



## Speculative Fiction Book Review

Book Title	<b>Early Riser</b>
Author	<b>Jasper Fforde</b>
Date	<b>March 2022</b>
Stars	

Jasper Fforde is very clever. He has to be to write a story like *Early Riser*. It's a mental juggling act and it needs wit and intelligence to keep all the balls in the air throughout the narrative. Ball Number 1 is his humour. It's his trademark, his USP. It's weird, snarky and witty. Ball Number 2 is his world building. It's original, weird (again!) and logically consistent. Ball Number 3 comes in the form of his characters. They are believable, engaging and (you guessed it), weird.

Let's deal with the world building first. *Early Riser* is set in Fforde's favourite location – Wales. In his world, Winter gets a capital letter because of its extreme, deadly and all-consuming nature. Wales, along with the rest of the world, is like Antarctica. As a result, the human race has developed the ability to hibernate. The invention of a drug, Morphenox, has increased people chance's surviving this condition but appears to have drawbacks. I won't say anymore to avoid spoilers. Suffice to say, sleep and dreams are pivotal here.

Our story follows the stumbling uncertainty of Charlie Worthing. Born into the Pool, where a community of women give birth to children to supplement the dwindling population. With a congenital skull abnormality, poor Charlie is never adopted but grows up with limited options for his future. More characters appear, each one damaged in different ways. This world is brutal and unforgiving. Yet sympathy is rare, it doesn't equip you to survive. That's what this story is all about, how each character tries to survive and whether they succeed.

Now to the humour. The previous two elements, weird and original as they are, morph into a typical Fforde story because of the humour. He creates situations where the internal logic of the narrative is twisted and distorted, making outcomes unpredictable. Yet, these outcomes are credible because the distortions are real and possible. To illustrate: a minor character is Carmen Miranda, the Brazilian Bombshell of movie musicals from the 1930s and 40s. Why is she in Wales you ask? It's never explained. It doesn't have to be in Fforde's world, she just is. As such, she gets to deliver her trademark "Chica chica boom chic". It's the ridiculous of it which sparks the humour and is consistently sustained through the story. No mean feat that. Yet it never impedes the urgency and pace of the story. The second half of the story roars along like a lorry going downhill on a frozen road and without brakes. You giggle but you turn the page with urgency. So clever. Hence my juggling metaphor.

In his acknowledgements, Fforde mentions his two year fallow period where he couldn't write. It's wonderful to know someone with his talent can suffer Writer's Block. Like his characters, mine lasts throughout each winter. It's good to know I'm not alone.

This is a stunning piece of work. Clever, witty and very, very exciting. I couldn't put it down.