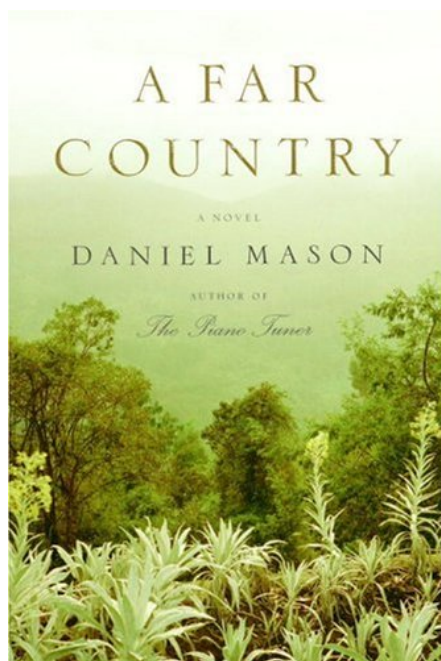




A Far Country

Daniel Mason

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From the bestselling author of *The Piano Tuner*, a stunning novel about a young girl's journey through a vast, unnamed country in search of her brother.

Fourteen-year-old Isabel was born in a remote village with the gift and curse of "seeing farther." When drought and war grip the backlands, her brother Isaias joins a great exodus to a teeming city in the south. Soon Isabel must follow, forsaking the only home she's ever known, her sole consolation the thought of being with her brother again.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

A Far Country Details

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From Reader Review A Far Country for online ebook

Cherie says

It took me two times to get all of the way through this book. It was not because it was badly done, or not an interesting story. Unfortunately, I am a moody reader, and the first time, I was just not in the mood to listen after I downloaded it and started listening, and it languished in my iPod until it expired and disappeared from my bookshelf back to library. Then I forgot about it.

The first time I downloaded it, I was drawn to the picture on the cover and the title of the book. That "something" was still there and it called to me again the second time I found it in the available books listing on Overdrive. As I started listening, it seemed soooo familiar. The names in the story, the lady's voice that was narrating, but I was not completely sure, until I got to a part in the story that I *knew* that I had heard before. It had not been a nice thing, and I instantly recalled the moment of horror again.

There parts in this book that are hard to accept that things like it really do happen, but I am not naive enough any more not to believe them. I know that they must be true. I know that they have happened. It makes me sad and angry, but it it does not make them go away.

On the surface of the story, this book is about a young girl waiting for her brother to come home from the city. The girl, Isabel, idolizes her older brother, Isaias. The story is told from her point of view from the time she was about four years old, when the story started.

I do not know where the story actually takes place. Somewhere that there is sugar cane grown and constant drought and people leaving home and moving to a very large city and back again, when and if possible. It is a story of hardship, constant hunger, pain, poverty and love. Isabel's love for her brother is the driving factor in everything that happens to her and where she goes and what she does to find him.

The story is beautifully written, but dragged at times and felt like it just went on too long. Then, it was over. It was not the ending I expected, but the abrupt stop was very jaring after going on for so long. It was a glimpse into a kind of poverty and powerless existance that I have never read about before and I was awed by the strength and endurance we humans can face up to in our environment, no matter what life throws at us. As long as there is love, we can go on.

It is a haunting story, and scenes still come back to me, weeks after I finished listening to it. The narrator was Kate Reading. Her voice was wonderful and she read beautifully.

June Ahern says

My first time read of author Daniel Mason. A Far Country is a beautifully written story about Isabel, a young South American girl, and told in her perspective. The words are like the trickling of a river moving slowly down its path toward the pull of the ocean.

The images Mason creates are colorful and poignant as a country farming family and community undergo the stark reality of the modern and cruel overtaking of their land held for hundreds of years. It is in a Latin America country although the location is not disclosed. Having been in Brazil, I imaged that country.

Isaias, Isabel's brother leaves for the "big city" for a better chance in life. He is a musician. Many of the

country people have left their homes that promise of a better life for in the country, people are starving and being killed by the government and big money take-overs.

I didn't like the ugly descriptions of the killing of people and the torture of animals but it is an ugly reality most of us don't know or choose not to know about - happening now in South and Central America.

