

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

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Jacket art and design by Martin Noble,
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The Red Bird

Driven by economics, curiosity and ignorance, a group of habitués of The Empty Room, a New York pub, decide to leave the States to try an experiment in the Sahel in search of an earthly paradise. Having set up a trading post and motel in the desert, their friendships begin to fall dramatically apart in a quest for power – and murder ensues...

The distinguished poet and Booker Prize nominee John Fuller has written:

'One of the most extraordinary publishing events of the past few years has been the rapid, indeed insistent, appearance of the novels of John Fraser. There are few parallels in literary history to this almost simultaneous and largely belated appearance of a mature oeuvre, sprung like Athena from Zeus's forehead; and the novels in themselves are extraordinary. I can think of nothing much like them in fiction. Fraser maintains a masterfully ironic distance from the extreme conditions in which his characters find themselves. There are strikingly beautiful descriptions, veiled allusions to rooted traditions, unlikely events half-glimpsed, abrupt narratives, surreal but somehow apposite social customs.

'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.

'I am convinced that he is the most original novelist of our time. His work has become an internal dialogue of intuitions and counter-intuitions that just happens to take the form of conversations between inscrutable characters. But really it is a rich texture of poetic perceptions, frequently reaching for the aphoristic, but rooted in sidelong debate and weird analogies. I class him as a latter-day surrealist. The things I like about his work are always rooted in wit. And of course the pure invention. What has struck me is how toughly he writes. Not, of course, like the butch Hemingway, but with the talking directness of someone with a secure vision.'



Front cover: adapted from Jazz and Poetry,
Parlophone 45 rpm record cover.

The Red Bird
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'There's only one of you who understands,' he says, 'one who took part in the past, and girds up for the future there – the guy who pours you drink, and owns the place and watches all and greets you when you might return, and hopes you'll leave and leave him be. My associate, narrator, call him the knowall – to him I bequeath powers of analysis, and fortitude, capacity to resist the going wrong, the disappointment, and the resignation. But – from him, you'll get no excuses, no apologies – they're not worth the driest fig. His greatest gift is, he knows the red bird sings, or may not sing. The bird can: – maybe it won't. It's the last thing, it's what you think of as the rest comes down... I'll leave a tape, to show you how the singing sounds...'

How we talk! I guess it's to keep quiet about the sex, the gyroscope inside that holds us all together.

'Sex?' asks Tania. 'It's not like politics, it happens, and it's done. Or, thinking of you guys – it doesn't happen, and it's never done.' She laughs – Marcel and I, not on her menu.

'What a pain he must have been – a demon aspiring to run paradise. Marcel shows – trust to fortune – there is nothing stronger.'

'But no paradise,' says Marcel, 'not even the good place. Just us. Paradise, suffering... that's not it. Everything's connected, nothing coheres. It's all procedures, policies, a heap of carrots, sticks, that bosses use. Fortune. My luck – that's the only thing that doesn't fit.'

'Not luck, Marcel,' says Tania. 'Chance. It fits.'

'It's not eternal return that we seem stuck in,' I tell Tania, as Hugo's face gives a last wriggle, a sperm, its lighted tail expiring, the screen dark. 'It seems we're stuck. The rhythm and the key slouch on... We're in eternal pause.'

from **The Red Bird**

ISBN: 978-1-910301-23-4