



The Electric Michelangelo

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Opening on the windswept front of Morecambe Bay, on the remote north-west coast of England, *The Electric Michelangelo* is a novel of love, loss and the art of tattooing.

In the uniquely sensuous and lyrical prose that has already become her trademark, Sarah Hall's remarkable new novel tells the story of Cy Parks, from his childhood years spent in a seaside guest house for consumptives with his mother, Reeda, to his apprenticeship as a tattoo-artist with Eliot Riley - a scraper with a reputation as a Bolshevik and a drinker to boot.

His skills acquired and a thirst for experience burning within him, Cy departs for America and the riotous world of the Coney Island boardwalk, where he sets up his own business as 'The Electric Michelangelo'. In this carnival environment of roller-coasters and freak-shows, while the crest of the Edwardian amusement industry wave is breaking, Cy becomes enamoured with Grace, a mysterious East European immigrant and circus performer who commissions him to cover her body entirely with tattooed eyes.

Hugely atmospheric, exotic, and familiar, *The Electric Michelangelo* is a love story and an exquisitely rendered portrait of seaside resorts on opposite sides of the Atlantic by one of the most uniquely talented novelists of her generation.

The Electric Michelangelo Details

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Author : Sarah Hall

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Govnyo says

I read this after "discovering" Hall through her short story anthology, Madam Zero. The novel is worse, though only marginally so - I was still gripped, and the writing is absolutely sterling.

The plot is fairly uninteresting - a boy is born in Morecambe, he grows up, the book follows the significant milestones in his life then winds up. There is love and death and hate, as is the norm. There are also [i]a lot[/i] of descriptions of the places where this takes place, one of which is Morecambe. The protagonist, Cy, is a brooding, silent, "arty" type. So essentially we have a placeholder plot and some placeholder characters, which is nothing to get excited about.

The reason I enjoyed it so much is the writing. On pretty much every other page, there is a mind-blowing sentence, and in between there is more than enough to keep you going. There are three points at which the plot climaxes, all three have to do with loss, all three are explosively rendered and the second and third I re-read. It is an astonishingly immersive reading experience for those who love language.

Why is it worse than the short story anthology? There is a lot of filler here. And the lacklustre plot does not grate in a ten page piece as much as it does in a 400-page novel. There are two whole parts of descriptive material, in which Hall tries to capture the spirit of the Lake District (and the other place) in the interwar era. This she does very well, though there is just not enough action in those bits, and it ends up being a bit of an effort. It is possible to skim over those bits, since they are entirely redundant as far as plot development is concerned. The short stories obviously suffer from no such defects.

(It is worth bearing in mind that there is no connection between Madam Zero and this, I just read the former a few days ago and was mesmerised.)

I have spent more space here criticising this than praising it, which is wrong. It is a great book that filled two nights very well, and I likely recommend it to others for its delectable writing.

Stacey says

This is the longest I have stuck with a book for a while, despite its difficulty. It literally took me 10 weeks to read (I'm measuring in weeks because of the whole pregnancy thing; I remember that when I started it, I was about 11 weeks because parts of the book were making me nauseous, and now I'm 21 weeks and the whole thing just made me tired lately). It's not because the book is overly long--it's about 340 pages--it's just that it's very dense. There is almost no dialogue, and the paragraphs are all very long and detailed. I felt that I couldn't skip over anything, though, for fear of missing something lovely. The quality of writing is this book's strength, and I suspect that's why it was a Man Booker Prize finalist. Depending on my mood, I was either fascinated by the book's originality or annoyed by its tediousness. Although I am ultimately glad I finished it, I am more glad that it is over and I can move onto something else. I could not recommend this to anyone, unless you are really into writing, tattoos, or reading at the pace of Chinese water torture.

Leslie says

I'm the first person to champion ambitious prose, even when it overreaches. I was absolutely with this book for the first 50 pages (at least through the anecdotal preamble about Cy's mischievous, unorthodox upbringing in a seaside consumptive hotel/abortion clinic). But once Riley is introduced and Cy is ensnared in the seamy underworld of tattooing, seadog villainy, and other tediously familiar treachery, the monomaniacal narrative voice begins to bulldoze the protagonist, wringing from him any agency, personality, or authority. The only character who truly matters in this novel is the voice, with all of its purply, breathless bravura and adjectives in triplicate. It's a shame, because there's so much I admire in here, and the author clearly has a nearly perverse love of language. But after 300+ pages of relentless, battering description, my palate grew numb to the pleasures. I had no real investment in Cy (essentially a palimpsest on which the voice could ink and re-ink a smattering of colorful anecdotes and baroque histories), and there was no modulation to the narrative, which at first proved exhilarating, but quickly grew exhausting. Instead of plot, there was a lot of overwrought philosophizing about ink, self-destructive and misunderstood geniuses (again?), and learning to love.

