

Arcadia Greentree knows she isn't exactly normal. But then she discovers she isn't Arcadia Greentree either.

Arcadia sees the world like no one else.

Exceptionally observant, the sixteen-year-old is aware of her surroundings in a way that sometimes gets her into trouble—and out of it again. But when she seeks to unravel a mystery at school, a tragedy at home forces her to use her skills to catch a killer.

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Raising Arcadia is the first in this exciting trilogy.



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RAISING ARCADIA

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SIMON CHESTERMAN

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RAISING ARCADIA

“*Raising Arcadia* is a pacy mystery novel that has, at its centre, the irrepressible (and perhaps sociopathic) heroine Arcadia, a sixteen-year-old searching for her place in the adult world. Stuffed with intrigue and mystery, it will be adored by young adults and by adults who prize curiosity and challenge. Read it—and then read it again, to see if you noticed all the clues.”

Adrian Tan, lawyer and author of *The Teenage Textbook*

“Chesterman’s compelling creation of Arcadia, a preternaturally precocious sleuth with an unsettlingly clear-sighted and plain-spoken manner, is matched by the twists and turns of a devious plot, making for a true page-turner.”

Philip Jeyaretnam, S.C., lawyer and author of *Abraham’s Promise*

“In prose so still and measured, Chesterman methodically uncovers Arcadia’s world. Beneath this astonishing portrait of a family is an invisible intellectual machinery at work that will intrigue readers at every turn. I am already impatient for the next book.”

Leeya Mehta, author of *The Towers of Silence*

“What a mind-racing read! *Raising Arcadia* is *Fringe* meets *Perception*, Hermione meets Sherlock... a wonderful exploration of destiny *vs.* potential.”

Sharon Au, actress and founder of styleXstyle.com

For Review Only

SIMON CHESTERMAN

RAISING ARCADIA

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PROLOGUE

The knife is light in my hand. It is an extension of my hand. An extension of my will. Concealing it behind my back, I continue to smile and gesture with my right hand while the left prepares the blade.

They suspect nothing, of course. Their dulled senses do not perceive that even I struggle to keep my voice at its normal pitch, to prevent beads of sweat forming on my brow. All is outwardly calm, all normal. All illusion.

Amiably, I smile. I laugh. Yes, that is indeed an interesting story. All the while imagining it done. For it must be done.

And then I strike.

1

INTERVIEW

“Why do you think the other students don’t like your daughter?”

The question dangles in the air like an accusation.

An uncomfortable silence.

“I mean, at home is her behaviour... normal? Does she play games, go to the park, and so on? Does she have friends?”

Brows furrow. Father looks to Mother, whose mouth opens and then closes again. Her eyes look to the ceiling and then to the walls, adorned with colourful project work. Uncertainly drawn maps; uneven charts of rainfall and sunshine.

“Because from what I can observe, she barely has any interaction with her peers at all.” Gold-rimmed spectacles are pushed higher on the bridge of the nose, doubtless intended to underscore the seriousness of what is to follow: “If your daughter is to make anything of herself in



this world, she is going to need to get along with people. She needs to learn to apply herself to the development of her character as well as the development of her mind.”

A ruffling of papers in a disorganised file. The expectation that the parents would fill the silence is in vain. Mother is continuing to look about the room, as if searching for something.

“Have you at least addressed the question of her reading? She appears not to have the slightest inclination to adhere to the recommended list. You know, we spend months planning a suitable curriculum for the students to ensure that they are reading age-appropriate material that is of high quality and sound morals. Just last week I attended a conference on the very subject—in Majorca, would you believe. A rare perk for a teacher, I suppose.” His tone has veered into the conversational, departing from the more serious timbre that he seeks. He straightens his tweed jacket, a cliché in need of dry-cleaning, and reverts sternly to type: “It is extremely disruptive to have one pupil refusing to read the books that we assign. And while her interest in anatomy is commendable, bringing first year medical textbooks to fifth form impresses no one.”