The story is not only well-crafted with words to inspire the imagination but riveting in its intensity of Isabel's journey to the Big City. She, at 15 years of age and along with her family, is starving and her parents decide to send her to a cousin and Isaias. A Far Country in reflection is a coming of age and unfortunately, for me, soon after Isabel gets to the city the story becomes sluggish, not moving but repeating too much her emotional attachment and longing to be with her brother. I admit, I got bored and impatient. If not having seen the poverty and the struggle of those poor in Brazil, I might have put the book down, but I had to know what happened to Isaias when he got to the city. Isabel searches for him while totting around her cousin's baby.

There is NO DOUBT that this author is an excellent writer to create images. Read this book when you can linger over the words for they are creations of an art piece in many ways.

Simonew says

In a way this book reminded me of "The High Mountains of Portugal" BUT I liked this book so much more !

Shane says

I was disappointed in this novel from an obviously very accomplished writer. It read more like a year in the life of the protagonist, Isabel, with a series of incidents, rather than a story that builds towards a climax.

Isabel, a 14-year old girl, has a spiritual and symbiotic bond with her older brother Isaias, who has left their drought-ridden village to make it in the big city "down south" in this unnamed South American country that could be anything from Brazil to Peru to Argentina. Isabel follows in the path of her brother, undertaking a perilous journey on a flatbed that nearly kills her, partly to be reunited with him, and partly to escape being dependant on her parents who are eking out a living on the farm. She finds employment in the city slum caring for a cousin's baby during the week and waving flags for a political candidate on weekends. Her quest for Isaias takes her into some dangerous situations but the imagined presence of her brother, who seems to be always around her, steers her out of trouble. The revelation in the end is anti-climactic, but the message, that out perceived greatness is not inherent and only comes from those who confer it upon us, is clear. The other inevitability: the drift from village to city, where the villagers end up in dead-end jobs, and that this cycle is perpetuated with every batch of new entrants, is more than clear too.

The writing is beautiful and this redeems the book somewhat, but the conflicts come in a series of little bumps which quickly resolve themselves and do not build upon each other. More could have been done with Isabel's disastrous outing to the discotheque in the city, or when she lost baby Hugo on the bus. The author conjures the impression that everyone is waiting for something to happen, like Isabel waiting for Isaias to show up; alas, as a reader, I too was waiting but nothing happened for me to say "ah, ha!" in the end.

I liked the descriptions of village and city and they come across as if the writer spent considerable time in these locales and immersed himself in the life there.

I think more could have been done with this book given the writer's gift for language, description and insight into character.

Carl R. says

I knew Daniel Mason from his super debut novel *The Piano Tuner*. And I felt an unjustified kinship with him on the basis that he was a classmate of a close friend's daughter in medical school at UCSF. Mason is another one of those medical literary folks. It seems unfair for one person to be so gifted both in both the arts and the sciences. But leave that be. I was eager to get to this second effort and happy when a relative finished it while visiting from out of town and left it with me. As so often happens with sophomore efforts, despite the great notices on the book jacket, I was rather disappointed.

Like *The Piano Tuner*, *A Far Country* is about a journey. This one by an untutored young girl rather than by a craftsman on a job. Although the fourteen-year-old's journey cannot compare in distance to the one from England to Myanmar, it's relatively just as far from Isabel's backwoods village to the big city. She goes there to escape drought-induced impending starvation and to search for her brother, who has apparently fed himself to the burgeoning urban monster. She stays with a cousin, whose baby she cares for while the cousin works, and hopes to see Isaias somewhere. The country and city of *A Far Country* are as generic as the title. It could be any third world place where people live on the edge of starvation, are oppressed by governments and landowners. I kept thinking of Africa, but there's the name Isabel, not to mention the cover illustration with its caucasian-looking hair. So maybe we're in South America. Mostly, though, it doesn't matter. This is a journey into deprivation, into a world where prosperity is measured in coffee spoons. And there are many wonderful passages. My favorite is a Steinbeck-like recitation of the movements of the poor of the city. Mason evokes *The Grapes Of Wrath* as he describes how they prostrate themselves to the privileged to put food on their own tables. However, the central weakness of the book haunts the narrative so pervasively that it is hard to properly appreciate the virtues. The problem is Isabel's passivity. She does not undertake her journey voluntarily. Her parents send her away because they can't afford to feed her. She's somewhat sad about that, but does not rebel. She simply accepts her circumstances and thinks vaguely of the possibility that she'll find her brother. Once there, she does as she's told and hopes Isais will show up. A number of events and people cross her path, but she reacts little. When a friend finally encourages her to seek real employment and she's humiliated and rejected by a rich woman, Mason describes her as boiling with anger. However, she never acts on the fury, and any hope the reader has of Isabel finally initiating some action are soon dashed. I found the ending very strong and wish the rest of the book had lived up to it. As it stands, Isabel is such a weak heroine that her actions at the end aren't quite credible. Unfortunate. Hope number three turns out better. There will be a third, I'm confident. He's too good to quit and fall back on surgery.

