



Only Forward

Michael Marshall Smith

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Michael Marshall Smith's surreal, groundbreaking, and award-winning debut which resonates with wild humour interlaced with dark recollections of an emotional minefield. Now part of the Voyager Classics collection.

Stark is the hero the future is waiting for – God help it. He's smart, alarmingly cool, and has immaculate taste in shirts. He's a troubleshooter in the City, a lawless sprawl of Neighbourhoods which covers the country from coast to coast. Each is totally geared to the desires of those who live in it, from can-do corporate types, through deranged criminals, to people who just don't like loud noises.

Stark accepts a job from Zenda Renn, the human face of the Action Centre – where people who have to be doing something all the time hang out. Someone's missing. Zenda needs him found, and soon.

In a world where the past and future, reality and dreams meet and have a fist fight, Stark is the only man who can make a difference. Time's running out and there's no going back. Only Forward.

Only Forward Details

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Author : Michael Marshall Smith

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From Reader Review Only Forward for online ebook

??? 2.? says

★★★★½

This shit is bananas.

RTC one day, maybe.

Nikki says

Oh -- my -- god. When I started reading this book I expected it to keep up the fairly light tone of the early chapters. Then it fucked with my heart bad. Don't believe reviews saying it makes no sense: it makes perfect sense, in the end, as long as you stop holding onto normal logic and start applying some dream logic. The narrator is unreliable, yeah, and he has attitude, and he knows he's telling a story, so there are bits that some people find irritating, like the way he keeps saying he'll tell us more about [whatever] later, if it's relevant. And I can understand that, but for me it's all part of who the narrator is.

I love the world built up here. The different neighbourhoods, the cats, the whys and wherefores of The City. I love the writing, because so much of it is painfully on the nose about trauma, about the demons we're capable of dreaming up. I love all of this more than I love the characters, really: I love it for what it has to say about trauma, about the way we think.

It's hard to talk about it without any spoilers, really. All I can say is that it comes together in the end, and you understand things in a heartbreaking rush, and it really is good. Weird, yes. But very good.

Bill says

This is probably going to be the worst review I've written.

There is so much to say about this novel, but I can't really tell you anything without spoiling it.

So, where to start?

How about the story? Well, the less you know, the better. Suffice it to say, our hero's travels take on some strange turns.

This is the second book I've read by Smith. His thriller Straw Men, under the name Michael Smith, was quite good, but the story wasn't one I wanted to keep following for two more novels.

Only Forward was enough to convince me that I have to read everything else by this guy.

Not only was the story outstanding, but this is some of the finest writing you will come across. There were a couple of times he made me laugh out loud, but many more times when he made me marvel at his poignant observances on the human condition.

The only thing that irked me was that there were a couple of things that I would have liked explained further, like Cat Neighbourhood, for instance. But maybe he meant to leave that to the imagination.

I need to make this a short review, otherwise I'll start ranting and raving and giving too much away.

Read Only Forward. It's only 300+ pages, an easy read, and it will take you on a mind trip.

Enjoy the ride.

Vit Babenco says

Michael Marshall Smith combines dystopia, hardboiled mystery and magic realism but he is always staying on the mocking side of things so the black humour fountains up.

The dystopian world is sinister and kitschy:

“There's no good or bad time to get on a Red mono. They don't have hours where you do certain things, or days even. You just pay your money and take your chances. Actually, by Red standards the carriage I boarded was fairly civilised. True, there was both vomit and a human turd on the seat next to mine, but I've seen worse. The prostitutes were mainly too stoned to be doing serious business, the fight down the end was over very quickly, and there were never more than two dead bodies in the carriage at any one time.”

The private eye is tougher than a crowd of cartoon superheroes:

“Every face says something: the deal with mine is that though you might not like what it's saying you have to admire the strength of its convictions.”

And his dreams come true:

“I'm where I am now because when I was young I wanted more. I wanted to live in a film. I looked, and I found. Now I live in that film, and here the bad guys are everyone who isn't you and if they die you don't have to give a damn.”

