of meat which he hands to his boss. The fillets are laid on a wooden chopping board, sliced into thin strips and dressed with grated ginger, before being placed on a plate, and served to the waiting customer. With a lick of his lips, the waiting customer consumes the meat. From being a fish swimming about in a tank to being a masticated morsel of meat already being broken down by digestive juices in a stomach took less than ten minutes. But as the sushi chef so rightly pointed out, the fish did originally come from the sea, where it had a lot more space to move about in. And if fish can dream, I doubt it ever dreamed it would one day find itself being sliced up, dressed and served with ginger and spring onion . . .

“How much does a fillet of voddissin cost, anyway, back home?” she enquired, stretching her arms up towards the night sky.

“About nine, ten thousand liss.”

She stopped her gyrations to look at him in disbelief. Ten thousand liss was, for an ordinary person, a whole month’s worth of water and oxygen.

“Are you joking?” she gaped, her hands falling to her sides.

“If it costs less than nine thousand, you can bet it’s been adulterated with something else.”

“But . . . who can afford that?”

“Almost no-one. Which makes it fantastically desirable, of course.”

Amlis sniffed thoughtfully at a stack of scarlet meat under viscose wrapping, as if trying to decide whether he’d smelled it, back home, in its final form. “If someone wants to bribe an official, flatter a client . . . seduce a woman . . . There’s no better way.” (Faber 2000: 234)

The snippet of conversation quoted above and stripped away of any context is perhaps a little difficult to understand. It contains words we may not be familiar with, words that we cannot find in our dictionary. Before we can digest the text, someone must dress it with an explanation and serve it to us in chewable-sized gobbets. But laying to one side the sinewy indigestible elements such as the words *voddissin* and *liss*, we can still hazard a guess at what the nameless female and her companion Amlis are talking about: some red meat that costs so much, it is not simply a means of nourishment but is a luxury item used as a bargaining chip to get people to do things they might not otherwise do. A little bit like the belly-meat of the tuna served in sushi restaurants, really.

What else can we deduce from the passage? The nameless female has been living away from her home country for some time, as she asks Amlis about the cost of *voddissin* 'back home'. Her amazement at his answer tells us how alien her home country appears to her now. Yet the way she asks the initial question while she stretches out points to the fact she is not unfamiliar with the meat they refer to as *voddissin*. It is the price 'back home' that she finds difficult to swallow. The way she phrases her question also implies that *voddissin* is also available where she is living, but is presumably nowhere nearly as valuable as it is 'back home' (wherever that may be). As any economist worth his or her salt should be able to tell you, value is determined by scarcity. When many people want something but its supply is limited, its cost soars. So *voddissin* is obviously a meat that is not readily available in large quantities 'back home'. But it is perhaps more readily available where the nameless female is living. She is faintly disgusted at the cost it fetches: 'Ten thousand *liss* was, for an ordinary person, a whole month's worth of water and oxygen'. This implies she is on the side of the 'ordinary person', appalled at those who squander obscene sums of *liss* on a meat she has obviously never considered to be such a desirable food. And yet, the way she compares this costly meat with 'a whole month's worth of water and oxygen' strikes us as odd. For most of us, 'a whole month's worth of

water and oxygen' costs very little at all. Admittedly there are some places on this earth where water is a very valuable commodity, but there are few places where oxygen is bought and sold.

In addition, we have the relationship between the two characters: the nameless female and the male Amlis. She has been living abroad for some time, while he is presumably just visiting. He is much more knowledgeable about the price of voddissin and what it is often used for. The two are comfortable in each other's presence. Amlis is answering her questions, bringing her up to date with news from home, a place where water and oxygen are not freely available but must be bought. The female is gyrating her arms up towards the night sky, which is not an activity many of us might pursue while chatting with a friend from back home who is on a visit. Is she an aerobics fanatic who uses every spare moment to keep fit? Or is she limbering up for some nocturnal exercise with Amlis? The sudden way she drops her arms to her sides when she hears the cost of voddissin shows us that she is not good at hiding her feelings. Her amazement at the high cost is immediately apparent, clearly visible in the sudden interruption to her gyrations.