Further consultation of notes. Reflected in the lens of the spectacles a few words that have been circled can be made out: “anti-social”, “self-absorbed”, “loner”.

“Academically, she remains, shall we say, inconsistent?” Another page turns. “I mean, she isn’t—what’s the term

we are supposed to use now—‘intellectually disabled’. On those rare occasions when she does apply herself, she does tolerably well. In science, for example.” This is a gross understatement. The teacher allows the parents a brief smile that is intended to be encouraging. Then his expression hardens once more. “But her disdain for subjects that she and she alone deems ‘irrelevant’ and her ignorance of basic facts about the solar system... Well, it was all I could do to prevent Headmaster from making her repeat the year.”

Mother’s eyes have almost completed their tour of the room, flitting past the puerile drawings of landscapes and self-portraits. They settle on a white sheet of paper fixed to the wall in a far corner of the room. With a light pencil and careful hand, a farmyard animal has been drawn. Or part thereof. The cross-section of a pig is easily identifiable, depicted with a level of detail that might be described—inaccurately—as loving. The animal is shown in profile, a vertical slice having removed the right half of its body from snout to tail. At first glance the image recalls a diagram of the various organs and humours hidden by fat and muscle, skin and hair. But on closer inspection it departs from such cool scientific models in its representation of a hog that has actually been cleft in two by some impossibly sharp blade, bodily fluids leeching down from the severed skin, guts just beginning to tip over the edge and fall down the page.

The teacher catches Mother’s eye, apparently noticing the subject of attention: “And as for her sense of humour.



Well, no one was particularly amused and a few of the students had to see Nurse when she brought a frog for discussion time and proceeded to display its entire alimentary canal from mouth to intestine.”

Looking down at his file once more, a tanned thumb and forefinger turn a well-worn wedding ring. A sigh, perhaps intended to seem sympathetic, escapes—or is released—from the teacher’s wet lips. “I have seen many young men go through this school. They have gone on to the finest universities; many now occupy high office in government and in the City. Now that we have admitted girls as well I expect no less of them.” His voice is earnest, apparently sincere. “It is our job to straighten the crooked timber of our youth so that they might make something of themselves. But we need your help.”

Mother’s hazel eyes remain on the sketched vivisection; her husband’s turn from her to the teacher. Father nods and gives a slight smile that is taken as understanding.

“We had such hopes for your daughter,” the teacher continues. “Your boy Marcus had done quite well here. Not so enthused about sports but—”

“Magnus,” Mother corrects absently.

“—I’m sorry, *Magnus*. Your family really does have a penchant for odd names, does it not?” He allows himself a slight chuckle, but in the quiet of the empty classroom it is quickly extinguished by a corrective cough. Mother’s eyes have returned to his and perhaps he thinks he has overstepped a line.

“Yes, Magnus was a remarkable boy. Exceedingly clever, but also obedient. I foresee an interesting future for that young man.” The teacher appears to have confused obedience with Magnus’s desire to pursue the path of least resistance. Clever, certainly—cleverer than she—but her brother’s ambition stretches no further than the satisfaction of his appetites. He continues to breeze through university, concerned only to do well enough that he might be left alone. “Magnus shall land on his feet, of that I am sure,” the teacher muses. “The question is: what are we to do with this one?”

Unusually, it is Father who speaks first. “Well, I suppose you could always expel her?”

Now it is the teacher’s brow that furrows. “I don’t think we are *quite* at that point. Though believe me the subject has come up in the teachers’ lounge. I must tell you that there are those here who would be quite happy to see the back of her. But I was thinking more that we might work together on this.” He leans forward and interlaces his fingers in a gesture intended to recall a church steeple, though it more closely resembles an ill-fitting set of gears. “If you might reinforce at home some of what we are trying to instil at school: discipline, honour —”

“Are you saying my daughter is undisciplined and dishonourable?” Mother has at last turned her full attention to the teacher, eyes narrowing ever so slightly as they do when she is irritated. Lips purse together and



a minute dilation of capillaries will soon lead to a flush of colour in her cheeks.