And magic realism turns into a bad psychedelic trip:

“When I turned they all stepped out and doubled up with laughter, pointing at me. Dismayed, I turned back to the King, but he was laughing too. I whirled back to face the crowd again and they were still pointing and laughing, and then suddenly they were all chanting ‘We can see your bottom, we can see your bottom,’ and I looked down to see I was naked. I put my hands in front of me and turned once more to the King. He was still laughing, laughing harder and harder, his upper body whipping up and down so fast his head was a blur.”

It grotesquely resembles Alice in Wonderland, which finally transforms into Horrorland and then everything turns very serious...

There is no end of imaginary worlds but there is the only one real world.

Evans Light says

100 pages - DNF. No rating.

Despite glowing reviews and enthusiastic recommendations, this book ultimately didn't pull me along. Relentlessly imaginative, I found it was the lack of forward narrative momentum that ultimately put me off, ironically enough. The tone was lighthearted without being outright funny, but the characters didn't engage. I

skimmed the remainder of the book and didn't see anything to pull me back in.

I think that fans of David Wong's *Futuristic Violence* and *Fancy Suits* would find much here to enjoy.

Ryandake says

i want to take a pair of scissors to this book.

not to make confetti, or compost, of it, but to rearrange it.

the author is introducing *quite central* new characters on page 320, fer chrissakes! the last 15 or so pages of the book are a firehose of infodump (well-written infodump, but still), the streams of which tie the book together.

but how much better it could have been if those streams were introduced earlier as rills... it would have ameliorated the worst problems of the beginning, and made the end vastly more emotionally intense.

ok wait. begin at the beginning.

our protag, Stark, is a rather noir-ish, trash-talking, gun-waving tracker of lost people and other things. he gets a call from Zenda, a woman with whom he's had some past, and she propels him on the assignment that is the central plot of this novel. mostly. sort of.

Stark's world is not our world--it's a sort of reified version of contemporary digital villages. people cluster together by affinities, allowing cross-pollination to varying degrees. this does give the book some gleeful energy, but ultimately does not seem meaningful to the central dilemmas of the characters. it's window-dressing; really good window-dressing sometimes, but not an integral part of the writing.

anyway. it's a mystery, for a while; a thriller, for a while; a metaphysical/psychological puzzle, for a while; and for 15 or so pages at the end, an attempt at being a tear-jerker. a kind of frankenstein of a book, in a way--the parts don't always seem to fit.

but i still want to rearrange it into cohesion.

it's not a bad read, but it can be a frustration to read a decently-written book and know that it could have been vastly better with some editorial attention. Smith needed a Gordon Lish, at least as an advisor.

Kevin Kelsey says

Conceptually it's brilliant, but with terrible execution and poor writing.

95% of it is "Ohh look at x isn't it WEIRD?! Actually, never mind, how about y, isn't y WEIRD?! Well, if you think y is weird, you're really going to go wild for z! It's the weirdest of them all!" Followed by completely ignoring x, y and z, and throwing in a straightforward explanation of what has actually been going on the whole time.

I really, really liked the explanation, but the book forgot to tell a compelling story until the last 20 pages or so. I would LOVE this book if someone took the main premise and rewrote it in a way that was compelling.

Alexis Hall says

Brought to your courtesy of Reading Project 2015.

I love this, I deeply love it, largely because of a single quote which I shall now transcribe:

How many times have you tried to talk to someone about something that matters to you, tried to get them to see it the way you do? And how many of those times have ended with you feeling bitter, resenting them for making you feel like your pain doesn't have any substance after all?

Like when you've split up with someone, and you try to communicate the way you feel, because you need to say the words, need to feel that somebody understands just how pissed off and frightened you feel. The problem is, they never do. "Plenty more fish in the sea," they'll say, or "You're better off without them," or "Do you want some of these potato chips?" They never really understand, because they haven't been there, every day, every hour. They don't know the way things have been, the way that it's made you, the way it has structured your world. They'll never realise that someone who makes you feel bad may be the person you need most in the world. They don't understand the history, the background, don't know the pillars of memory that hold you up. Ultimately, they don't know you well enough, and they never can. Everyone's alone in their world, because everybody's life is different. You can send people letters, and show them photos, but they can never come to visit where you live.

Unless you love them. And then they can burn it down.

So, yes, deeply love but not much actual memory of ... y'know ... what the book is about or what happens in it.