In contrast Amlis comes across as more urbane, 'sniffing thoughtfully', and regaling his companion in a rather world-weary way with just what uses the delicacy voddissin is put to back home. He is the more relaxed one of the pair, the languor in his voice expressed by the pauses ('flatter a client . . . seduce a woman . . .') in what he says. Nothing fazes him. It would appear he is enjoying the look of utter incredulity and disbelief on his companion's face, happy at the effect his words have caused. It is almost a childish delight in the ability to shock someone so much they stop whatever it is they are doing.

Before moving on, there remains one final point to be drawn from the passage quoted above. The 'stack of scarlet meat under viscose wrapping' is, we can safely assume, the meat they refer to as 'voddissin'. This exotically named meat is scarlet. In the normal course of things, we would assume it must

be a red meat such as beef, pork or lamb. It is wrapped in viscose and stacked up, as if ready not for immediate consumption but rather for transportation. The viscose will keep it clean and fresh until it reaches its destination (which is 'back home' where Amlis and his female companion are originally from). If the meat were beef, pork or lamb, or even some red-meat fish such as tuna, there is a troubling thought that should cross the mind of the reader: why should such commodities that are widely available in the industrialized world be worth such a premium where Amlis comes from? (Having said that, it must be admitted that there are varieties of beef in Japan that can easily cost the equivalent of a household's monthly utility bills). And finally, it is so obvious a point it could almost be overlooked: what sort of word is 'voddissin'? It is not English, and doesn't even sound vaguely English. Might it be a word from a Slavic language? Or from one of those unusual languages (such as Basque) that bear little or no resemblance to any other language? Amlis and his female companion converse in English, so the word 'voddissin' stands out immediately, being the only non-English word they use. If the meat stacked up beside them in viscose were beef or pork, then surely they would simply call it that? In which case, we must assume they refer to the meat by this strange-sounding name because it is a kind of meat for which no English word already exists. Unless they have some extraordinary powers, the chances are they have not actually created a new kind of animal to cull for its meat (unless of course Amlis is a scientist working on genetically modified products). Therefore, the only logical explanation is that they are referring to the meat of an animal here on Earth which is not usually considered to be edible. Or which we simply do not think of as fit for human consumption.

Having exhausted what might be cleaned from the passage, perhaps it is time to look closer at the world-weary traveler character who goes by the exotic name of Amlis.

Amlis stood naked on all fours, his limbs exactly equal in length, all of them equally nimble. He also had a prehensile tail, which, if he needed his front hands free, he could use as another limb to balance on, tripod-style. His breast tapered seamlessly into a long neck, on which his head was positioned like a trophy. It came to three points: his long spearhead ears and his vulpine snout. His large eyes were perfectly round, positioned on the front of his face, which was covered in soft fur, like the rest of his body. (ibid.: 110)

Amlis, clearly, is not a human being. He is a cross between a wolf, a deer, and a kangaroo, able to walk (and run) on all fours, but also to stand erect (and one assumes, gyrate his arms up towards the night sky). Yet he is no dumb animal. He is capable of using language, and of traveling great distances. How Amlis is able to travel from his home to wherever it is his female companion is living is not yet clear, but however he does it, he is able to transport stacks of voddissin with him. This is not a case of a highly evolved kangaroo putting its baby pouch to new uses, surely? And where exactly is 'back home'? Where do these furry, long-necked, vulpine-snouted beasts come from? The penny should have dropped by now: 'back home', where they eat voddissin, and where a month's supply of water and oxygen cost ten thousand liss, is not so much an alien country as an alien planet. And if we assume that the conversation between Amlis and the unnamed female took place here on Earth (which it does), we realize that it must have taken a lot more than a pair of bouncy hind legs for Amlis to get here. But there is a much more worrying thought to be considered first: the stacks of red voddissin may be a meat we are not familiar with as a food, but they may be familiar to us in another form, as living flesh and blood: our own!

