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Sam Marsdyke is a lonely young man, dogged by an incident in his past and forced to work his family farm instead of attending school in his Yorkshire village. He methodically fills his life with daily routines and adheres to strict boundaries that keep him at a remove from the townspeople. But one day he spies Josephine, his new neighbor from London. From that moment on, Sam's carefully constructed protections begin to crumble—and what starts off as a harmless friendship between an isolated loner and a defiant teenage girl takes a most disturbing turn.

Out Backward Details

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Cheryl says

Enjoyed this very much - how cleverly I was drawn in from the very start into empathising with the main character, who despite being seemingly undeservedly marginalised in a close knit society, yet demanded my sympathies because of his humour and love of his natural surroundings. It was a very long way into the book before I stopped forgiving him misdemeanours and could stand back and realise the sinister path the author had led me on in backing him as the underdog.

I was also swallowed up by the moorland landscape along with Sam, the wild countryside of endless horizons seeming to offer him freedom from his unhappy small world, but at the same time reflecting his rapid decline into a crueller, more inhuman world.

Was totally absorbed by this book - it's dark and troubling, at times very funny, and has rather made me question my judgement of character!

Blair says

Sometimes, when I read a really good book, the subsequent review practically writes itself. I normally start the first draft of a review when I'm halfway through a book; occasionally even earlier. If I absolutely LOVED the book, you'd think this would be easier. Yet it's been days since I finished *God's Own Country* and I haven't yet written a word about it. Why the delay? In part, it could be because I just know it's going to be difficult to do this book justice. My initial response upon finishing it was to write: 'Wow, just wow', and I'm tempted to leave it at that. But if I'm to convince others it's worth reading, I suppose I have to explain why it wowed me in a little more detail, so I will give it my best shot.

The story is narrated in North Yorkshire dialect by Sam Marsdyke, a 19-year-old farmer's son. Having been expelled from school several years before, he has withdrawn into a world of his own making; he spends his days working on the farm with his brutal father, walking the wild moors with his sheepdog, and terrorising unsuspecting rambblers and 'towns' (Sam's word for the rich families who are slowly but surely buying up the surrounding farms). With no friends or even acquaintances of his own age, Sam lavishes attention on the puppies and lambs at the farm, and frequently uses his vivid imagination to conjure up interaction between the people, and even the animals, around him. When a new family - well-off 'towns' from London - move into the farm next door, Sam develops something of a fixation with their young daughter (whose name is Jo, although she is almost always referred to as 'the girl' by Sam - a telling detail, as it turns out). The plot is woven around Sam's increasing sense of isolation and, concurrently, his escalating obsession with the girl. Without giving too much away, it all builds - subtly and with a heavy dose of black humour - to a startling and disturbing climax.

Rarely has a narrative voice been so convincing, so powerful, so ferociously REAL. At points during the time I spent reading this book, I found myself actually *thinking in Sam's voice*, which I don't think has ever happened before. It's revealed early on that Sam's expulsion from school was due to an accusation of rape, but rather than turning him into a repulsive character, Ross Raisin carefully dances around the issue - it isn't even that you necessarily believe Sam is innocent, but rather that he is painted as such a believable, complex character that it is impossible not to be drawn into his lonely world. He is often very funny and can be incredibly beguiling. His observations are twisted cleverly and are sometimes shocking; for example, he turns a description of two sheep mating into what seems to be an admission of guilt about the rape incident,

and the wordplay here is so beautifully done that I had to read it several times and turn it over in my mind to grasp the real meaning. Sam is capable of astonishing cruelty, but shows affection and empathy towards the animals he cares for; he is clearly obsessive, but his fantasies about the girl are, more often than not, innocent and even quite sweet. In fact, it's Jo who initially appears to be the more manipulative and conniving of the two. Raisin encourages the reader to be on Sam's side, to perceive him as well-meaning even as his behaviour becomes ever more menacing and out of touch with reality.