I seem to remember the narrator actively lies which is a new level of unreliability.

Mind-twisty and intriguing.

Skip says

Weird. Really. Hard to classify too. The first half of the book follows Stark, who is hired to find an important person, who is believed to have been kidnapped. He lives in an interesting alternative world, with many oddball friends and neighborhoods, my favorite of which is the Cat Neighborhood. About halfway through, everything changes as we are abruptly transitioned into a dreamworld, with little upfront explanation. As the explanation unfolds bit by bit, we long for a cohesive end. There is an ending, but it was unsatisfying as we learned how Stark became who he is. Perhaps most frustrating, at least to me, was the introduction of central

and pivotal characters in the last 20-25 pages.

Daniel Roy says

What a perplexing book. On the one hand, I certainly have never read anything quite like it; but then there are tons of aspects of the book that are irritating and unsatisfying, making the novel fall well short of brilliance.

The novel starts as an Adams-esque science fictional satire, complete with home appliances with snappy personalities. My suspension of disbelief wrestled with the setting for a while, until I accepted that it was satirical and surreal, and thus should not be expected to make much sense. I wouldn't have thought much of this book if that was all there was to it; but I stuck with it because some reviews mentioned that the story went somewhere unexpected. And boy, did it ever.

The second part of the novel starts to build a much-needed sense of gravitas, and takes a turn for the psychological. There are parts of it that qualify as horror, inasmuch as there is plenty of graphical descriptions of bodily fluids; but besides a frightening nightmare chase, not much of the horror elements resonated much with me.

The setting, though, became compelling and exciting. Smith captures the disjointed emotional landscape of dreams with brio. I tend to read in bed, and there were many moments where I had to perform a reality check to make sure the surreal, liquid prose wasn't the result of having fallen asleep and dreaming that I'm reading a book.

Ultimately, though, even the brilliance of this sequence isn't enough to rescue a scattered plot. The prose is sometimes flat, sometimes brilliant, but none of the characters really transcend hard-boiled stock. The novel feels as if Mr. Smith was carrying three book outlines down the stairs, tripped, and picked up the pages again. The story builds to an emotional catharsis near the end, but it does so by dumping background information on the reader in the last twenty-five pages of the novel.

All in all, a perplexing book. Quite unique, but not all for the right reasons.

Carol. says

"I made a mental note to tell the next Street Engineer I met that they were doing a damn fine job. Sort of an embarrassing thing to think, but I knew it was safe; I always lose my mental notes."

Glad I'm not the only one. I had some intelligent things to say about *Only Forward*, but I can't find my mental sticky notes. I do know that I found the beginning undeniably clever and almost unputdownable. My reading updates show chuckling and snerking through the first hundred pages.

"Working out what that might be was going to be important, and I put a memo in my mental file to have a crack at it when I could be bothered. My mental memos are different from my mental notes: I always do something about them eventually, and they're typed so I can read what they say."

And then suddenly my updates stopped, because, damn, that shit started to get real, going from world-weary, cynical humor to semi-thriller to something deeper and more devastating.

"I could defend myself, say it isn't easy... but I won't, because that's not the point. The point is too deep, too personal and too small to explain. The point is not for spectators. Nothing that's important, really important, looks impressive, because it only means something to the person that does it. Staying alive, for example, not dying: it looks so easy, but sometimes it's almost too difficult to be borne."

A really good book that is unlike most things I've read, but perhaps similar in tone and scope to *The Gone-Away World*, *Cursed* or *Pandemonium*. Probably some people might feel there is a similarity with Vonnegut, but it's been a very long time since I read him, and I found Stark to be far more accessible than any of Vonnegut's characters. All take a skewed view of the world, people sort of making connections and an emotional undercurrent to make something quite interesting. First published in 1994, it feels amazingly current in 2017. Note: also an award winner, with the British Fantasy Award in 1995 and the Philip K. Dick award in 2000.

Set in a Britain of the future, it is one we can almost recognize, where cities have become something like gated communities known as Neighborhoods, where people of a kind can band together and really support what they believe in. Some of these cities make perfect sense, such as Idyll, **"an old Neighborhood, where people come and go quietly and peacefully. They don't care about anyone else, and they have no argument with anyone. They just want to be left alone to be kind and gentle to each other. I know that sounds kind of weird, but it works for them."** Some are just futuristically weird, like Color, where the narrator, Stark lives. Color has color rules, including a strict after-dark black jacket code.

