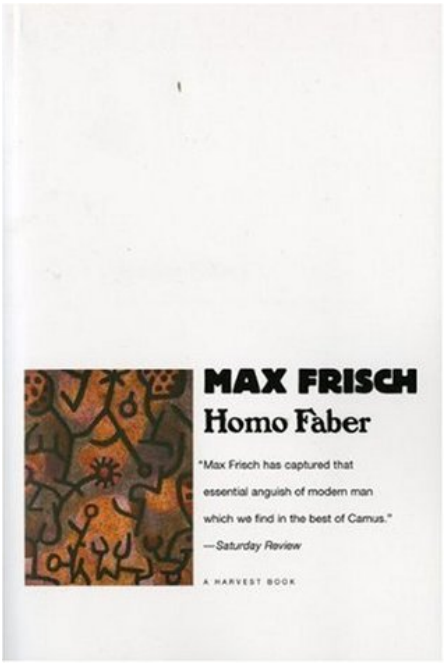

Homo Faber

Max Frisch

Homo Faber

Max Frisch

Homo Faber Max Frisch
Max Frischs Homo faber ist eines der wichtigsten und meistgelesenen Bücher des 20. Jahrhunderts: Der Ingenieur Walter Faber glaubt an sein rationales Weltbild, das aber durch eine ›Liebesgeschichte‹ nachhaltig zerbricht.

Homo Faber Details

Date	:	Published May 1st 1994 by Mariner Books (first published 1957)
ISBN	:	9780156421355
Author	:	Max Frisch
Format	:	Paperback 228 pages
Genre	:	Classics, Fiction, European Literature, German Literature, Academic, School

From Reader Review Homo Faber for online ebook

AC says

How moving... How..., shockingly...surprisingly so

Jan-Maat says

What a difference a reread makes. Now I want to seize everybody in turn by the lapels and say 'read this book and then read it again!'.

Unusually I know when I had the book for the first time, the Easter of 1995, there's an inscription in my Mother's handwriting on a flyleaf with that date. Now I've read it again, but also read it for the first time. You can't read the same book twice since you never can be the same reader.

The narrator doesn't see things that way. He is told: "*technology..the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it...technology as the knack of eliminating the world as resistance, for example, of diluting it by speed, so that we don't have to experience it...the technologist's worldlessness...technologists try to live without death*". However the narrator's dissertation on Maxwell's demon was uncompleted. Life intervenes. The world intervenes. Repeatedly. The willfully blind man is forced to see.

Max Frisch was Swiss. This novel written in 1957. As with Dürrenmatt's The Judge and His Hangman the war is in the background souring the lives of men who go profoundly off the rails years later.

I like the opening to this book very much. I get a good sense of the main character, the time and his way of life. Brief images are very powerful. From the first we see how the narrator has lost sense of himself. He's on the verge of a breakdown but can't see it. He hangs back from revelations the reader perceives. He transfers his own sudden, inexplicable, oddness to his around him. His past opens up and swallows him whole.

Homo Faber is the title. What does man fabricate if not his own tragedy.

Rereading there is a sudden sharpness in the descriptions of places. I smell an ocean I've never seen, see the oozing red mud of a continent I've never stepped foot on and my stomach feels as though I've smoked too many cigars. The disrupted, interrupted narrative works to give the effect of being in his mind, increasingly discontinuous and illustrates his ignorance of himself. The man who made himself does not know himself. The narrator talks about cybernetics but is deaf and blind to the feedback. Nowadays we can give tragedy a technologist's name and call it systems collapse.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

A series of number cropping up everywhere you look ("a lotto winning combination"). A girl (or a boy) you meet, accidentally, in several unlikely places ("we are meant for each other"). A sudden inclement weather on a scheduled date for a job interview ("a better job is waiting for me elsewhere"). Coincidences, synchronicity--people read meanings from them, even the atheists or those who believe in the pure

randomness of the world.

An author who can create a world, and horrify you with it (e.g., Elias Canetti in "Auto da Fe"), deserves the highest praise. Through his character-narrator, Walter Faber, Max Frisch has created a world completely devoid of meaning. Walter Faber, with his mesmerizing staccato prose (like even his words don't want to socialize with each other lest, inadvertently, they would create meaning), will not and cannot see any possible meaning in even the most astounding events, including serial ones, and just proceeds to narrate them matter-of-factly. Most people delight, or at least are mystified, by the unexpected and the surprising. Walter Faber, at best, only looks annoyed by them. Scorned and ignored, the events (perhaps resentful of being called random) then take a revenge, allowing Chance to take over, gobble up the entirety of his existence and spit it out as a mere insignificant instant. A very depressing ending that can rival that of Kafka's "The Trial" or that in "The Stranger" by Albert Camus.