The teacher has not yet noticed this, but his weight shifts backwards, buttoning and then unbuttoning his tweed jacket as he moves: a sign of uncertainty. “What I am saying is that she needs more discipline and she needs a moral compass. The world owes no one a living. If she is to succeed in life she will need to be able to find the right path on her own. There is only so long that school, that *parents*” — a meaningful glance is unrequited — “can offer her structure. In the absence of that structure, some adolescents just... drift. They flit from one thing to another, never focused, never achieving their potential. For I do believe that your daughter has some potential.” A magnanimous tone is now adopted, fingers tugging where a beard once grew in a gesture of staged thoughtfulness. An index finger rests a moment longer than it should on his now clean-shaven cheek. No sign of a blush there, but since vacation it has lacked its familiar red smudge. Stray whiskers on the chin suggest that this morning’s shave was hasty. Curious.

“Potential to do what?”

Mother’s polite sarcasm is missed by the teacher, who presses on with an enthusiasm that is only half-feigned. “Well, perhaps medicine? She has shown some aptitude in introductory biology. Her attention to detail in anatomy is, er, prodigious.” A half-glance towards the half-pig in the corner. “And I gather you have something of a medical background yourself?”

Father clears his throat. "Well I suppose that's possible but at present she seems more interested in why things die rather than how one might keep them alive."

Mother smiles. "Yes dear, but the neighbours were so very pleased when she showed that those chickens had been killed by a fox and not their cat. Poor little beast would have been put down."

The teacher attempts to continue his thread of the conversation in the face of these distractions: "If she is to study medicine, she will need more than an interest in biology of course. General mathematics, chemistry. She will need to improve her overall grades considerably. In the event that she ever wants to practise medicine, the ability to relate to her patients as people will become essential. I'm sure you understand me, Doctor?"

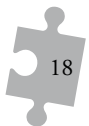
Father shrugs. "She could always become a surgeon, so that her patients would be unconscious by the time they reach her."

"Yes. Well." The teacher tries to establish whether Father is joking. A slight upturn of Father's lips is taken as a license to let out another chuckle. "Oh I see you are having me on."

"What she really enjoys is puzzles," says Mother.

"That is well and good. I myself enjoy doing the crossword. But alas no one will pay me to do it. And I am afraid that your daughter has a tendency to look into puzzles that are quite frankly none of her business."

The brief diversion to career advice is over. More rifling



through pages of the thick file. The blue divider indicates the section devoted to disciplinary matters, which is quite thick. “The school remains grateful that your daughter identified the gardener who had stolen the German teacher’s bicycle, but she must leave such matters to the proper authorities. And keep her prying eyes to herself.”

For the first time there is a brief glare at the third chair, set back from the other two.

The teacher closes his eyes for a moment, collecting himself, before returning his attention to the parents seated before him. “The reason I invited you here this evening is that the start of a school term offers an opportunity to turn a page, to make a fresh start. It must not be a repeat of last term. I had hoped that a brief vacation would have allowed her to clear her mind, to mature. Yet her attitude continues to be one that I cannot describe as other than wilful insolence.”

A pause to allow this to sink in.

“The final straw was that this morning she was found to have brought a prohibited substance onto the school grounds.” A small plastic bag of coarsely cut dried leaves from the nightshade family is produced and held out silently for the parents to receive.

“Now that’s not entirely her fault,” Mother begins, nudging Father with her elbow.

Father looks down at the packet before slipping it into his own pocket. “That’s right. I smoke a pipe now and then and she expressed an interest in the tobacco. She said

she wouldn't smoke it, but wanted to compare it with the different leafs that she tells me some of the older boys and girls—and a few of the teachers—are known to smoke. I like to encourage her in her experiments.”

In fact her taxonomy of tobacco is almost complete. Most of the smokers at the school consume branded cigarettes, notably Pall Mall and Lucky Strike, but there are a few who roll their own—in some cases lacing the shag with other herbs. Cigars and pipes are still less common.