There are many dramatic events in this story - particularly towards the end, which spirals into surreal confusion to the point that what appears to be a nightmare segues into the book's climax, reflecting Sam's damaged mental state. But really, it's all about Sam as a character, and the power of his unreliable narration. You probably know how much I like my bleak, black books, and *God's Own Country* certainly won't have the same appeal for every reader; it's intensely disturbing in parts. The idiomatic language might be off-putting to some, too. But if you can stomach all the slang and the dark turns the plot takes, it's breathtaking; the way the book draws you in until you're too rapt to look away seems to mirror Jo's involvement with Sam. Alongside Gillespie and I (a worthwhile comparison since, despite the very different settings and details, the two books share many traits) this masterful debut is one of the best books I've read all year.

Debbie Reschke Schug says

I appreciated what the author was trying to do here, but I didn't necessarily enjoy reading this book. To be fair, I'm not sure how much my entertainment level should affect the amount of stars, but I felt a certain level of ambivalence while reading the story...and I kinda detected that the author either had or struggled with that ambivalence while writing this.

It's saying something that I liked reading the author's interview and an additional essay in the back of the book more than the actual novel. And, may I add, is this a new marketing ploy by publishing houses to put somewhat attractive writers' pictures on their books? Because as much as I don't want to admit it, it is intriguing to see a good-looking author's photo, especially when it's associated with a pretty creepy story. The book is in the voice of a pretty disturbed boy, who I actually liked, until his actions veered into criminal territory. I usually like novels that are set in "hinterland" areas, such as rural England. This book made me see that farm country in the Western world is universally similar. But I don't know if making the kid mentally ill and violent was a great representation of young farmers, a choice which the author comments on in his interview.

The writing makes you both mourn the loss of small farming as well as wish it good riddance. The story seems to suggest that this kind of life (with its unbridled exposure to death and other unsavory animalistic elements) isn't really good for anybody. I don't have that much experience with farm life—although I did spend a few years in Iowa—but I don't really buy that farm life is super brutal and emotionally unhealthy for everyone in it.

So, while I liked the author's voice and the subject of the book, I really wish different choices had been made. I think a more loving, but no less three-dimensional, approach to some of the characters would've made a more poignant novel.

Anne says

Also called Out Backwards. Another book like *Waterline* that makes the line between someone who

functions well in society and someone who's behavior is considered anti-social, dangerous or aggressive seem very thin. One can take the same clues from the environment that most of us agree to interpret in a similar way and tweak them a bit, reinterpret them, and come up with an entirely different view of the world. One realizes that behavior that might get someone jail time might not stem from intent to harm but from altered interpretation of facts. How could one determine which people truly intend to cause harm for their own benefit and who does so just as a side effect of their thought processes?

Alan says

started this on the train this morning and loving it already. Sharp, funny writing. Takes the piss out of ramblers (Gods Own Country being Yorkshire of course): 'Daft sods in pink and green hats' - I laugh the laugh of recognition - that's me.

...enjoyed this, the charm of the (unreliable, slightly bonkers) young narrator wins you over immediately. Bit like the 'Butcher Boy' you're drawn in by his jokey style, his use of dialect, his love of animals and nature. All the animals talk, sheep, dogs, worms, gentle conversations with him as opposed to the human world of anger and fear and misunderstandings. Very subtly done, to draw you in like this and gradually expose the lad's other side - viciousness, obsession - and still have you rooting for him until you realise the nature of his crimes and start backpedalling.

The language is great, on every page there's a dialect word or two to get your head round, take these passages all from a couple of pages:

the bone-idle nazzart

happy to sell it fast as a rabbit's fart, just for a quick packet. Norman's father never had much brass, no matter the land was gradely and he could keep dairy, for he was a doylem.

outside a pub being done up for the influx of 'towns' a mighty yellow skip in the car park, slowly filling with manky articles of furniture - pictures and trunklements off the wall, chairs, tables, bar buffits reeking with 50 years of smoke, spilt ale.

I just love 'glishy', describing a healthy dog's coat, or new red houses, all bright and glishy like a piece of flesh with the skin torn off.

The prose is invigorating and comic, with the odd punch in the ribs. I take my pink and green hat off to you, sir.