Ugh says

In trying to make sense of Homo Faber, I feel as ill-equipped to do so as the other reviews lead me to believe Walter Faber as he exists at the start of the novel would be if you asked him to explain the meaning of life and human existence. He'd go:

"Umm, to assemble propellers?", right?

So I'm led to believe. But why is that? Did I miss the part where Frisch explains why his cold, isolated engineer, who doesn't want to be chattered at by some stranger on his long-haul flight (the utter git), ended up thus? Is he supposed to have been born that way, or did he make choices that turned him that way? Is anyone, actually, that way?

He wanted to marry his young sweetheart, right? That doesn't strike me as cold, even if he was pretty neutral about the whole thing. Here was a man trying to choose a human connection. He wouldn't be the first young man to want his gilfriend to abort her pregnancy, especially if they can't be together. Or the first to want to take a good job abroad. Are we supposed to think that makes him a robot?

What was the purpose of the plane crash? To demonstrate that Walter's faith in technology is misplaced? But the plane lands safely and provides shelter, and then all the passengers are rescued by helicopter...

What was the point of the trip into the desert? To fill some pages with the word zopilotes over and over? Or to demonstrate that Walter is a whimsical itinerant? Except that we're told he's never done something like that before. So... to demonstrate that he's *not* whimsical?

What was the point of Walter's finding the hanged old friend? Merely to introduce the character?

Why was Walter so attracted to Sabeth? Because she was the only appealing person on his boat, a pretty girl half his age? Isn't that just a desire that any single man in his position would feel? Or are we supposed to believe Hanna's notion that Walter was attracted to Sabeth because of who she was?

What was the point of the moping about in Cuba? What was the point of Professor O's repeated appearances? What was the point of all the repetition in the narrative?

Just what was the point of this damn book???

Manny says

Warning: contains major spoilers for *Sophie's World*

Manfred, my inner German child, is looking even smugger and more annoying than usual.

"I'm not a child any more," he informs me. "I'm grown up. I read Max Frisch's *Homo Faber*."

"You are a child, Manfred," I sigh. "You're only three."

"Three and a half," says Manfred with a little less confidence.

"Three and a half if you like," I agree. "And you didn't understand that book. It was too difficult for you."

"Did so," says Manfred.

"Okay, Manfred," I say. "If you understood it, why don't you tell me what it was about? Which books did it remind you of, in your vast reading experience?"

"Well," says Manfred after pretending to think, "It reminded me of *Sofies Welt*."

"Incredible!" I reply and roll my eyes. "Sartre's *Die schmutzigen Hände* reminded you of Jostein Gaarder, and this *also* reminded you of Jostein Gaarder! Think of the odds!"

"You underestimate Jostein Gaarder," says Manfred sullenly. I can tell he'd like to storm out and slam the door, but it's not biologically possible. He really does resent sharing my body at times like this.

"Alright," I say "Why *did* it remind you of Jostein Gaarder?"

"The key to the book is Hanna's speech on page 140," says Manfred. "Here it is. *Der Mann sieht sich als Herr der Welt, die Frau nur als seinen Spiegel. Der Herr ist nicht gezwungen, die Sprache der Unterdrückten zu lernen; die Frau ist gezwungen, doch nützt es ihr nichts, die Sprache ihres Herrn zu lernen, im Gegenteil, sie lernt nur eine Sprache, die ihr immer unrecht gibt.*"

"And that means?" I ask.

"Man sees himself as the master of the world, woman only as his mirror," says Manfred. "Man is not obliged to learn the language of the subjugated class; in contrast, and although it does not help her, woman is obliged to learn the language of her master, a language which always puts her in the wrong."

"Why is that the key to the book?" I want to know.

"Walter speaks the fragmented language of the ruling male class," says Manfred. "Half the time it isn't even proper sentences, but he doesn't care. He knows engineering and chess, and that's enough for him. He pays so

little attention to the coherence of his life that he doesn't even notice when--"

"No spoilers, Manfred," I remind him.

"Yeah, well, he doesn't even notice something he *really should notice*," says Manfred in an irritated voice. "In the end, he does start to understand the coherence that's central to Hanna's way of looking at things. But only when it's too late."

"And what's the connection to Gaarder?" I ask.

"See," says Manfred, "I suddenly realized what the real point of *Sofies Welt* is. The first time you read the book, you think it's a good story and the philosophy is kind of interesting but it doesn't make any sense. Like, why is the heroine a teenage girl? What's the deal with how she discovers halfway through that she's not a real girl at all, just a character in a book? Why is it so important to her to study philosophy? How does that help her get out of the book? What has any of it got to do with anything?"

"Good questions," I agree.