The process by which a mackerel is caught, killed, cut up and eaten is not too difficult for us to imagine. In many cases we do not see the process with our own eyes, and so by the time the meat is sold to us at the sushi shop or the supermarket, it appears to us simply as slices of food, to be dipped in soy sauce and eaten. We do not associate the packages of meat with the animal. If every time we bought a steak, we pictured in our mind's eye a cow grazing peacefully in a field, then being led to the abattoir, to be killed, strung up and butchered, its hide flailed, its body parts cut up and packaged, we would perhaps think twice about making the purchase. We enjoy the taste and the aroma of the meat without troubling ourselves with moral concerns about whether it is right to eat other animals, and about questions of humane treatment of the livestock we rear on our farms. It is indeed unusual (at least for this livery-livered Englishman) to be confronted with the brutal truth of the process when you visit a sushi shop and one minute see the fish swimming about in the tank, then the next its being scooped out, sliced up and laid out before you on a plate. You are made very aware of the fact that you are eating something that was until a very short time ago a living creature. You are also aware that it has been killed for no other reason than to satisfy your hunger (or perhaps greed). Of course, it remains to be seen how many customers dwell on such matters. For the vast majority the fact that the mackerel is killed before their very eyes is merely a guarantee that it is fresh.

Though we take it for granted that we as humans have a perfect right to kill any kind of fish or animal that takes our fancy and eat it, it is almost unthinkable that we in turn should be treated in such a way. We feel safe in the cocoon-like world that we have fashioned for ourselves on land, but are aware that there remain places we venture into at our peril, places such as the sea, the jungle, and certain inner city areas. Perhaps that explains our dread and fascination with sharks. But while we can accept the danger posed by a great white shark, and can take measures to limit our chances of being eaten by one, it is

beyond most of us to imagine a kangaroo-like alien just popping down to Earth and culling a few humans to take back to their planet. For one thing, you would think someone would notice these furry animals coming down in their spaceship.

Given the outlandish nature of this story, the next question to consider is this: how is the reader made to believe in the plausibility of the tale? The premise is a subject that dealt with clumsily will degenerate into farce, and turn into the literary equivalent of a fifties B-movie, full of so-bad-it-is-almost-good moments that make you want to cringe. The author must tread carefully. The true nature of what Amlis and his female companion are doing must be revealed in stages, hinted at obliquely rather than stated boldly and plainly. The way this is achieved is simple but highly effective: the events portrayed are seen through the eyes of the female with the gyrating arms, whose name is Isserley. Indeed, her presence dominates the narrative, a fact emphasized by having her name appear as the very first word in the novel.

Isserley always drove straight past a hitch-hiker when she 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. (ibid.: 1)

Although the narrative is in the third person and not the first (so we have 'she saw him' instead of 'I saw him'), it is clear that the words on the page are Isserley's. It is she who in her thoughts is describing the men she passes on the road in terms such as 'puny, scrawny specimens'. It is her scorn and distaste for men that comes across, as she views them as 'specimens', objects, 'hunks', rather than as individuals with a name and a personality. This opening paragraph is full of an ironic humour whose full impact will only become apparent to the reader on reading the novel for the second time. Initially we see only its reversal of the usual gender roles with the apparently lecherous observer being

(surprise!) a woman driver eyeing up the men for size. It is of course normally male (truck) drivers who give lifts to only the most physically attractive (and skimpily dressed) women hitch-hikers. By reversing the stereotypical roles, the author is not only bringing a wry smile to the readers' lips, but is also cunningly encouraging us to jump to false conclusions. We feel we are being let into a joke, which though obliquely stated is nonetheless clear to all 'right-thinking' readers: men often objectify women, seeing them simply in terms of their sexual attractiveness, so why not write a story about a woman who does likewise? Such role reversals are often a source of satire, and thus after only a few lines of text we find ourselves making assumptions about the kind of novel we are reading. It will poke fun at men's predatory nature and baser instincts, while at the same time make men the victims and not the perpetrators of the sexual objectification. It will give female readers a vicarious pleasure to see the tables being turned and men getting some of their own medicine for a change. See what it's like to be judged solely on the shape of your body!