Grandpa Joe says

This book was an off-the-cuff impulse purchase - except that I was at a library and not at a store. I knew nothing about either Daniel Mason or the book, except for a brief blurb on the back and the information that Mason wrote the "bestselling" *The Piano Tuner* which I haven't read. I chose this book (audio version) because it wasn't too long (7 CD's) and I needed something to listen to as I drove around in my car.

The book was a pleasant surprise. Mason has an interesting, poignant writing style. I was quickly drawn into

the story which features a young girl, Isabel, who grows into a young woman and the life of hardship and near poverty of she and her family sometimes experience as they live off what is sometimes rain-starved land, growing and harvesting cane.

As a teenager, Isabel is forced to abandon her family's farm and begin life in the big city, both to avoid starvation and to search for her older brother with whom she had been very close who had left for the city years earlier. There is a touch, but only a touch, of the supernatural in this story is Isabel is blessed (or cursed) with the ability to "see farther." I was quickly drawn into this story, its characters, and the plot. Nearly everyone in this story is economically down and out, some more than others. Isabel encounters only one truly wealthy person of note, and this rich lady makes a very poor impression.

Overall, this is an intriguing story.

Adriana says

After having read Daniel Mason's first novel, *The Piano Tuner*, I eagerly anticipated the release of his second book. However, I was sadly disappointed in it. *A Far Country* is written with the same beautiful, fluid, lyrical prose that made *The Piano Tuner* so attractive to me, but in this novel, the language doesn't seem to serve as a vehicle for an engaging story - rather, it is the mask which hides the fact that there is not much of a story at all.

A Far Country is about a teenage girl named Isabel, who lives in the drought-ravaged interior an unnamed Central or South American country. Isabel is prone to visions of some sort, and when her brother goes off to the distant city to make money, she goes in search of him - dreaming of his whereabouts. It sounds like it could be an interesting story, but the truth is that nothing much happens. Isabel arrives at her cousin's home in the slums on the outskirts of the city, and she just remains there, taking care of her cousin's baby, and walking around town. She does very little proactive searching, which in my mind would make the novel much more interesting. Mason writes Isabel with great psychological depth, but this can only carry him so far without a plot, and all the exploration of her psyche becomes a little ponderous after a while.

I am incredibly sad not to give rave reviews to this novel, since I love Mason for *The Piano Tuner*, but other than his intoxicating prose style, there is little to recommend.

Jeslyn says

Excellent second outing - I've yet to read anything I wasn't completely engrossed in from this author. Written from the perspective of a young South American girl, Mason crafts a perspective that is believable, poignant, and riveting in carrying the reader through Isabel's odyssey of seeking her brother Isaias, who has left the destitution of their agricultural life for greater promise in the city.

Interestingly, one of the most consistent criticisms this novel received was that the location was left a mystery to the reader. I don't understand why this was such a sticking point for the disgruntled; in fact, given the poverty and transience of the people of the backlands, it seemed entirely appropriate that the locations were as anonymous as the people. Mason's writing seems to urge the reader to ponder thoughts, actions, experiences, and perhaps to let go of the finite and specific for a bit.

Still one of my favorite modern fiction writers.

Alumine Andrew says

I've been waiting for Mason to write another book after reading *The Piano Tuner* a few years ago. I was so pleased when I found his second novel.

It couldn't be further removed from his first work which was set in Burma. *A Far Country* is set in...a far country! We are not told specifically where it is but to me it feels like a country in South America, Brazil or maybe Peru.