"But you see," says Manfred, "It makes perfect sense! That's *exactly* what teenage girls most need to understand. They *aren't* real girls. They're just social constructs. Fictitious characters in a male narrative."

Where on earth is he getting all this jargon from? Has he been reading feminist theory? But that's clearly impossible.

"And the only way they'll ever escape from that narrative is by studying philosophy," concludes Manfred with satisfaction. "It all came to me when I was reading *Homo Faber*."

An even more impossible hypothesis crosses my mind: has he got a girlfriend?

"That's for me to know and you to find out," says Manfred smugly. "Interview concluded."

Matt says

This book is required reading in many schools in Germany. Crazy idea. What are the “children” supposed to get out of it? And so are the ratings and reviews (here and elsewhere) by the young ones. Unfavorable. I have, I believe, seen the film one time. But have forgotten all about it.

Homo Faber is Walter Faber. Engineer. Lives by the motto “für einen Ingenör ist nichts zu schwör”. Constructs his world around technology. Writes letters in the desert after an emergency landing on a typewriter (mechanical). Feels at home in the confined square of a chessboard. Travels a lot. To deploy technology to people who are already quite happy without it. Romance? Wrong! A single relationship (Hanna); breaks up. Hanna goes to Walter’s friend (doctor) to not get their (Walter: her) child. One not sees the other again. Not for twenty years. Faber meets a young woman on a voyage, calls her Sabeth because Elizabeth he does not like. He does not recognize Hanna in Sabeth, and not himself. He can’t, the old crock.

Recommended for its prose in telegram style (quite sophisticated but not for every day) and its anti-protagonist. Glad I read it now that I’m older than Faber (just barely). For students, as said, quite unsuitable.

Missy J says

I’m not going to lie. *Homo Faber* was a difficult story to read. We meet a restless and unfeeling man called Walter Faber, who understands the world only through reason and technology. At the beginning of the novel, Faber travels to South America, but the plane crashes in the Mexican desert. Despite being stranded in the desert for several days, Faber does not lose his temper and fixates his mind on playing chess to pass the time. By chance, he learns that a fellow passenger is the brother of his former best friend, who turned out to marry Faber’s ex-girlfriend Hanna. What a double coincidence!

I’m not going to spoil the story, but basically Faber keeps on travelling from one place to another while his repressed past gradually catches up with him. He leaves South America for New York where he has an affair with a married woman. To escape her, he spontaneously decides to go on a cruise ship to Europe. On board, he meets a young woman called Sabeth. He falls in love with her and even proposes to her. They part ways, but soon after meet again in Paris and decide to take a road trip together through Europe, ending in Greece, where Hanna lives. You can guess how the story unfolds.

I find it very hard to enjoy stream of consciousness types of narratives. Some people love this book and others don’t get it. Max Frisch was an open and harsh critique, and he didn’t shy away from criticizing his own home country Switzerland. His most famous work is *Homo Faber*, where a **man thinks he is better in control of his life thanks to technology, but in fact many unexpected events still occur**, destiny cannot be control and some things end tragically. The overall theme is fantastic and there are so many examples I can think of these days. I just think that the author’s point didn’t come across well in this story, especially for people who are not familiar with the author’s life.

Blanca Mazón says

I can't believe this book is under the category "unpopular books"!!! this is one of books that have influenced me the most. The story of this man destined to become a robot, ignoring his emotions, trying to avoid suffering and depending always on logic and system, is a story of people in the 20th century. What we know now about emotional intelligence is what Max Faber lacks. If someone is interested in the depths and miseries of the human soul, he should read this book. Morover the language is so clear and direct, he doesn't need a very baroque language to express the horror mr faber is feeling.

Warwick says

And now here at last is a real book for grown-ups. Intelligent and utterly unsentimental, *Homo Faber* would, I feel, have been wasted on me if I'd read it ten years ago; now it strikes me as extraordinary. (This is unlike most novels, which, if not actually aimed at people in their late teens and early twenties, seem to resonate most strongly with that intense and exciting age group.)

As it happens, Walter Faber, the central character of this novel, does not read novels at all. He can't see the point. A technician for UNESCO, Faber builds things, records them, and analyses them. He believes in logic, reason, facts, brute statistics. A machine impresses him in a way that a human does not, because ‘it feels no fear and no hope, which only disturb, it has no wishes with regard to the result, it operates according to the pure logic of probability.’ Faber has few close male friends; women he can't relate to at all. Too emotional. ‘I'm not cynical,’ he explains. ‘I'm merely realistic, which is something women can't stand.’

> I called her a sentimentalist and arty crafty. She called me Homo Faber.

His one serious relationship ended in divorce years ago. She scorned his beloved technology as ‘the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it.’ (And she, by contrast, was an archaeologist: ‘I stick the past together,’ she says in one of the novel's few moments of unsubtlety.)

