



A Very Private Life

Michael Frayn

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Uncumber lives in the distant future, in a world sharply divided between 'Insiders' and 'Outsiders'. The Insiders lead a privileged existence: never having to leave their homes, they enjoy a vastly prolonged lifespan, a regular supply of food and mind-altering drugs, and holographic entertainment at the push of a button. Meanwhile, the Outsiders, half-savage, inhabit a polluted wilderness of ruins and industrial waste, struggling for survival.

Uncumber has been warned never to go outside. But when she meets an Outsider on the Holovision and falls in love with him, she becomes curious and decides to venture out into the world . . .

Equal parts dystopian science fiction and brilliant social satire, Michael Frayn's eerily prescient fourth novel *A Very Private Life* (1968) earned widespread critical acclaim and comparisons to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. This edition features a new introduction by the author.

WHAT CRITICS ARE SAYING

'A weird and frightening intensity.' – *Time*

'Easily the most original thing Frayn has done . . . written with elegant simplicity.' – *New Statesman*

'An ingenious fable . . . at times poetically imaginative.' – *Sunday Times*

'An intriguing fantasy.' – *Sunday Telegraph*

A Very Private Life Details

Date : Published July 2015 by Valancourt Books (first published September 3rd 1968)

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Author : Michael Frayn

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From Reader Review A Very Private Life for online ebook

Wiebke (1book1review) says

This was a great quick read. Makes you think and look at solitarity and families differently.

Rachel Adiyah says

(To me, this book could represent our future with Generation Z. I could absolutely see those kids turning into the Inside people; they'd have different technology and mannerisms, but it would essentially be the same thing.)

At some unspecified point in the future, humanity has divided itself into two classes. The upper class consists of the Inside people. They barricade themselves in houses which they never leave. To meet someone means that you meet them on holovision. Everyone past the age of puberty is expected to wear dark goggle-like glasses so they do not reveal their emotions to their family and holovision friends, which is considered extremely rude and inconsiderate. Drugs are used to experience or suppress every emotion, or just to get you high in every conceivable way. There are no windows. Education and entertainment are obtained - like everything else - via the holovision.

Our "heroine" Encumber - called Cumby - finds herself outside and very far away with Outside people. The Outside people are the majority of human beings who do the work to provide Inside people with their easy lives. Their lives are spent in squalor, finding what pleasure they can from love, friendship, and food. Despite what she sees and experiences, Uncumber never gains an understanding of just what this parasitic relationship between Inside and Outside has done to the world.

E says

"A Very Private Life" is a dystopian novel--not that you'd deduce that from the beige cover, a horrible wrapper aesthetically akin to the design of most Misery Memoir jackets.

The premise of the novel shares some similarities with Brave New World: the sullen protagonist, Uncumber, lives in the ultra-comfortable "inside world" in her own private room in a windowless house. People who live inside never leave their houses, and encounter others (even the people they share the house with) primarily via their holovision machines. Everyone's medicated to the gills, drugs meted out for the full range of experiences: hilarity, sexual ecstasy, even intellectual euphoria (not to mention happiness, sadness, even judiciousness[?!:]).

Although comforted by the romantic fantasies and pleasurable delusions provided by her holoscreen, Uncumber feels intensely disconnected from the inside world. She rebels against the inside's conventions by refusing to take her medication, becomes infatuated with a man named Noli who is part of the outside (and lower) classes, and runs away (read: leaves the house) to find him.

However, the outside world is not half so romantic as Uncumber imagined: it's dirty and full of unhappiness and bugs and nasty food. Noli lives on a desert island where he works to exhaustion each day, lives with several wives. He is bluntly cruel and as escapist and pill-happy as Uncumber's family.

When at last Uncumber leaves Noli's house (well, his shared room), she gets lost in the jungle, almost starves to death, is found by a consortium of pirates who kill and rob people who live in the inside world. The pirates feed Uncumber and keep her safe for night; when she sees them rob a house, she feels ambivalent, both hateful toward and sympathetic to the people on the inside. Uncumber is found at the scene of the crime and, after a bizarre non-trial, sentenced to reintegration into the inside world in her own little house. There she lives, immortal and fully integrated, blaming her old rebellious tendencies on incompatibility with her family.

The End.

What did I make of this? It's worth mentioning foremost how many absorbing and beautiful passages there are in this book. Uncumber's discovery of the sheer volume of life outside of her carefully sanitized world is both shocking and delightful, playing to the reader's sense of wonder. The dystopia described is well-realized, as effecting to me now as a well-remembered nightmare.

Uncumber's attempts to discover a meaningful life beyond the one proscribed to her by her family and the inside society ultimately seems to reflect on ineffectual attempts at rebellion against contemporary society: although Uncumber senses that something is wrong and tries to act on it, she's so unaware of social and psychological reality (and so unable to cope with reality when she finally gets a dose of it!) that she is only ever able to express her feeling of unease and displacement through ineffectual and self-damaging rebellion. If one extrapolates from this story some sort of parable for contemporary society, things look bleak: people are miserable but deluded, ineffectual and perpetually trapped. While I don't agree with that bit of Hobbesian pessimism, I certainly think "A Very Private Life" is engaging both as a novel and as a piece of social commentary.