Still, for all of my curmudgeonly grousing, I'll read her other books, in hopes to find something equally promising but more focused and balanced.

Allie says

What Sarah Hall does well in "The Electric Michelangelo" are descriptions. The images of blood, coughed up from lungs or pulled with a tattoo needle, are vivid enough to make me queasy. Likewise, I can perfectly imagine the characters and their every mannerism, except the main character Cyril whose perspective gives the story. However, after all these carefully constructed visuals I was left wanting more plot. The main action takes many fewer pages than the descriptions and happens so abruptly that I had to reread it to understand what had happened. After creating all these fascinating characters, I really wanted Hall to do something with them. I realize that some things were left intentionally mysterious, but I feel like a great thing about fiction is its ability to reveal some of the secrets that you never find out in life.

L.S. says

[carte vorbita -humanitas:]

Dragos Bucur reureste o lectura excelenta, ba as spune chiar o interpretare excelenta. Si autoarea mi-a lasat o impresie buna, deoarece a stiut sa vorbeasca frumos si ingenios despre un subiect care imi displace - si anume "arta tatuajului".

Cy o priveste pe Grace drept opera lui de arta, o opera pe care o iubeste. Se indragosteste *de ea* doar dupa ce Grace isi pierde frumusetea pe care el i-a dat-o.

Rob Stainton says

I'm sure this is excellent in its genre. Poetic images. Fascinating situations. Quirky life episodes. But 100 pages in no story had emerged. And I am a "narrative guy"

Catherine says

I am a fan of the photographer Dianne Arbus and although I didn't know it when I put this on my wishlist, there are strong similarities in style. If Arbus had written, it would have been a book like this. There is distance from the characters yet aching intimacy. The atmosphere is so loaded, so heavy so exotic, yet the story so understated. Her writing is original, her phrasing accomplished. Wow! What an awe-some writer -- in the real sense of that word.

J.K. Grice says

I liked this book well enough, although the pacing was a bit slow at times.

Shazia says

I can't believe this won the Booker Prize. I chose it because of the prize (I've liked books by many other winners) and the intriguing subject matter - a tattoo artist from the period after the Great War and during the second World War, set in an English coastal tourist town and Coney Island. I think it won the award because the writing is so artful. Each phrase is a little poem. It seemed to me that the author got so caught up with her beautiful writing that she forgot about the need for plot or character development. Other people may be fine without that, but I am not. There are definitely interesting parts, but mostly I slogged through this book out of sheer determination to finish. This book struck me as a prime example of what B.R. Myers was complaining about in "A Reader's Manifesto" in *The Atlantic* . <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/a...>

Mrs. Danvers says

This book sings. It is amazing that such a young woman could write such a thoughtful story of a man's whole life, with such vitality and mastery.

Sara Bauer says

Too dense to unpack via Goodreads. I'll do a full review on my blog in time, but I must say, approach this novel with extreme EXTREME caution.

David says

I can see why people like this so much, the richness and the color. At the same time, it isn't for me so much. I want a story from this, but have trouble finding it. Things happen, but there's 90% of the book just for build

up if it's Cy, and not enough payoff. I think there's too many stories without focus, too much favoring of maximalism, too much fascination with pure ornamentation for my taste. Many will love it for exactly those things, but I wanted things much tighter. Just me though, still much good inside.

Meghann says

i did not enjoy this book. i finished it out of obligation; i think i kept wanting it to be better but it just never was. i didn't really care about anyone in this story, though it was a little interesting to learn about early tattooing methods.

?Laura says

This is the story of Cy Parks, from his coming of age on the shores of Morecambe Bay in England to his career as a tattoo artist on the boardwalk of Coney Island, New York in the early decades of the twentieth century. It is the story of the three people who would shape his soul, all three somewhat eccentric and flawed, tortured and gifted. His mother, Reeda Parks, runs a hotel for consumptives in Morecambe Bay, where the "soft air" is said to assuage their symptoms, and shows him what it is to give oneself to the care of others. His mentor, Eliot Riley, teaches him the art of tattooing while fighting his inner demons and his own bad habits. And then there is Grace, an enigmatic circus performer who would become his muse and his canvas, his true love, the source of his greatest sorrow.