The heroine is obviously a woman with time on her hands: she allows herself the luxury to drive past the male hitch-hikers she sees, before turning back to give the hunkier specimens a lift. She gives herself the time to size the men up. If she were in a rush to get somewhere, it is unlikely she would prolong her journey time in this way. The fact that she drives past the men before doubling back to offer a lift to the ones she likes makes us wonder about her character: is she simply a woman with very fussy tastes, a woman who knows just exactly what she wants and is not prepared to compromise? Or is she rather a woman of a cautious nature who wants to make doubly sure she is stopping only for the right type of man for her? At this stage it is not clear. We will have to read more of the novel before we can make any such judgments. But if she is a look-before-you-leap cautious type, then surely it is safe to assume she wouldn't be offering lifts to total strangers in the first place.

Isserley's motive for picking up hunky men seems to be so blatant, it would appear to require little discussion. The language used is so sexually charged, the reader assumes that her interest in muscular men must too be of a sexual nature. The vocabulary (size him up, a hunk on legs) is that used when women are discussing the relative physical merits of a man they find sexually attractive. Isserley would clearly appear to be a woman for whom size is important. Men with no meat on them are of no use to her. It is only later that we begin to realize the trap we have fallen into: the author has encouraged us to jump to the wrong conclusions, making erroneous assumptions about Isserley's behaviour. And yet the words on the page do not lie. They tell a literal truth which we overlook: Isserley was looking for big muscles. In our sex-mad world we assume her motives are carnal (that is, sexual). In fact they are carnal in the literal meaning of the word. Her interest is in their meat.

As an opening gambit, it is very effective. The author grabs our attention and leads us to believe we will be reading about some sexually voracious woman, a car-driving, man-eating post-modern woman with a suitably post-modern name: Isserley. Not Jane, or Mary, or Florence, traditional names which conjure up images of dutiful, submissive, kindhearted women who accompany, care for or give birth to men. For this emancipated woman who knows what she wants and is prepared to go out on her own and get it, a suitably unusual name: Isserley. And yet in the next few paragraphs of the text, the author gives us information that seems to directly contradict this image we have of a nymphomaniac behind a wheel. She lives in the Highlands of Scotland, a very cold and sparsely populated region which hardly has a reputation for sexual adventurism. We read of Isserley driving through a wintry rural landscape enveloped in mist, in the early morning watching the sun rise. The location, the time, even the season, all seem highly unsuitable for a woman looking for hunky hitch-hikers.

To add to our confusion the woman we had assumed to be a confident, no-nonsense, post-modern type, at ease behind the wheel of her car, checking

out the scene for suitable hunks to satisfy her, turns out to be a timid driver of a little car, who spends more time worrying about tractors pulling out of side roads than she does thinking about men. She gets distracted by the stark beauty of the landscape to such an extent she very nearly drives into the outstretched hand of a hitch-hiker. There is no reason why she should drive a red BMW, but it does however come as a slight let-down when we discover she is pootling about at 40 miles an hour behind the wheel of a battered red Toyota Corolla that has a nasty rattle on the passenger's side. Isserley is not so one-dimensional as the opening paragraph might have led some readers to believe. She is sending out conflicting messages. She looks forward to getting home, savouring the thought of how superb her male hitch-hiker would be once he was naked, and yet she worries about wasting her petrol, too. She's an amazon on a budget who still has fond memories of her old grey Nissan estate. She drives around in deep mid-winter when most hitch-hikers are wearing so many thick clothes, it is impossible to tell just how muscular they are.

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.
(ibid.: 4)

It would appear that Isserley has a remarkable sex-drive. But at the same time we sense that her daily sorties are nothing more than a tired old routine she goes through. Her lack of enthusiasm is conveyed in the phrase 'been doing this for years', so long a period she can no longer even remember its exact duration. Her car is worn out from the constant use she makes of it. There is no glamour, no excitement in the cruising. It sounds as if her cruising were almost a chore. There is a weariness expressed here that we suspect is Isserley's; she is tired of her routine, and yet she continues with it, as if she were stuck in a rut. The daily grind is obviously taking its toll on her, as her nights are full of "nagging pain,

bad dreams and fitful sleep.” (ibid.: 6) She is weary of it all, and tries in vain to fire herself up by “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 around the waist to ease him into position. The fantasy was not enough, however to keep her eyes from drooping shut.” (ibid.: 7)

Our first impression of Isserley as a powerful woman on the prowl for a muscular mate is being wiped away. Instead we have a tired, timid, absent-minded driver who has sleeping problems. To add to our confusion, we learn that Isserley puts on her glasses only once she has spotted a man she likes the look of. She has evidently never heard the famous quip by Dorothy Parker that ‘Men never make passes at girls who wear glasses’. She can obviously see without glasses so why does she put them on when common sense tells us they will only distract from her sexual allure?