Pete Young says

Though it depicts a future dystopia, *A Very Private Life* is actually less a science fiction novel and more a futurist fairy tale. The young female protagonist Uncumber lives in a sterile underground world in which personal privacy is paramount, being a cultural reaction against the invasions of privacy that began in the 20th century. Emotions must be drug-induced to be acceptable, babies are made at the factory when you provide the ingredients, and dark glasses are the only item of clothing because they help keep your feelings to yourself. But, being a bit of a rebel, Uncumber looks for something more tactile and goes on her way to the outside world in search of Noli, a surface-living man she accidentally encountered on her holovision TV. He turns out to be a selfish low class polygamist among other things, and her situation get worse from there. As an allegory for the dangers of withdrawal from the world *A Very Private Life* works well but the story never really comes alive as anything other than a mild comedy of manners. Yes, life is always far more complex than we can perceive from a naïve standpoint, but that observation seems self-evident from the beginning and the development of this theme never really moves beyond second gear.

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[illegible]

sergevernaillen says

Nog ééntje uit de pocket-collectie van mijn vader (nog een tachtigtal te gaan). Dit had ik ergens in de jaren '80 al eens gelezen. Typisch SF-verhaal uit de jaren '60, de hoogdagen van de SF.

In feite wel gedateerd omdat een aantal van de beschreven evoluties de dag van vandaag ondenkbaar zouden zijn. Bijvoorbeeld: holovisie is ten tijde van het verhaal de standaard maar men moet de verbindingen wel maken door lekker ouderwets een telefoonnummer in te toetsen.

Vermakelijk. Makkelijk op een dagje uit te lezen.

Jennifer says

it's a small book so a nice short read, but i didn't care for the ending. here's a small synopsis: "Dystopian forecast and pure moral fable mingle brilliantly in Michael Frayn's chilling account of Uncumber's adventures as she rejects anaesthetized nirvana for the raw outside of none-too-noble savages."

Valancourt Books says

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Scott Morrison says

Unbelievable that this was written in the 1960s. Brilliant.

Nick says

Modern literature is rich with dystopian visions of the future – do you really need to read another one? The answer is no, not really, but this is a classy example of the genre and has the virtue of being a compact and

very readable novel. The set-up is straightforward and not particularly original: human society has separated into wealthy, privileged Insiders who lead long, disease-free lives and rely on three-dimensional 'holovision' and an endless variety of recreational drugs for entertainment; and the Outsiders who do the real work and are regarded by the Insiders as drones. You know the kind of thing.

The plot revolves around an Insider girl, Uncumber, who is compelled by curiosity to visit the outside world, for which she is of course absolutely unprepared. It's a spare sort of story, with no extraneous incidents or characters, but quite a lot of intriguing and amusing details about the world Frayn creates. One of them is that the Insiders wear no clothes, but are very prudish about revealing their eyes, almost constantly wearing dark glasses. The Outsiders, by contrast, seem to have developed into a polygamous society and speak a different language which is an amalgam of various real contemporary languages and seems to have been quite intricately worked out by the author. This means that the reader, together with Uncumber, remains largely in the dark about what is going on in the outside world, although we can piece together a few more scraps of knowledge than she can thanks to our greater familiarity with the sort of human lives she encounters. This puts us in an odd relationship to the characters – though the lives of the Outsiders are, on the face of it, more similar to our own, it is the Insiders whose language we can understand.

The strength and interest of this novel is in the care Frayn takes with the detail. It is more *Brave New World* than 1984, more concerned with the social elements of a potential future society than the structure of political control. Compared with these works, it's a slight addition to the genre, but an entertaining and intelligent one.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in August 1999.

Michael Frayn is so well known today as a playwright that it is strange to realise that he was first a journalist and then a novelist. And his novels are very different from his plays, often being science fiction and written in a whimsical manner. Despite the tone in which it is written, *A Very Private Life* wants to say some fairly serious things about Western culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

The novel is set a fair way into the future, when humanity has split into two classes, Insiders and Outsiders. Insiders live in sophisticated houses, in which every necessity for life is provided through holovision and drugs - instead of feeling emotions at the whim of nature, when they could distress or embarrass, they take drugs to produce or suppress feelings when their expression is socially desirable. Even their holidays are taken in this way; they never go out of their houses into the real world. Why should they, when the holograms they experience can have the real world's imperfections removed?

The Outsiders, by contrast, live among the ruins of less up to date houses, and take on the manual labour of the world. They continue to wear clothes, abandoned by the Insiders, and are thought of as animals by the other class. (In a neat inversion, they wear dark glasses to be considered decent - so that others cannot know what they are thinking.)

Uncumber is brought up as a privileged Insider, but never really fits in. She craves real experience, refusing to take the drugs with her family, switching off the holographic representations of visitors. Eventually, she manages to go Outside, but then finds she cannot fit into Outsider society either.

The clear targets of *A Very Private Life* are the ways in which modern Western society cuts each one of us off from true human companionship. I once met some people who had worked in West Africa. When talking to a group of Ugandans about life in England, they described shopping in a supermarket. The idea of a building in which you could find all your shopping did not surprise them, for they believed England a land of marvels. They could not believe, however, that it was possible to do all your shopping there without speaking to anyone - and not only was this a fantastic idea, but it was almost immoral in their eyes.

The Insiders do not even experience anything directly; part of their withdrawal from human contact is through the use of holovision and drugs as a substitute for interaction with the potentially unpredictable real world. It is hard not to see this as a comment on the modern TV culture, not to mention the escapist side of drug taking.

How little Frayn approves of these aspects of modern life is shown by one particular incident. After some time outside, Uncumber unwittingly gets involved with a group of criminals; she is put into what is a prison for Outsiders, yet it turns out to be almost identical to the home in which she was brought up.