I can imagine many readers finding Faber very unlikeable, even monstrous; and yet I feel desperately defensive towards him, perhaps because he reminds me of my father. Actually he reminds me of all fathers – there is an air of generalised daddishness about him, and this is not coincidental: the notion of paternity is crucial to the book.

‘I like functionalism,’ Faber says. He has a prose style to match. This is not to say that it is dry, or clunky, or unartful, because it is none of those things. The style is astonishingly telegraphic, elliptical, Faber narrating the facts that he considers important. The effect is staccato but wonderful; an extreme example here from a virtuoso section set in Havana:

> My lust for looking.
> My desire.
> Vacuum between the loins.
> I exist now only for shoeshine boys!
> The pimps.
> The ice-cream vendors.
> Their vehicle: a combination of old pram and mobile canteen added to half a bicycle, a baldachin with rusty curtains; a carbide lamp; all around, the green twilight dotted with their flared skirts.
> The lilac moon.

Often you are forced to read between the lines to understand what is really going on, and sometimes this reaches such a pitch that one has the impression of having experienced a scene twice. All the time Faber is

writing to understand what has happened, and to justify his behaviour to himself. He can hardly accept the novelistic coincidences that the story involves: this cannot have happened. How was I to know. What else could I have done. The probability was minuscule. These were the facts as I knew them.

I am not mentioning the plot because it shouldn't be spoiled. Which seems strange, because we are given all the main facts quite early on. But part of the point of the book is discovering that the facts are not always, after all, the most important thing.

It's not often I really, really love books in translation. This is not because of any hipsterish misconception that you're not getting the "real" book, it's just that one of the things I most enjoy analysing when I read is the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of sentence construction and vocabulary choice, and this is all very different when you are reading the words of a translator. (Not that translators are not adept at this too – they are – but their motives and concerns are to do with fidelity to someone else's idea rather than their own, and this difference is fundamental.) But here I was riveted by the technique on display.

There is a moment where Faber recalls being on a beach in Greece with a girl. The two of them have a competition of similes: describing what they can see in terms of what it looks like. This is new ground for scientific-minded Faber, but he gets into it, and the paragraph rolls on for pages:

> Then we found we could make out the surf on the seashore. Like beer froth. Sabeth thought, like a ruche! I took back my beer froth and said, like fibreglass. But Sabeth didn't know what fibreglass was. Then came the first rays of the sun over the sea: like a sheaf, like spears, like cracks in a glass, like a monstrance, like photos of electron bombardment. But there was only one point for each round; it was no use producing half a dozen similes. Soon after this the sun rose, dazzling. Like metal spurting out of a furnace, I thought: Sabeth said nothing and lost a point….

It's hard to describe the effect this long passage has on you, coming as it does after 150 pages in which I don't think a single simile had been deployed. To me it felt like being hit by a truck. It's one of the most unusual and powerful devices I can remember, in terms of constructing a novel, and the reason is that the passage coincides exactly with a moment of exquisite emotion both for Faber the character, experiencing it, and for Faber the narrator, remembering it. There is something technically brilliant going on in here.

There are so many other aspects to this superb novel that I haven't even touched on: its comments on the war, its deliberate and wide-ranging internationalism, its precise descriptive scenes. The story is clear-eyed and matter-of-fact and this has a cumulative effect that is quite devastating – heart-breaking, really. And yet for all that, what I am left with is this unexpected, life-affirming feeling…a renewed appreciation of what existence entails:

> *To be alive: to be in the light. Driving donkeys around somewhere (like that old man in Corinth) – that's all our job amounts to! The main thing is to stand up to the light, to joy (like our child) in the knowledge that I shall be extinguished in the light over gorse, asphalt and sea, to stand up to time, or rather to eternity in the instant. To be eternal means to have existed.*

Praj says

“Nothing is harder than to accept oneself." - Max Frisch.

Walter Faber is a paradigm of collective identity v/s self-identity, rationality v/s irrationality and providence v/s concurrence; counter positioning free will. You cannot find yourself anywhere except in yourself. Frisch portrays the contradictory worlds of methodical reasonableness and the quandary of being a mortal. Walter believes in what he nurtures. As a technologist working for UNESCO, he lives in the present and connects with the world through scientific implications of his free will. Walter truly believes that it is mere a sequence of coincidences that fashions a man’s life, not fate. He defies the very nature of human sentiments sheltering his vulnerabilities through an itinerant lifestyle and transitory associations. Nevertheless, when circumstantial occurrences go beyond coherent justifications revealing the blatancy of Walter’s concealed emotions; the dichotomy of fate and coincidences are collided. Walter’s encounter with Herbert, his travel to the tobacco plantation, facing his uneasy past through Hannah and the sexual relation with Sabeth banishes Walter’s logic of concurrent consequences and imposes the idea of destiny. His obstinate belief that a man should not be held responsible for the actions he did not choose is shattered when guilt overrides his conscious after knowing Sabeth’s true identity. He appreciates the value of forgiveness, a concept which he had alienated himself from.