Someone who is clearly quite important to Stark, although it isn't exactly clear how or why, asks him for a favor, to find someone who has gone missing from the Type A Neighborhood. It is unprecedented, and while Stark wonders "which kind of job this might be," it seems straightforward so he agrees.

Much of the story is like that; Smith tells us what we need to know, but we know Stark is holding things back. And that's fine. He's wit is as dry as pixie dust, but it's as funny as hell. For instance, take his description of trying to answer the phone:

"It was a long and arduous journey, full of trials, setbacks and heroic derring-do on my part. I was almost there, for example, when I ran out of cigarettes, and had to go back to fetch another packet."

Then there's catching up with an old friend:

"We chewed the rag for a while. I recapped the last few months, mentioned a couple of mutual acquaintances I'd run into. Ji told me his land had expanded another half mile to the north, which explained his bars continued existence, recounted a couple of especially horrific successes and used the word 'fuck' just over 400 times."

At his business meeting:

"'Uh-huh,' I said, reeling under the impact of so much bad film dialogue. 'So put a trace on him. '"

The humor eventually fades somewhat, leaving a different, more emotionally sincere tone in its wake. It ended up having more of an emotional impact than I expected, particularly for a book that had me giggling through the beginning.

Visiting different Neighborhoods gives Stark a chance to engage in entertaining social commentary. It's soon apparent Mr. A has left his Neighborhood, which means we get to visit some of the other ones nearby. The world-building doesn't make a ton of literal sense; I suppose one could think of it as metaphorical, and indeed it is a commentary on how we choose to live with those like us, but his vision is also extremely interesting.

I unquestionably enjoyed it most of the way through, but found the ending... not at all what I expected. It took a turn that didn't entirely work for me and called into question most of the preceding story. That's an unsettling feeling to have in a book, but I think it was unsettling in a good way, raising questions about authorial intent, narrators, etc. Wastrel has a nice analysis of the book. I admit, most of that didn't occur to me when reading, which is, I think, the better kind of revolutionary story. It was only much later after reading that I thought of the Vonnegut comparison, who honestly, was kind of a chore in high school, even when I read him for fun. I actually started re-reading this all over again, enjoying it just as much. One of those book you keep thinking about after finishing. Read at your own risk.

Four and a half stars, rounding up, because there aren't many books I remember so well three months after finishing.

Jack Tripper says

(Full review 3/25/18)

What starts out as a hilarious send-up of cyberpunk and hardboiled/noir eventually turns into a hallucinatory nightmare, making it almost two novels in one. If Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* was cyberpunk-cubed, with loads more action and craziness than your typical Gibson-esque fare, then this is *Snow Crash*-cubed, at least in the earlier sections. It would have been fine had it kept its initial tone throughout, but the second half takes everything to another level.

It takes place in the far future, in a giant city that's as big as a country basically, but it's divided up into various neighborhoods that are entirely different from one other, even blocked off from each other sometimes. One neighborhood is for busybody workoholics, who do nothing but run around their offices 20 hours or so a day. Another is for people really into color, and the buildings color coordinate themselves on the fly to whatever the people on the street are wearing. One particular neighborhood has no idea other neighborhoods exist, as the walls surrounding it are covered in projection screens showing an apocalyptic wasteland outside. Another is nothing but gang warfare at all times. Et cetera.

The story's told in first-person by Stark, who's from Color neighborhood, and his job is finding things. That's it. And he's really good at it. The higher-ups in the Type-A personality/workoholic community have tasked Stark with finding one of their own who's gone missing in a suspected kidnapping, and what seems like a simple enough job somehow becomes a twisted mindbender of a journey in a surrealistic dream-like world where absolutely anything can happen and your worst fears may be realized, in horrifyingly nightmarish form. And that's all I'll say about that. Best for the reader to discover it themselves.