Maciek says

I first saw this book advertised in a magazine a few months ago, but only caught a glimpse of the cover with neither the author nor title - and was trying to find it since, as that cover image stuck in my head. I had no idea what the book was about, but I was looking for it - and if not for Goodreads I'd probably never have found it. Now tell me that covers don't sell books!

The book in question was *God's Own Country*, debut of the English writer Ross Raisin, which has been nominated for several prizes and apparently caused quite a stir when it came out, drawing comparison to *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Who would have thought I'd stumble upon such a treat?

The novel tells the story of and is narrated by Sam Marsdyke, a young man living with his family on a farm somewhere on the edge of the North Yorkshire moors. Having been expelled from school, farm life is pretty much the only reality that Sam knows - he has no friends or acquaintances his age, and often uses imagined conversations between people and animals - obligatorily full of North Yorkshire dialect. Sam's favorite pastime is walking around the moors and absorbing the atmosphere and beauty of the countryside, to which he feels a deep attachment. He absolutely loathes "towns" - rich people from big cities who slowly buy up farms surrounding his own. Sam thinks that they have no connection and respect for the moors, and shouldn't be there - that they're only interested in having a post-card view from their windows. He stays away and doesn't want to talk to these people, but takes a delight in terrorizing them from a distance. But all that changes when a well-off London family moves to the farm next door to Sam's, and his sense of isolation turns into a growing obsession with their young daughter.

Sam's compassion and devotion for the world around him is admirable, even though he as a character might not entirely be - he is obsessive and can be sadistic but also innocent and very naive at times. The decay of many farm and mill-towns and the disappearance of a traditional country way of life due to urbanization and globalization are very real issues not limited to England, but most of the world - in several decades families like Sam's - people born, bred and raised in the country, on a small patch of land - will be bordering on extinction, if they won't disappear sooner. It's easy to sympathize with Sam, who leads a harsh life in an often unforgiving land, and who sees how his entire existence is threatened by approaching change.

That being said, *God's Own Country* reminded me heavily of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, which I also read recently and liked very much. It's weird, because while *The Butcher Boy* features no real plot to speak of I was drawn to and moved by Francie's voice, and consider him to be a character strong enough to carry the book on his own. While I certainly appreciate Ross Raisin's writing and Sam's literary voice, I ultimately felt that the novel was predictable and lacked a surprising element which would make it memorable. It's not a bad book - I just think that it lost a bit of attraction for me because I read it so soon after finishing *The Butcher Boy*. Which one I'd recommend if any sounds interesting? - both, and see which one you'd like better! That's only fair, is it?

Ape says

To start with the superficial, I love the front cover on this book. So cool.

It's a book set in North Yorkshire with lots of lovely Yorkshire terms and dialect - hooray! It's not called *God's Own Country* for nothing =). It is quite cool to read something set in such a local area, so much is familiar to me here. I love the North Yorkshire Moors. This story is narrated by Sam Marsdyke, and we're in his Yorkshire head for the whole ride, with some fantastic expressions and imagery. He's 19, lives on the farm where he grew up, with his mother and grumpy farmer father. He got bullied in school, accused of rape (it was a bit grey, especially considering the ending and just how naive and immature he was, it's hard to say if he was falsely accused or not) and is basically mocked by the local community. Everybody knows everyone else's business, so there is no escape for him. So he's a lonely little soul.

The old country community is gradually being worn away - local pubs are re done out; farms sold off not as

going concerns, and people from outside buy up the properties, more often than not as holiday homes - this is a genuine and depressing problem, killing off communities, making property too expensive for locals to buy and turning these places into playgrounds. I've heard of some villages in Northumberland that have turned into ghost towns because they are essentially now nothing but second homes.

Just across from Sam's home, a family from London move in - permanent residents. The 15 year old daughter is going through her rebellious phase, not getting on with mother etc, and takes to visiting Sam. He does get played by women so easily... I know she's young and confused and when she comes to him and says "let's run away" she really doesn't understand the mess she is creating for both of them. My heart really went out to him at that point, because you knew in 24 hours she'd be over it, but he took it so seriously and as forever-and-ever. Of course after a couple of days, what with him being naive and immature - not understanding this was just a short-lived teenage phase - things do turn a bit darker and I did then lose sympathy for him.