A man is a not a machine but an incongruous creature. Frisch talks about the influence of industrial age and its significance in etching human mentality. The evolution of scientific technologies has assured human beings the capabilities of capturing the materialistic wonders controlling every aspect of human survival.

Above all, however, the machine has no feelings; it feels no fear and no hope ... it operates according to the pure logic of probability. For this reason I assert that the robot perceives more accurately than man.

Walter’s fixation with the technology constantly asserts the conflict between the modern world and the so called primitive thought processes. To a spiritual mind, death is the ultimate liberation of a soul. Whereas in a scientific setting death is seen as a failure of the aortic pump. Frisch toys with the post-modernism attitude towards technology suggesting that even though technology can make life easier it cannot define the workings of human connections. Walter’s practicality in every decision shielded him from the absurdity of emotions and fear making him helpless and nauseated in his own personality, is analogous to the resolution of Antoine Roquentin in Sartre’s **Nausea**:-

I was thinking of belonging, I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, 1 foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things; this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. I kept myself from making the slightest movement, but I didn't need to move in order to see, behind the trees, the blue columns and the lamp posts of the bandstand and the Velleda, in the midst of a mountain of laurel. All

these objects . . . how can I explain?..... I realized that there was no half-way house between non-existence and this flaunting abundance. If you existed, you had to exist all the way, as far as mouldiness, bloatedness, obscenity were concerned. (Jean Paul Sartre; Nausea)

The underplayed incestuous approach and the irony in Walter's analysis on abortion as a logical outcome in a civilization, shows that even though 'man plans' the absurdity of fate makes technology a pitiable surrogate of human identity. Ultimately, Walter's trepidation of death and emancipation from his social identity as an engineer, proves that "Man the Maker" relates to how an individual classifies oneself from a hollow world where one cannot suffer nothing.

Steven Godin says

Is everything in life a coincidence, or are things predestined for us? How much do the decisions that we make in life influence the outcome?, even down to the smallest of details?. For globe-trotting Walter Faber this is a conflict that is never really resolved, through the misadventures of a strange semi mid-life crisis, Frisch writes a poignant and sometimes shocking novel as Faber struggles to maintain his previously unwavering belief in technology, whilst human connections both past and present start to send his perfectly controlled existence spiraling out of his control.

The narrator, Walter Faber, a Swiss bachelor heading towards fifty, is an analytical, headstrong but somewhat misanthropic individual, who's life is about to seriously land him on the ropes. A man of science, heading to South America on business to do with a project involving turbines. Unfortunately for him, his plane making an emergency landing in the Mexican desert was not part of the plan, and from here on in, bizarrely, Faber would face some uncanny happenings, after first of all finding his old friend Joachim dead in the jungle (the husband of Hanna, his childhood sweetheart). Later he would fall in love with a young lady, the dynamic Sabeth, whilst traveling across the Atlantic on board a ship destined for Europe (not knowing she is actually his daughter who he had with Hanna). After spending time in Italy together, an accident in Athens would bring Hanna back into Faber's life, leaving him torn between guilt and love amidst the ruins of his own fate.

This has the feeling of an existential work certainly, but this novel is of greater depth when dealing with the unusual predicaments Faber finds himself in. There is an air of precision and efficiency in Frisch's writing, the restrained, repetition and rhythm combined with shifts forward and back in time create a remarkable tension. The pragmatic Faber is spare, unromantic and sometimes damn right obnoxious, a character who engenders empathy, and as the forces that be conspire against him, you can't help feel for the poor man, as of all the people on the planet (this being the 50's so the population would have been smaller than today, but even still!) he falls for the one person he shouldn't have. But he slowly starts to reveal a humanistic side not seen before, he is obliged to admit that he has found himself caught in a flood of coincidences, and dwindling to hold to this as an excuse to absolve his part in the tragedy that ultimately unfolds. At least until that is no longer possible.

With respect to the women, (they basically hold the key to the stories progression) Frisch intentionally places very strong, independent women in his protagonist's line of sight, and they are the women who hold the deepest attraction for him. my only problem (that wasn't really a problem, just something to get used to) was the long paragraphs of animated description, broken by single stark statement, set alone, which at first I found irritating but this didn't affect the flow of the narrative significantly. As for Faber, there is one line I

will never forget, where he describes the towering skyscrapers of New York as 'Tombstones', this being decades before 9/11, in a sinister kind of way, it makes sense now.