Then, once she has stopped for a hitch-hiker, and we feel a frisson of excitement, our unease is renewed when we read about her care not “to flip the toggle for the icpathua” (ibid.: 8). There is no explanation for this made-up word in the text, and so as readers we are left wondering what ‘icpathua’ is, and when we might learn some clues as to what it does. It doesn’t have a capital ‘i’ so it is not a brand name of some product used for clearing windscreens. It is something that Isserley is taking care not to use, just yet.

Without warning we are given a different perspective on the situation. The text becomes the interior monologue of a hitch-hiker Isserley has picked up in her car. We learn that Isserley is very short but has enormous breasts. Unfeasibly large breasts that are clearly visible as she is wearing a low-cut skimpy top. She is a funny shape with big knobbly elbows, knobbly wrists and big hands. The skin of her hands is badly scarred. Her hair hides her small, heart-shaped, elfish face with its perfect little nose and supermodel mouth. Her cheeks are puffy and her glasses are so thickly lensed, her eyes look twice the

normal size. She talks in a foreign accent.

As abruptly as it began, the monologue is over, and we return to where we started, seeing things from Isserley's point of view. It is clear she is not altogether comfortable conversing in English with her hitch-hiker. She cannot understand his use of slang, and also has no awareness of popular culture, so fails to understand what the AC/DC inscription on his T-shirt might refer to. She is not originally from Scotland. All this information points in one direction: it alerts us to the incongruity of her situation. She has come from some foreign place to live in a cold, inhospitable, sparsely populated region where she spends her days warily cruising the A9 for men. She wears glasses (that make her eyes look unnaturally large) only when she has a man in her car. Something tells us the details do not add up. There is no apparent logic to her behaviour. We suspect there is more to her than meets the eye, but we are not too sure we want to know any more. From our first impression of her as a promiscuous adventurer, she has metamorphosized into some freakish creature, "half Baywatch babe, half little old lady" as her hitch-hiker puts it (*ibid.*: 12).

Her conversation with her hitch-hiker leads her to believe the man is on the way to visit his ex-wife and children in Bradford. This assumption makes her decide he is a bad risk, and so she resigns herself to "put him back" (*ibid.*: 18), an odd phrase that we would normally use for an object rather than a man. When it transpires he has no set plan, and nowhere to stay the night, Isserley gets so excited, the man notices. As the tension in her body builds, and the man grins in anticipation, the reader is caught up in the adrenaline rush of the moment; it is clear that at last after the foreplay of the first twenty pages of the book, there will be a climactic scene revealing to us just who or what Isserley might be. And yet when the climax comes, it is nothing more than a little prick; or to be exact, the two little pricks of the needles that spring up from inside the passenger seat, injecting the hitch-hiker with icpathua. The needles were activated by Isserley by her flipping a toggle on the steering wheel. The man imme-

diately loses consciousness. It would appear icpathua is some kind of knockout drug or anesthetic. Instead of rampant passion and steamy sex misting up the car windows, we are left with a comatose man and Isserley, gasping for breath as if she had just run a marathon. She flicks another switch and the car windows turn dark amber. She takes a blond wig out of the glove box and places it carefully on his head. The fantasy she had earlier conjured up to keep herself awake is now being acted out, and has taken on a sinister air.