I don't think either side come out unblemished. If this is a town v. country thing, they're both tarnished, and they're both playing each other. Yes, the "towns" as Sam calls them, may be superficial, and coming to play at being in the country, tearing up communities and looking down their noses at the locals. On the other hand, the local community isn't so great for him either as it is; thinking about how he is ostracised and bullied. And the locals are as quick to take advantage of the newcomers where they can; Sam's father overpricing the sheepdog puppies for sale; farmers selling up to cash in on the potential.

Rob says

This is a striking first novel that combines a racy story line (which one isn't quite sure is all in the main protagonist's head) with some wonderful Yorkshire phrases (which one cannot be entirely sure are utter fiction or not) and some beautiful descriptions of the North Yorkshire moors and farming life in general.

That seemingly least offensive breed of people, ramblers, come in for some enjoyably sharp criticism and the unwelcome influx of the middle classes into a rural community, complete with tomato coloured puffer jackets, is condemned with a strong lacing of humour. The book is most memorable, however, for the interior voice of Sam Marsdyke, a bored youth with a seam of cynicism running through him like a stick of Scarborough Rock. Always liable to behave in a self-destructive manner, he turns pretty scary towards the end and one is left continually muttering the words, "no, no, don't do that!"

Carola says

I had the audible version and have to say the narrator was quite brilliant and accounted for at least a star. It is a surreal journey in Sam's mind and the way he sees and wittily "talks" to his Moors. The feeling I had from this was a constant hanging between endearing and disturbing. But I could definitely relate to the Tomatoes!

Marcella says

On the back cover of "God's own country", amongst the usual praise for a "wonderfully unique" debut novel I read "very funny and very disturbing". To be honest, I never really laughed once but agree that it is a deeply disturbing book that you just can't put down.

All through the read I couldn't shut off this feeling of dread of what the budding association of "lankenstein" aka "bogeyman" aka Sam Marsdyke and the newly moved "towns"' daughter will end in. As he is the hero of the novel one wants to believe that all allegations about him are false and are just a result of him being branded early in his youth as a nimrod and rapist. Not a reputation that is easily shaken in the moors of small town England.

It was a chilling read and makes me want to reread some classics such as Harper Lee's "To kill a Mockingbird", Camus' "Stranger" and John Steinbeck's "Of mice and men" and rethink the question of morality and what makes it so.

Debbie Reschke Schug says

***UPDATE: I upped the number of stars I originally gave to this because, as it turns out, I've been thinking a lot about this book. And any book that I reflect on a week after finishing it deserves another star.

Original review:

I appreciated what the author was trying to do here, but I didn't necessarily enjoy reading this book. To be fair, I'm not sure how much my entertainment level should affect the amount of stars, but I felt a certain level of ambivalence while reading the story...and I kinda detected that the author either had or struggled with that ambivalence while writing this.

It's saying something that I liked reading the author's interview and an additional essay in the back of the book more than the actual novel. And, may I add, is this a new marketing ploy by publishing houses to put somewhat attractive writers' pictures on their books? Because as much as I don't want to admit it, it is intriguing to see a good-looking author's photo, especially when it's associated with a pretty creepy story. The book is in the voice of a pretty disturbed boy, who I actually liked, until his actions veered into criminal territory. I usually like novels that are set in "hinterland" areas, such as rural England. This book made me see that farm country in the Western world is universally similar. But I don't know if making the kid mentally ill and violent was a great representation of young farmers, a choice which the author comments on in his interview.

The writing makes you both mourn the loss of small farming as well as wish it good riddance. The story seems to suggest that this kind of life (with its unbridled exposure to death and other unsavory animalistic elements) isn't really good for anybody. I don't have that much experience with farm life—although I did spend a few years in Iowa—but I don't really buy that farm life is super brutal and emotionally unhealthy for everyone in it.

So, while I liked the author's voice and the subject of the book, I really wish different choices had been made. I think a more loving, but no less three-dimensional, approach to some of the characters would've made a more poignant novel.