“Would these be the same experiments that led her to amass a collection of dung so that she might examine the eating habits of the local fauna, and to hang a dead badger from a tree in the lower green in order to measure the rate of its decomposition?”

Father stifles a laugh and Mother slaps his knee in disapproval. But not very hard.

“As I said,” the teacher is trying to regain control of the conversation, “a new term offers a chance at a new beginning. But she has to want to take that chance. She is now sixteen. Next year she enters sixth form and will begin her A-levels. The school aspires to help all our students succeed, but we cannot work miracles. Some of that drive must come from within. If she continues in this fashion, there is only so much that the school can do without compromising the education of her peers. I do hope you understand.”

There is another pause and it is evident that the teacher has said his piece. The parents have not quite played their



role, but he has done his duty to the school. Again, he waits to give them a chance to respond: to thank him, to reassure him of their support, to promise to discipline their daughter. But Father is simply nodding and Mother's gaze has returned to the pig.

The teacher looks from one to the other and then, for a second time, the third chair is the focus of attention. "Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

The finger on the cheek, the conference, the twirling wedding ring on well-tanned hands. Curious. There is little point debating the disciplinary matters raised. One could quibble about whether the rule against smoking properly applies to a student who brings pipe tobacco but no pipe, and there is no rule against dissecting frogs. Wilful insolence is a tautology—can one be insolent accidentally? But that is pedantry. The accusation of insolence assumes rudeness towards those deserving of respect. Do the teachers deserve respect? A more debatable proposition. By social convention, teachers are respected, perhaps, but that convention presumes that teachers have knowledge and wisdom to impart to their pupils. Another debatable point, present company particularly included. Explaining this, however, will incur the wrath of the teacher and perhaps upset Mother and Father. In any case, she keeps coming back to the cheek, the conference, and the ring.

It is only a second before the girl leans back and looks her teacher in the eye.

“You should buy your wife some flowers.”

“I beg your pardon?” The teacher removes his spectacles as if they have somehow compromised his ability to see as well as to hear.

“I said you should buy your wife some flowers. Jewellery would be best, but at your salary you probably can’t afford anything adequate.”

“Young woman, you —”

“I say this,” the voice slows, a concession that may be seen as patronising but she is beyond caring, “because she appears to be thinking of leaving you. Flowers are a customary token of affection, and sometimes serve as an acceptable form of penance for marital indiscretions.”

Father clears his throat again, uncomfortably turning in the plastic moulded seat to catch his daughter’s eye but it is too late.

“From the beginning of the year you typically arrived at school with a faint lipstick mark on your cheek. Some kind of upmarket brand, I’m guessing, from the matte finish and the fact that it remained visible for several hours. It’s quite sweet, I suppose, the wife who gets made up prior to sending her husband off to work and gives him a goodbye peck. But one week ago the marks stopped appearing. Two possible explanations: either she stopped wearing makeup or she stopped kissing you. I’m assuming that your wife works—it’s hardly likely that you could afford a car like yours on a teacher’s salary—so she’s still wearing makeup but not kissing you. That may be why



you are now rushing to get ready in the morning and leave the house, evidenced by the patchy job of shaving today. Now one week ago was when you returned to school with something of a suntan, though you claimed to have been at a conference on educating today's youth. What kind of teacher feels compelled to explain to his students—and their parents—that he's been at a conference and that's where he got his tan? Someone who is trying very hard to stick to his story. Add to this the fact that just now when you were fiddling with your wedding ring one could see that the tan extends all the way under your ring. My limited experience in this area is that men tend to keep their wedding rings on in most situations, either due to fear of losing the ring or being accused of hiding the fact that they are married.” The briefest of smiles at Father, who is now covering his face with his hands. “In any event, it is now clear that you spent last week in the sun without your wedding ring and are very keen to maintain your story that this was for a conference. No wedding ring plus lie equals affair. So, on the assumption that you are having an affair and your wife has found out about it, she is likely to leave you. Given that you depend on her financially, and taking into account any sentimental attachment you might have to her, you probably don't *want* her to leave you and so I suggest, once again, that you consider buying her some flowers.”