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david says

‘Homo Faber’ is the concept of humans being able to control their fate and the environment through tools.

Idealistic, maybe, but it becomes the fodder for Mr. Frisch’s last published book.

It took a few pages to catch this writer’s rhythm but, soon thereafter, it was an easy lope to the end.

This grateful reader was awed by the sublime dexterity the author employed to integrate so many themes concomitantly. Not in the patronymic way of the old Russians where we are always trying to remember the eighteen different names by which each character may be referred to.

But in a complex labyrinth that allows different perceptions to flourish. A difficult feat, indeed. And while he is toying around with us, he makes us laugh. Consistently and throughout.

(Many times, it reminded me of Henderson the Rain King)

Walter Faber is a regular guy who works as a technologist for an American corporation. He is the protagonist and we can witness through his eyes, what this particular European, specifically a Swiss, squeezes out of his life on this earth, directly after World War Two.

Death plays a big part in living, as Frisch is aware, and he uses it as a mechanism for human interaction and man-made peccadillos, and how we futilely plan or attempt to manipulate the present and/or the denouement.

I am not trying to be opaque but there is so much to enjoy here, and I do not want to reveal it all. (Oh, and I am lazy)

It is a strong piece of work, to be enjoyed by both girls and boys alike.

Paul says

On the surface a straightforward story, simple and resembling a parable; but like a parable capable of many interpretations and readable on more than one level.
Walter faber is a rational man who believes in technology, a creature of habit. A series of events disrupt his settled life. A plane crash, a chance meeting with the brother of an old friend, a visit to the friend in central america, whose body they discover at his home. Then there ia a boat journey across the Atlantic. Faber, a middle aged man, meets a 20 year old woman and they hit it off and continue to travel together and an affair develops. It transpires that the girl is his daughter, he didn't know he had (he thought the mother had an abortion). This isn't like the incest Laurie Lee describes in rural England; only a problem when the roads were bad, but is purely coincidental and enough to test any pure rationalist.
Then tragedy strikes in the form of a snake; a serpent strikes at the heart of the tale. This is man vs machine; but as the narrator, Mr Faber gives the plot away as you go along, it's a bit like watching a car crash in slow

motion!
One thing I did notice; Faber just never stayed still, always on the move. Faber realises he cannot control his environment as life continues to conspire against him. He is dislocated with no family or home. he does become close to someone who might be family but ... Faber has avoided responsibility and fate makes him pay.
A striking novel with an unsympathetic protagonist (perhaps a debateable point) but a gripping and thought provoking story

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Ian "Marvin" Graye says

April 20, 2011:

I bought this book in 1979 and read it sometime in the early 80's.

It's only a couple of hundred pages, so when Praj asked me to review it, I thought, hey, why not re-read it (even though I very rarely re-read books).

April 22, 2011:

Re-reading this novel has been a total revelation.

Firstly, I had previously rated it four stars from memory. Now I have upgraded it to five stars.

It's not just good, it's great, one of the best books I've read.

Secondly, I haven't seen the Volker Schlondorff film "Voyager", which is based on the novel.

If it is anywhere near as good as the book, I will seek out the film with a passion.

About the Right Length

I have read numerous books that were anywhere in length between 300 and 1,000 pages long.

However, there is something in me that feels that 200 pages is just the right length.

In the early days of the internet (when grazing seemed to have superseded dining), I thought everybody would head in this direction, and that the days of the epic were over.

I was clearly wrong, but I still feel that, if an author has a 600 page book in them, they should write three 200 page novels (or at most two 300 page novels).

Hit the ground running, say what you want to say, don't subject us to the risk of boredom, finish it and move onto the next novel.

It's ironic that I'm about to start "The Pale King".
But "Homo Faber" does just this.

Some Short, Sharp Examples

I have read a few novels that more or less live up to my prescription and are perfect as well.

Camus' "The Stranger" is one.

Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice" is another.

Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness".

Nabokov's "Lolita".

"Tourmaline" by Randolph Stow.

To these great novels, I would now add "Homo Faber".

Towards Crystalline Perfection

Given the relatively small canvas, what matters to me is the crystalline perfection of the prose.

Not a word wasted, not a word that I would change.

Circumnavigating the Plot

I don't think it is fair to you to summarise or hint at the plot.

It is not a detailed or hyperactive plot.

The narrator (Walter Faber) finds himself in a number of related predicaments that conspire to reach a resolution, almost despite Faber's reluctance or inability to seize the initiative and direct or change the course of his life.

In retrospect, each predicament is an existentialist challenge to the certainty of his worldview and the way he (and we) live our lives.