Betty says

A strange and unusual book, written in the broad Yorkshire dialect, easy enough to pick up as you go along. The author has certainly done his research. A young boy is accused of something he didn't actually do and is kicked out of school. He must work at the home farm and forget about education. When we come into his story he is about 19 years old. Downtrodden and a town misfit, he lives an eventful life within his own mind. The story is sometimes humorous, often deceptive, and somewhat depressing. He has separated himself from everyone in the village and when not working on the sheep farm, is wandering his beloved moors with his favorite dog..

One day a "townie" family moves in next door, with a 15 year old daughter who doesn't appear to have any qualms about being with or being seen with Sam, in fact she encourages that they be seen together. The book is written mostly from the imagination of the boy. He "talks" mostly in his mind to objects animate and inanimate and his mind contrives stories and make-believe conversations. The concept is interesting, a little hard to grasp at times but usually becomes clear as time goes on. The reader gets a feeling for the boy, and it seems he is often accused of things he has not necessarily done. A row between the girl next door and her mother leads to a mad dash across the moors for both Sam and Josephine where Sam feels entirely at home. Though the town believes him to be backward, he is knowledgeable on a number of planes and I feel that his life could easily have been very different, which is disconcerting and depressing to realize. Reading this book I felt a sense of person and place which took on a life of its own. Interesting, sometimes brooding, occasionally humorous, often deceptive, and definitely not boring though a little slow to read, an unusual subject for a debut novel. I would not recommend this book to someone who likes their books cut and dried, but I would recommend it to anyone who likes to delve into the whys and wherefores of life and the mind of the unusual.

janet says

I read some other reviews people have written about this book, and I was really impressed by the variety of takes on the book out there which is a credit to the author. I agree that we are all drawn in to feeling sympathy for the main character at the beginning of the book and got a lot of hearty laughs at his portrayal of ramblers and towns and it seems most people enjoyed the Yorkshire dialect. I'm also with many that Sam's love of the moors and its wildlife is wonderful, and the little conversations he has with animals and the statements he imagines they are making are among the most wholesome and real aspects of the novel. I'm not sure if it was mentioned, but the novel also touches on farms becoming housing developments and town slowly encroaching upon land that has been used for agriculture for eons.

On the negative side, I agree that the plot becomes very predictable at a certain point and, well, we don't really want to go there but we have to keep reading.

Now, what makes this book a 4 for me is what made *Notes on a Scandal* so great. Though we discover that Sam's psychology basically fits the profile of a sexual predator and he is certainly dangerously obsessive, the way the law interprets sexual crimes is unjust towards him based on the information he provides the reader if we can believe him. Also, the author begs the question of how well the justice system of Britain deals with people like Sam.

Lisa says

This is the story of Sam Marsdyke who is a 19 year old farmer in the Yorkshire countryside.

He has come to despise the 'towns' and having been expelled from school is resigned to his life on the farm with his mum and dad and the sheep.

This is an intimate look at the life Sam endures and what he desires from inside his small world.

It is an excellent character study which is very different from anything I've read before.

I got a real sense of the beautiful countryside up against the starkness and reality of actually making a life there.

If you want action and fast pace do not read this book.

If you like a slow burner that is rich in description and insight read this book!

EDIT - I just listened to Fool on the Hill by the Beatles and that is this book - amazing

Paula Connelly says

The blurb on the cover of this book is spot on! It is both amusing and at the same time dark and disturbing.

There's no doubt about it, the writing is superbly done. How else could I have found such a disturbed individual as the main character so likeable? For the largest part of the book I found myself sympathising with his viewpoint and, even as it became clear there was something more sinister going on, I still felt that it wasn't all entirely his fault.

While reading I felt that a subtext to the story was very much the theme of cultural changes to the countryside and the effects on the agricultural community and this, I thought, was very well observed through the eyes of Sam, the main character.

In short, this was a very clever and unique piece of writing, even though the story at times made me feel more than a little uncomfortable. And I can't help wondering how easy it was to read for anyone unfamiliar with the North Yorkshire dialect!