The silence hangs once more.

“There's no need to thank me,” the girl says. “Oh

and you might want to re-read your Kant because you're misquoting him. What Kant actually said was that out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made. Setting your goal as straightening all of us out puts you in direct opposition to one of the more influential philosophers of the second millennium. Though I suppose the fact that you're pitting yourself against a German may go down well with some of the school's more conservative alumni."

A tremor in the teacher's fingers and a clenching of his jaw muscles indicate an effort to remain in control of his temper. The gold-rimmed glasses return to the bridge of his nose. He clenches the pen so tightly that it is possible an act of violence is being considered, but then the fingers relax. It would be the end of his career and the start of a prison term to attack a student. "My dear young lady," he says at last, "your concern for my personal life is touching. But it is about the last thing that you should be worried about. What we are here to discuss this evening is your continuation at this school, the foundation of your education, and the prospects for a meaningful life. Does any of that register in your bizarre little head?"

The meeting is becoming tedious and Mother's shifting in her seat indicates that she would like to leave.

"It does," the girl lowers her head slightly in a pose of contrition. "I'm sorry that I've disappointed you." She looks from one parent to the other: "Mother, Father, I shall try harder."



The teacher is clearly unconvinced, but it is an opportunity to end the meeting on a more positive note. “That’s better,” he says. After a pause he closes his file. “You know, it is good that you have passions. But you need to bring some discipline to all your work and try to get along better with those around you. No one likes a smart aleck.”

“Yes, Mr. Ormiston.”

The teacher turns once more to the parents. “Do ensure that she reads the books on our list—and no more tobacco at school please?” He moves to stand up and the formal meeting is concluded. “I look forward to seeing you again soon,” he says to the parents with a forced smile. “But not too soon, I hope!” He looks at the girl and is about to speak, but confines himself to a curt nod.

Hands are shaken and Mother, Father, and daughter step outside where the sun has set. They walk in silence along a paved path flanked by manicured lawns. Even in the lamplight, gentle indentations are still discernible where a student—the prints are too small and too light to have been a teacher—has ignored the “Keep off the grass” signs and taken a shortcut from the dormitory across to the woods that adjoin the school grounds.

They reach the car and climb inside. Father turns the key, but as they pull out onto a suburban street the girl asks for a favour.

He sniffs. “I’m not sure that tonight is the best time to be asking for latitude, my dear. It’s late and we should get home.”

She is loath to manipulate her parents, but does not want to let go—cannot let go—of the one interesting aspect of the evening. “I am sorry that you had to come in this evening, and I will try harder,” she says. “But please do this for me?”

Mother turns to look at her for a moment. “Oh go on, Ignatius, humour the girl. Dinner can wait a few more minutes.” Has Mother guessed what she is doing? No, but she knows something is afoot.

Father is not amused but also not in the mood for further argument. They follow the street until they reach a main road and the girl asks him to park opposite a row of shops. “Please turn off the lights—it’s wasting battery power.”

His daughter rarely displays an interest in conservation, but he simply asks: “And what are we waiting here for?”

“Just a couple of minutes.”

He is nonplussed: “I mean *why* are we waiting here?”

The girl is peering out the window and does not reply.

Mother stifles a yawn. “I liked your drawing,” she says. “It was quite lifelike. Well, deathlike. Ignatius, did you see her drawing?”

He did not but doesn’t want to admit this. He is considering his response when a red sports car drives past them and parks on the opposite side of the street. A man emerges from the car, straightens his tweed jacket, and walks quickly past a fish and chip shop to the corner store, which doubles as a newsagent and a florist.



A minute passes before the man returns with a dozen roses. He pauses to adjust his gold-rimmed glasses and run his fingers through thinning brown hair, glancing only briefly in the direction of the car in which three figures sit in silence. Then he gets back into his own vehicle and drives off.

Inside the other car, the girl allows herself a smile of satisfaction. “OK,” she says. “Now we can go home.”