An Island Utopia Where Nobody Dies and the Living Is Easy

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THE FERRYMAN, by Justin Cronin

For a science-fictional utopia created by a reclusive “Designer,” the world of “The Ferryman” bears a startling resemblance to the well-heeled strata of, say, San Francisco or New York. People fetch soy lattes after yoga, “flushed with high-minded health.” They live in self-designed houses overlooking the sea, hold season tickets to the opera, have careers as couturiers and art dealers and vintners.

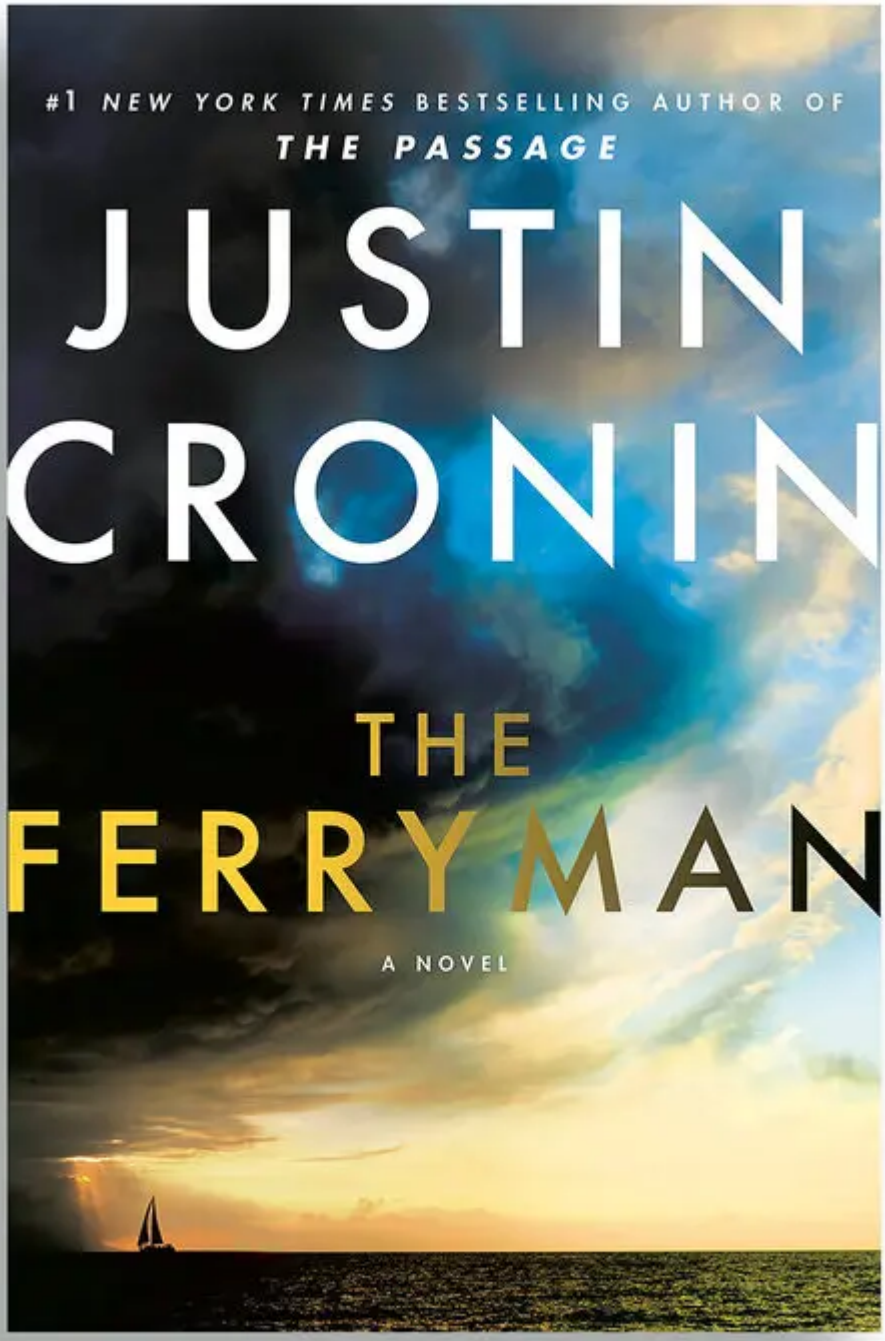
The only snag? The art is *bad*, and no one seems to realize it. Early in Justin Cronin’s new novel, Proctor Bennett, the titular ferryman, attends a piano recital and finds the experience akin to “watching someone perfectly hammer nails into a board.” This aesthetic judgment arrives with all the force of a consciousness-changing epiphany.