Walter's Tanned and Toned

Part of the novel's appeal is the tone that derives from the unlikely character of Walter.

He is no hero, but neither is he an anti-hero.

He is a thin, wiry, 1950's Swiss engineer, a technologist, a believer in the reign of rationality over sentiment.

The Age of Aquarius isn't even on the horizon.

The tale is by him as well as about him.

His tone is dry and clinical, like an engineer's report.

Initially, he is world-weary, detached, disengaged, sarcastic, resigned.

You laugh at his interaction with the world, but it's not in your face comic farce per se, it's a serious farce scaling its way up to an immodest tragedy.

He's hanging on in quiet desperation (not just the English way, but the Swiss way as well).

Then things start to happen to him, some good, some bad.

Bit by bit, he becomes more engaged, more interactive, more hopeful.

Only to experience the greatest sadness I can conceive of.

Walter's Women

It's not giving anything away to say that Walter's plight revolves around the women in his life.

Given the relative absence of women friends, he is typical of many men in that he can only relate to a woman in one of three ways: in their capacity as mother, lover/wife or daughter.

This not only shapes the relationships in his life, it shapes him and the women as well.

The Feel, the Craft, the Finish

The novel starts dry, but builds quietly and confidently towards its end.

Max Frisch is a master of his craft.

An architect himself, Frisch's novel is immaculately conceived, flawlessly constructed and consummately delivered.

On time, on budget.

Ultimately, it defines the existentialist plight with both a rational and an emotional sensibility.

I realise that I haven't given you much to go on but my enthusiasm, but if you can find a copy, I guarantee that you will be hooked from the first sentence and you won't be able to stop.

Many thanks to Praj for prompting me to revisit the book and re-discover a classic of the second half of the last century.

P.S. Volker Schlöndorff Discusses His Film "Voyager [Homo Faber]" in 2011

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb52Ii...

Edward says

I had never heard of this book, or of its author, but boy am I glad I decided to buy it on a whim. It is a work that deserves to stand with Camus and Sartre in its penetration of the modern condition; an understanding of which is in each case elucidated through the perspective of a misanthrope.

The protagonist, Faber, is an engineer, who is characterised by certain stereotypically male traits: he lacks empathy, and is logical and analytical to the point of inhumanity. He treats significant events - even those of life and death - more or less with apathy, and purely as the culmination of probabilistic forces. His world is at the precipice of technological rebirth. There is a hint of wonders to come: the arrival of computers, and the ease of travel and communication. On an allegorical level, Faber himself embodies this human potential.

The title, *Homo Faber*, is a play on words that could be seen to bear multiple meanings. The phrase itself is Latin, and means "Man the Maker", signifying man's potential for shaping the future. The second meaning is simply the direct identification of the protagonist: Homo Faber; or, Faber, the man, who is prototypically male, yet whose experience and condition is no greater than that of any ordinary man. I see a third meaning, which is that of a taxonomic designation - Homo Faber, as contrasted with Homo Sapiens. If Homo Sapiens is the wise man, then Homo Faber is the species which has substituted its wisdom for deed, and acts without concern for the repercussions.

These themes stand quite aside from the central story of the novel, and yet are woven subtly throughout. There is much here for the reader to grapple with. Unfortunately to say any more would be to spoil the story - the gradual revelation of its enormity, and the questions around the complicity of the characters represent the greatest pleasure this book has to offer.

"Homo faber suae quisque fortunae"? To what extent does this hold true for the three central characters? I notice now that there may be a fourth implication of the title, which is one of mocking irony.

Anne says

oh my god I am so glad to be done with this tortuous book. I appreciate the other reviewers who point out the reasons for this story's existence. It is very well-written and I suppose it serves to remind us not to live like robots, to have feelings. Fortunately I don't live like a robot and I already have many feelings, thank you very much, so for me reading this was like spending hours and hours with a depressed and depressing very sad old man who is telling me all his regrets without even really having learned anything from them. Very painful, dreary.

BlackOxford says

A Swiss Heart of Darkness

An engineer with an engineering outlook on life, the eponymous Homo (Walter) Faber believes in the randomness of existence. But he fails to recognise that such randomness is equivalent to a kind of cosmic spontaneity. And that such spontaneity implies some sort of spirit. He insists on the absolute disjunction between spirit and matter. The former is emotional, sentimental and soft. The latter is masculine and what

constitutes reality, what can be measured, assembled and disassembled, and kicked with one's foot. *"Technology instead of mysticism,"* is how he puts it.