It doesn't really matter because of the way Mason describes it and makes us feel like we've been there, that we recognise the landscape. I found this really clever and caught me off guard a little as the story felt familiar whistle being totally new.

Basically it's the story of a struggling family who live in the countryside, far away from the big city. The way out of poverty for many is to send their young people to live and work in the city and send home the money they earn. This migration of youth in turn makes the rural areas poorer as there is no new generation coming though to work the farms.

One young man goes to the city and his sister who is left behind is devastated by the loss so decides to go and find her brother. We journey with her to the city and discover it through her overwhelming experiences. The size and noise, the shattered dreams once she figures out cities are not rich and not everyone works and the realisation she has no way of finding her brother.

This is a beautifully written book, worth reading, as is Mason's first book *The Piano Tuner* (which he wrote while still a student at University).

Robert Ditterich says

A tender tale about the loss of culture and ultimately the loss of hope for isolated rural communities and the individuals who escape them in an unidentified south american country. The persistence of drought which causes an exodus into slum fringes of a city is the prime force in the challenges that face the characters. It is poignant and delicately written. The story is driven more by character than by plot.

Smriti Brar says

A poignant tale about a girl's journey to find her brother. Very descriptive with heart wrenching details in places. A sensitive narration.

Jennie says

I listened to this book and I felt as though the narrator started off by leaning into you and telling you a secret. That "secret voice" continued throughout the ENTIRE book, which was a bit annoying. I am learning that if this happens again, I may just put down the book altogether and read it personally, instead of listening to it. As far as the book, it was okay. It did not really have any major highs and lows for me. I was hoping that they would expand on Isabell's "powers" a little more, but after the prayers to do away with them, that was about all you got.

Laura Nale says

I am not even sure what to say about this book other than thank goodness I am done. This whole book is about Isabel searching for her brother and when she finally finds him....nothing that's it...she finds him. Nothing more...BORING!

Leroy Seat says

This was a well written book in many ways, but I enjoyed the first half of it more than the second half, for the story didn't seem to progress much and the book just seem to stop rather than come to a satisfying end. I liked the descriptive writing, and I got a good impression of Isabelle, the central character, and the struggle she went through. But, still, I was disappointed that there was not more of a story.

I thought this was an interesting statement of Isabelle's thoughts: "She had never seen anyone as fat as Junior. At home, fat men were landowners or lenders and to be avoided. There is no fat man who didn't make another man thin, her uncle used to say" (1424-25).

Ink Drinker says

3.25 At other times in my life, I would not have persevered to complete this novel. However, I'm devouring the written word in early 2018 and the page count was tolerable. Others may have been disappointed with this novel because it serves as narrative for the sake of narrative. There is no plot and its brilliance is (only) in the portrayal of the life for those sustenance farming in harsh desert terrain migrating to the urban wasteland of a cronyist industrialism. Cronyism, lack of rule of law, no respect for individuals and no true property rights makes life impossible for the farmers and so we inhabit the mind and body of a young girl who observes...and we see and think completely as she does. Isabel doesn't display growth per se, she is more fixed at a certain place in her self and in the midst of changing times.

Victoria says

I don't really know where this book came from. I never bought it—and I always remember the books I buy.. I'm convinced it just appeared one day on my bookshelf. So I was curious and decided to read it on a whim.

I haven't read Daniel Mason's The Piano Tuner, advertisements for which are plastered all over this book. I had no expectations for this book, but the premise sounded somewhat interesting.

"A Far Country" is the story of a Isabel, a young girl living in an unknown South American country, and her search for her long lost brother Isais. Mason is a gifted writer and he's able to create a vivid world for his characters to live in. In short, reading "A Far Country" is very much a sensory experience.

But that's about it. This is one of those books that starts off at point A and doesn't even make it to point B, let alone C. I could pretty much summarize this entire book in two words: Stuff happens. Mason gives Isabel some sort of supernatural inclination, but it doesn't manifest in anything other some briefly mentioned dreams of her brother. And I found the climax of the book to be terribly...anticlimactic.