The problem is that I had NO idea this was the case, and when I first tried reading this several years ago, I set it down a couple chapters in, as I wasn't really in the mood for a comedic post-cyberpunk adventure at the time. If only I'd known. Comedy, sf, horror, fantasy, noir -- this book has it all, and it's pulled off to near-perfection. It's just plain fun to read, and Stark makes for an engaging, hilarious narrator. Until now I'd stuck

with Michael Marshall Smith's excellent short horror fiction, but that will certainly change. Brilliant.

4.5 Stars.

Karl says

This book won the August Derleth Award (1995) and Philip K. Dick Award (2000).

The book starts with a small boy that is left on his own in a flat. The boy answers a knocking on the front door of his high rise flat to find a man with no head standing on the doorstep.

Set in a stylized future City where individuals live in neighborhoods organically responsive to their moods and lifestyles, the story begins as a routine missing persons case for its narrator, Stark, an irreverent soft-boiled detective who specializes in "finding people, or things."

The book resonates with wild humour interlaced with dark recollections of an emotional minefield.

Stephen says

6.0 stars. On my list of "All Time Favorite" novels. I really enjoyed the two other books I have read by Michael Marshall Smith, *Spares* and *Straw Men* and so had fairly high expectations going into this book. They were SIGNIFICANTLY exceeded. I loved this book from the opening page to the very last word.

This book is definitely a "mind trip" where reality is not always what you think it is and you are never sure what is going to happen next. However, unlike other books like this, the author does a superb job of never losing his audience. You always have enough of an understanding to follow the story and, most importantly, you know that the explanations are coming. That is always a big issue for me when I am reading a story like this. If everything is not clear enough to follow the story line, I get distracted by finding myself asking, "Did I miss something" and wondering if I need to go back and reread what I have already read. That usually leads to frustration and lack of "immersion" in the story if it goes on for too long. That does not happen here where the author does a great job of having his main character, Stark, basically tell you "look you are not going to understand this now, but I will explain it to you later if it's necessary so sit back and just trust me for the moment...." By doing this he lets you know to enjoy the ride and everything will be made clear at the appropriate time, which it eventually is. I thought this was brilliant.

In addition to having an incredibly original, mind-blowing plot, this book has some absolutely amazing characters starting with the protagonist, Stark, who is a private investigator handling very "unique" matters. Add to that a couple of psychotic, but well-mannered brothers, Ji and Sneed, a couple of sarcastic "home appliances" and a cat that gives any dog a run for its money as "man's best friend" and you have the makings for a dark, funny and, in the end, very poignant story. Stark's narration throughout is brilliant. He is both very funny (I laughed out loud more than once) and yet is able to grab you when the emotional aspects of the story become more serious. His tone was just perfect.

Anyway, as you can tell from my comments above, I LOVED THIS BOOK. It receives my HIGHEST POSSIBLE RECOMMENDATION!!!

Winner: British Fantasy Award

Winner: Philip K. Dick Award

Adam Light says

ONLY FORWARD is one of the most original, mind-bending novels I have had the pleasure to read in as long as I can remember.

I planned to read it sometime this year, but when I put it on my to-read list, my friend Gregor promptly advised me that this deserved my immediate attention.

To begin with, I read the Straw Men trilogy by Michael Marshall many years ago, and had no idea that the masterful author of those books also wrote under the name Michael Marshall Smith. When I learned this, I sought out books he had written under this name.

According to the author, ONLY FORWARD was his first book, and he set no limits, and he personally warned me to set aside expectations. I did so, gladly.

This book blew away everything I've read in a long time. It was so surreal, but the amazing part was that no matter how strange and hallucinatory it became, it never bogged down, got confusing or lost my interest. It never felt forced. It flowed with the consistency of a dream. I was so intrigued, I read it in two days. Couldn't put it down for anything.

Only Forward is narrated by Stark, a guy who takes care of things that need taken care of. He is a very likeable, yet unreliable character; he seems to have a lot of secrets. He often states that there might be something we might need to know, but he isn't going to waste our time talking about it unless it becomes relevant.

Stark takes on a job that involved finding a very important man who has apparently been kidnapped.

There is the smell of conspiracy right away.

I'm not going to say anything else. This just needs to be read.

What really got me was when part two began. It was about halfway through the book. I was so impressed with how Smith pulled this off, I could not stop reading it. Very cool.

I have this one on the must read again list. It was that good.

Highly recommended.