That there should be any sort of continuity between physical matter and emotional spirit is not a consideration for Walter. Art bores him; ancient ruins are merely old. Consequently, neither does he comprehend the possibility of love. If strictly random materiality is all that exists, casual affection can be a fact, but certainly not self-less love. A silent declaration sums him up:

> "Caresses in the evening, yes, but I can't stand caresses in the morning, and frankly more than three or four days with one woman has always been for me the beginning of dissimulation, no man can stand feelings in the morning. I'd rather wash dishes!"

Homo Faber, true to his name, is above all practical, a maker, a fixer, at least in those aspects of life he regards as real. He can repair things like automobiles, turbines, and electric shavers. He knows the theories of cybernetics, plumbing, and electricity. He knows his way around the engine room of a ship.

But Walter is aesthetically and emotionally dead to most of the world around him. While a companion quietly appreciates a tropical sunset, Walter's only thought is sarcastic: *"Herbert stood there, still experiencing."* And he can neither commit to, nor abandon his married girlfriend. He can't decide what relationship he wants with a young girl who is, unknown to them both, his daughter. He even dithers repeatedly about where he intends to go and why.

Walter records everything from Mayan ruins to the harbour of New York with the latest high-tech cameras, but he doesn't know why, and he has no use for the results. He has had exactly one one friend in his life, whom he hasn't seen in 20 years. And the daughter he knew nothing about had been raised by this one friend, who had married her mother. The friend is found, by a series of improbable coincidences, dead by suicide in a remote Central American jungle. Equally improbably, Walter encounters the daughter on his voyage home to Europe.

Faber‘s monadic existence he finds not in the least unpleasant. He has freedom - to travel, to think, to meet others - that any sort of close relationship would impede. But the encounter with his daughter disturbs his equilibrium. Although only fifty, he feels suddenly old, tired, irrelevant in her presence. But the discovery that she is quite possibly his daughter is understandably even more de-stabilising. The order of his existence is torn apart, its logic made nonsensical.

The possibility that Walter has had sex with his daughter is the ultimate dislocation. The mother's question is precisely the reader's: *"How far did you go with the child?"* Randomness must be accompanied by something of the spirit and not a small degree of love for his life to retain any coherence whatsoever.

Frisch has more than a touch of Patricia Highsmith: of Studebaker and Nash automobiles, transatlantic sea voyages, post-war Mediterranean exoticism, as well as of her sexual ambiguity, incipient incest and public homosexuality. He has produced a period piece to rival even hers.

Hadrian says

A novel of slowing down and being left behind by the world and technology, and the imprisonment that that

world might bring.

Bern says

Lisede Almancadan okudu?um bir kitapt?. Doksanlar?n hemen ba??nda Ankara'da tutucu say?labilecek bir okul ortam?nda bu kitab? nas?l okudu?umuza hala inanam?yorum, ama Alman hocalar?m?z sa? olsunlar Almancadan bihaber di?er hocalar? atlat?p bize Zweig'?, Siegried Lenz'i, Dürrenmatt'? okuttular (Alman Lisesi'nde de okutulmu? zaman?nda, demek ki gizli bir ittifak varm?? aralar?nda :)). Vakti zaman?nda "Çarp?k Sevda" diye yan?lt?c? bir ba?l?kla yay?nlanm??t? ve Almancas? yeterli olmayanlar bu versiyon sayesinde s?nav? geçebilmi?lerdi. ?imdi 60'l? y?llardan kalma bir çeviri ile Sezer Duru'nun yetkin çevirisiyle ve k?rk ya? olgunlu?uyla tekrar okudum. Gelelim kitaba, kadere inanmayan-ya?ad??? her ?eyi matematiksel bir rastlant?ya ba?layan Walter Fber (ki eski, belki de hayat?n?n ilk ve son a?k? Hanna taraf?ndan "Homo Faber", yani teknik insan olarak adland?r?l?yor) için inanmad??? kader a?lar?n? örüyor. 21 sene evvel ba?lant?s?n? kaybetti?i (bence kaybetmek istedi?i) arkada?? Joachim'in karde?i ile uçakta yan yana geliyor ve sonras?nda Joachim'in naa??n? bizzat buluyor. Sonras?nda ise tüm planlar?n? aniden de?i?tirip Amerika'dan Fransa'ya uçak yerine gemi ile gitmeye karar veriyor ve Sabeth ile kar??la??yor. Daha fazla detay vermeyeyim, okumak isteyenlerin tad?n? kaç?rmayay?m. Kitab?n "Voyager" bir film uyarlamas? da var, Sam Sheppard Faber rolünde. Onu da en k?sa zamanda izleyece?im. kitap hakk?ndaki bir söyle?i de ?u adreste https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wybM0....

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jesse says

i truly hate this book! i had to read it in class once and create a frikking presentation. my mood drops several degrees when only *thinking* about this crappy book!

HIGHLY **NOT** RECOMMENDED