It's a very prettily written book. It's an easy read too. But I never felt compelled, or connected with many of the characters. Isabel's well fleshed out, I just don't find her story terribly...interesting. I'm not even sure I'll remember most of what happened in the book in a year from now. I was hovering between a 2 and 3, because I didn't dislike the book, but nothing made me love it or feel like I want to read it again.

Ron Charles says

Daniel Mason's evocative first novel, *The Piano Tuner*, published in 2002 when he was still a medical student at the University of California, told the story of a musician traveling into the Burmese jungle to find a mysterious military officer. His new novel, *A Far Country*, is another story of searching for someone in a distant place, but this time the exotic locale is never named, the theme is reduced to numbing clarity, and the characters are meant to represent millions of people in similar circumstances.

The far country of the title is a desperately poor Catholic nation, where wealthy landowners murder squatters who have nowhere else to go and unrelenting drought pushes peasant farmers to eat insects. Mason's heroine is a shy, clairvoyant 14-year-old girl named Isabel. "Her body isn't closed," Mason tells us, which means "there was less of a barrier between this world and the other one." If you have a low tolerance for magical realism, don't worry: It quickly fades away here in favor of a flatter, rather static lament about the plight of The Poor (wherever they may be) at the hands of The Rich (you know who you are).

Isabel's father works in the sugarcane fields, but the older brother she idolizes dreams of making his living as a musician in the capital, a place of almost mythical promise: "In the city, families put their maid's children through school, babies are bigger. In the city, the poor are rich, minimum-wagers are kings. The men don't cheat you in the city, they aren't powerless, they don't drown themselves in drink, they don't hit. The women don't get old before their time. In the city, if you are thirsty there are fountains." (Spoiler alert for readers who have never been to a city: These peasants have a somewhat rosy impression of it.)

After several crippling seasons of drought, Isabel's musical brother defies their father and strikes out for this land of opportunity. During infrequent phone calls -- taken at the town's only telephone -- he reports that he's doing well. He even sends back some money. And so when her parents finally run out of hummingbird meat and cactus roots, they send Isabel on a perilous bus ride to live with a cousin in the vast and ghastly Settlement that has developed around the city.

While her cousin works as a maid during the week, Isabel takes care of her baby, watches street crimes and wanders around looking for her brother. "Mostly," though, "she lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, watching the room fill with light and later with darkness." For about 200 pages. Oh, there are moments of potential plot development that may fool you into reading on -- a job as a campaign worker, a trip to the Department of Missing Persons, a budding romance with a photographer -- but they're all cheats; they never lead anywhere. Despite many passages of beautiful writing, the novel suffers from an aimless plot, characters almost as abstract as the setting, and languid moralizing about the tragedy of poverty.

Fans of The Piano Tuner, take note: This new novel strikes the same chord over and over again.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

Linda says

Lots of pretty words, not much story. I couldn't wait to move on to something else.

Kris Kennett says

A young girl's search for her brother as rural people move to the city. Fictitious country. Not particularly up lifting.

Julie Christine says

A quiet but fierce novel. Set in Brazil (it's important to me to know WHERE I am as I read- I'm geographically-anal so I put together various clues- a severe drought in NE Brazil in the early 1980s, sugar cane industry, zebu cows, a great southern city, the Amazon. Then I read two 2002 interviews with Mason where he stated he was working on a novel set in Brazil...) Mason offer the mystical, mythology, a sense of fable- all swirling like feathery clouds through the stony reality of poverty, famine, drought, civil unrest, racism, slums and violence. Isabel leaves the protection of her family circle in a village stricken by drought and famine in the country's north to seek her beloved older brother, Isaías. Isaías ran off to find his fortune as a musician in the country's fabled city of gold and the family fears what has become of him.

Most of the book follows Isabel's quest to find her brother from her journey south to her life in the city, where she shares a one room flat in the projects with her cousin and minds the cousin's baby. The baby becomes her companion during her increasingly bold circuits through her neighborhood and eventually into the city in search of her cherished soulmate and kin. Isabel is barely a teen but carries the depressed and resigned soul of someone decades her elder. Her wanderings seem aimless and the plot vague, but it comes together with a rush of breath and a bittersweet resolution.

Mason's writing is beautiful, lyrical, full of vision, impression. This nearly gets in the way of plot development, but he is still a joy to read.