The narration’s pleasingly sharp details — the “asparagus grilled in a film of oil,” a blazer that bears a yacht club’s insignia — are some of the many appealing things about “The Ferryman,” a 538-page book that clips along as effortlessly as you might scroll through a well-curated Instagram feed. There’s something mildly intoxicating, in fact, about entering this utopia,

called Prospera, because Cronin's shrewd world-building allows us to have it both ways: We sink into aspirational fantasy even as we relish the author's sly commentary on a certain species of coastal elite. (Prospera is an island, after all.)

Even the book's genre touches are incorporated with a certain lightness. Rather than undergo the indignities of birth and death, old or infirm Prosperans are sent by ferry to a mysterious island called the Nursery, where their memories are wiped and their bodies rejuvenated, so they can return as hale 16-year-olds with new identities.
Unlike most Prosperans, Proctor — 42 years old, comfortably married, proud civil servant — dreams in his sleep. But after a disastrous incident that occurs when Proctor escorts his own aging father to the ferry, his dreams become indistinguishable from reality, and his respectable life begins to disintegrate. "You're not … *you*," his father tells Proctor cryptically before being bundled away. We're plunged into disorienting visions of his father's old telescope and large sailing vessels and an abandoned pool. Localized storms rage and then vanish. And even Proctor isn't sure whether Caeli, the troubled teenager he befriends, is just a figment of his imagination.

His new sense of estrangement draws him to Thea, the only person who acknowledges how awful the art on Prospera is. She in turn draws Proctor into the Annex, the neighboring island inhabited by Prospera's servant class, where a blind painter creates canvases that evoke "a more authentic reality, the true shape of the world" — good art, in other words — whose images happen to match the ones in Proctor's dreams. The Annex is gritty, laced with a class-based resentment that soon turns violent, and yet, Thea tells Proctor, "it's life, *real* life." Among the Arrivalists, an underground movement-cum-religion, Proctor and Thea grope their way toward the truth.



Before Cronin splashed onto the best-seller list with the Passage trilogy, a maximalist series about rampaging vampires, he wrote “quiet” literary fiction centered on New England couples and summer camps in Maine. “The Ferryman” is an intriguing blend of both modes.

It's a careful book with a limited cast, animated by the bonds of parental and romantic love. An undercurrent of grief, organized around a pure, almost unobjectionable family tragedy, forms the book's emotional core, and the scenes of fatherly doting that recur throughout are so pitch-perfect that they verge at times on treacle. At the same time, the plot features car chases, shootouts, the infiltration of a government building and a twist that completely alters the frame of the story precisely two-thirds of the way through.

Occasionally, the seams show. Cronin's prose is mostly lucid and considered, but certain patches of overwriting read like attempts to inject unnecessary grandeur into the proceedings. One woman leads her husband to bed as a final farewell: "Her body would say to him the things that words could not." Proctor, in nearly all respects a generic everyman, has an unfortunate habit of bursting into rhapsodic apostrophe. "Water, life-giving treasure of the universe!" he thinks at one point. "What fantastical creatures must teem within your depths, what wonders lurk beneath your storm-tossed waves!"
Storm-tossed waves crop up again and again in this novel, which is drenched with references to "The Tempest": freak squalls, an enchanted island, the name Prospera. Prospero's monologues are even quoted directly in the book's latter half. The twist, after an initial *frisson* of insight, is disappointingly reminiscent of more than one blockbuster sci-fi movie released in the past two decades, and Cronin's methodical explanations still aren't enough to quell lingering questions about how exactly it all works.

But his nods to Shakespeare hint at bigger themes. The idea of a benevolent puppet master echoes through "The Ferryman," from the godlike Designer who created Prospera to the Great Soul worshiped by the Arrivalists. Shakespeare's Prospero, we understand, is a similar figure, creating illusions that hold the other characters in sway, the god of his own little island. By the end of "The Ferryman," Proctor and Prospero and Cronin and Shakespeare are all linked, and the novel becomes meta-commentary on the creative act itself. When one character muses, at a climactic moment, that perhaps "all creation was boxes within boxes within boxes, each the dream of a different god," one imagines Cronin giving the reader a broad wink.

Some may find this idea profound; I found it deflating. Those early suggestions about the relationship between "real life" and the creation of good art seem, in this light, to be a useful plot device rather than a proposal about how our own world might work. If in the end everything is just "boxes within boxes," how much meaning does the notion of "real life" even hold?

But maybe this is asking too much of a story meant to engross and entertain, which its satisfying epilogue, in particular, does in spades. The novel delivers everything you'd want from your nightly dreams: an anodyne, occasionally beautiful diversion, rife with patterns and the suggestion of deeper truth that vanishes as soon as you lift your eyes from the last page.

Chelsea Leu is a writer and critic whose work has appeared in The Times, The New Yorker, The Atlantic and elsewhere.

THE FERRYMAN | By Justin Cronin | 538 pp. | Ballantine Books | $30