The language in this book is stunning and the author's ability to bring the settings and characters to life is incredible. We are able to see these three souls through Cy's eyes and to love them as he does despite their scars and their failings. I drank this book in from start to finish and it will stay with me for a long time. It is just wonderful.

Rachel says

This book was written really well with some truly beautiful passages in it. I highlighted about 9 different passages that I loved. So it's strange to me that I just... didn't really care for the book that much? I don't know, I don't want to dissuade anyone from reading it, but at times I just wished I was reading something else.

Ellie says

The premise of this story was what drew me to it. Seaside resorts, amusement parks, early 20th century life, and body art all appealed to me, but Hall really could have benefited from some good editing. Her writing reminded me of the stuff of 19th century when writers were paid by the word. I often found myself wishing she would get to the point and move the story on. The second half was much more engaging, perhaps because the setting was a faster paced Coney Island, with rich, eccentric characters. However, even then, I longed for more character development, because each of these people obviously had a back story worth telling. I was especially disappointed that she did not follow up on Grace's story, or, for that matter, give us a

hint as to what brought her to this place. The same could be said for most of the characters, even Cy ultimately. What was his mother's relationship to Riley? All in all, this was a less than satisfying read, merely okay.

Kimberly says

“War was a peculiar thing...It brought out the best and the worst and the downright incomprehensible in people. It made them slough off the dead skin of reason and deepen the roots of nationality. They became creatures of habit, more so than ever before...War sent people out looking for principles and decency and even fragments of God to be woven up in chain-mail and used as armour against all the bestial suffering and immoral wickedness inflicted by other human beings, those accused of creating a convenience with evil. But it also gave them an excuse to behave very badly themselves under the big black umbrella of a far worse phenomenon.” Thoughts on WWI and WWII, The Electric Michelangelo pg 245

An awesome read, something that finally challenged my mind and was very wonderfully written. If you love the history of Tattoos, have them, thinking of getting them, or just love a good read...this is for you.

Nancy B. says

I expected this book to be a kind of fluffy story about a tattoo artist and his adoration of a girl, but it turns out that it's really a brilliantly drawn coming of age novel for the art of tattooing, america, and one engaging young man. The girl, who doesn't come in until late, is intriguing and solid, with a feminist bent that is believable and respectable. Sweet!

Carol says

This book was terrific - I had very much wanted to read it and it lived up to every expectation I had. Set during the first half of the 20th century, it's about Cy Parks, who grows up in an English seaside resort town and becomes a very good tattoo artist. He emigrates to America, where he plies his trade in Coney Island. There he encounters the enigmatic Grace, who does an equestrian act in one of the park's circuses. Their oddly intimate relationship develops through the medium of her request for an unusual full-body tattoo. Hall's prose is gorgeous - her poetic and perceptive descriptions bring the story and its characters right inside. Reading this book was a distinct pleasure.

The Electric Michelangelo also has a distinct Tom Waits feel to it. This story and its characters bear a strong resemblance to the people and narratives that appear in Waits' material. For me, this added an extra savor to the novel.

Val says

Cyril Parks grows up in Morecambe, a working-class holiday resort where his pragmatic, compassionate, widowed mother runs a guest-house. She rents rooms at a discount to customers the other guest-house proprietors do not want to know about, consumptives and sufferers from industrial lung diseases and wartime

gas attacks hoping the clean Morecambe air will cure them. She also 'helps out' a succession of women in her back room at night. She teaches Cyril not to flinch from the unpleasant aspects of life.

When Cyril is fifteen he is apprenticed to Eliot Riley, a boozy, venal tattoo artist and learns his skills. He also learns how art can lift someone out of a dark and base life, for Riley it is the only thing which can. After Riley's (and his mother's) death, Cyril takes his skill and his knowledge and sets off for a new life in the USA.

Part two of the book shows his life as the self-styled 'Electric Michelangelo' in Coney Island. This book has been described as a love story and Cy does become enamoured of a fascinating woman in the last two chapters of the novel, (view spoiler), but it is more about places and people and an art away from the mainstream of society.

The book is flamboyantly overwritten, but this somehow suits a story which concerns the extremes of both the highs and lows of life, and never the ordinary.