She smoothed some wayward locks over his ears, pecked at the fringe with her sharp fingernails to help it settle over the forehead. She leaned back and evaluated the total effect, made some more adjustments. Already he looked much like all the others she had picked up; later, when his clothes were off, he would look more or less identical. (ibid.: 22)

The smoothing of the man's hair is not a tender touch given by a lover in a moment of intimacy. It is a cold, calculated attempt to make the man look like all the other men Isserley has ever picked up. This is not done to make the hitchhiker look more like her ideal of what a man should be. It is to hide his identity from any passing drivers. Isserley adds to the disguise by putting a pair of spectacles and an anorak on the man, before pressing the button to make the car windows transparent again. She then heads for home, which is (we learn) a farm. This last nugget of information is thrown in as if it were of little importance, but it only adds to our growing unease. If Isserley lives on a farm, how can she spend so much time driving around looking for men? There must be farm work to be done, animals to be fed, and fields to be tended. Given what we know of Isserley, it is unlikely that she is a conventional farmer. We can only assume either that she lives on the farm, but doesn't work there, or that the work she does there is not of the giving-hay-to-the-cows-and-mucking-out-the-sheds variety.

The first chapter closes with Isserley worrying about the rattle her car is making as she drives home. This is most unsatisfactory. We as readers are left with the feeling the author is playing with us, leading us to believe and look forward to one thing, only to give us something very different in its place. Instead of disclosure and a warm glow that comes from knowing where the story will take us, we are left in the dark, with little clear idea of what is happening, and even unsure as to what kind of story it is we are reading. The titillation of the opening lines has been replaced, but we are not sure with what. The kidnapping of the out-of-work hitch-hiker with terrible teeth has no rhyme or reason to it. If it were straight sex Isserley wanted from the man, she would not need to knock him out with a strange drug administered by a bizarre contraption built into her car. We turn the page, spurred on by our curiosity, keen to find out the truth behind this mysterious woman and her customized Toyota. But like the hapless hitch-hiker who is caught in Isserley's trap, we the readers are caught up in the author's plot, struggling to make sense of it, but unable to do so. We hope that things will become clear to us once we follow Isserley back to her farm, but frustratingly the next chapter begins with her back on the road, the following day, driving through yet more bad weather. The murky gloom of the Scottish climate is mirrored by the murkiness of the plot. We cannot see where we are going. We know that Isserley is out on the prowl again, but we still have no clear idea what she wants the men for. Is she a sadist who gets her kicks from inflicting pain on muscular men, drugged and brought back to her farm where nobody can hear their screams?

Her next hitch-hiker is a businessman selling whelks to restaurants abroad. He offers her work as a whelk-collector, telling her, "There's piddly wee ones, y'see, the size of peas, that aren't worth the bother of picking up. But these big fellas are just fine" (ibid.: 30). In our haste to find out whether he too will get the icpathua treatment in the buttocks, we are liable to miss the hint we are being given by the author. On re-reading the novel a second time, we will won-

der how we managed not to see the hint, it strikes us as so obvious. But like an Agatha Christie whodunnit, it is only at the final denouement that we see how blind we have been. Once the truth is spelt out to us, it seems so obvious we are embarrassed to admit we did not see it coming. The hint in the whelk-dealer's words lies hidden in its echoing of the opening lines of the novel, with the importance of size being stressed. Small whelks are no good to him. Small men are no good to Isserley. What happens to the whelks? They get eaten in far-off places where they are in big demand. It shouldn't take too much imagination to guess what happens to Isserley's hitch-hikers.

“As soon as you've got enough, you give me a tinkle and I come and collect. (. . .) I'll come out for any amount over twenty kilos. If you don't get that much in one day, a couple of days will do it.”

“But don't they spoil?”

“Takes them about a week to die. It's actually good to let 'em sit for a while so as the excess water drains out. And keep the bag closed, or they'll crawl out and hide under your bed.” (ibid.: 33)

Isserley could almost be talking with Amlis. The roles are similar and the whelk-collector talks in the same cynical way about the product he deals in as Amlis does about the voddissin he has come to collect. And when Isserley rejects the offer of a job gathering whelks, she does so because she is already busily employed as a gatherer of meat. She is out every day, scouring the roads for big-muscled hunks of men. Men with lots of meat on them. Voddissin.

Works Cited

Faber, Michel. *Under the Skin*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000