



I Who Have Never Known Men

By Jacqueline Harpman

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Discussion Questions

1. How do the women's experiences of isolation affect their sense of identity? How does the narrator's lack of a past influence her relationship with the other women?
2. The women have hazy memories of their past lives. How does this absence of memory shape their behaviour and outlook? Do you think remembering would have changed their fate?
3. The novel opens with the women confined in a cage, and later they escape into a seemingly endless, empty world. How does the concept of imprisonment evolve throughout the novel? Are they truly free after escaping?
4. The women initially resign themselves to their situation, but the narrator is driven to question their reality. What role does authority play in the women's captivity, and how does the narrator's rebellion change their dynamic?
5. The narrator is younger and different from the others. How does her perspective shape the story? Would the narrative have been different from the perspective of one of the older women?
6. The novel raises many questions without providing clear answers, particularly about the nature of the world and the reasons for the women's captivity. Why do you think Harpman chose to leave so much unresolved? What do you think the purpose of their captivity was?
7. Once the women escape, they must create meaning and purpose in an empty world. Do you think survival alone is enough to give life meaning? How do the women respond to this challenge?
8. After the women escape, they are free physically but remain mentally imprisoned. What does this novel suggest about the nature of freedom? Are they ever truly free?
9. Men are notably absent throughout the novel, yet they remain a subject of curiosity for the narrator. How does the absence of men affect the narrative, and what might it symbolise?
10. As the women die off, the narrator confronts death and the meaning of life. How do the different women face death, and what does the novel suggest about the inevitability of death?
11. The narrator often feels estranged from the other women, despite their shared experience. What does the novel say about the nature of companionship and the human need for connection?
12. By the end of the novel, the narrator is the only one left alive. What do you think her final reflections reveal about the human condition? How do you interpret the final line of the novel?

Author Biography

Jacqueline Harpman was born in Etterbeek, Belgium in 1929. Being half Jewish, the family fled to Casablanca when the Nazis invaded, and only returned home after the war. After studying French literature she started training to be a doctor, but could not complete her training due to contracting tuberculosis. She turned to writing in 1954 and her first work was published in 1958. In 1980 she qualified as a psychoanalyst. Harpman wrote over 15 novels and won numerous literary prizes, including the Prix Médicis for *Orlanda*. *I Who Have Never Known Men* was her first novel to be translated into English, and was originally published with the title *The Mistress of Silence*.

Reviews

Two people a year, or maybe three, used to buy Jacqueline Harpman's novel *I Who Have Never Known Men*. Her story of a girl locked in a cage with 39 women in an underground bunker on a nameless world was published in 1995 then slid into obscurity.

Something has changed since then, because the novel's tale of sisterhood and survival has become one of the hottest reads this year, drawing comparisons to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Octavia E Butler's *Parable* series of novels.

IWHNKM, as it is known in hashtags on BookTok, the -community of TikTok users who have made -reading cool again, is in such demand that bookshops in the US have -struggled to keep it in stock.

In the UK it has become "a bestselling staple of fiction sections across our bookshops", according to Waterstones' head of books, Bea Carvalho. Its publisher, Vintage, which reissued the novel in 2019, sold 45,000 copies last year, an elevenfold rise on 2022.

The novel has also appeared on the must-read lists of Service95, a newsletter, book club and website set up by Dua Lipa, one of a growing group of celebrities in music and fashion using their clout to support literature.

"It's described as speculative fiction/sci-fi, but it's quite desolate in its writing in a way I haven't found with other books," said Hali Brown, who runs the Books on the Bedside TikTok account with her sister Hana.

The narrator is the youngest of 40 captives and too young to remember her past. "All the guards are men," Brown said, "and that's all the women know about gender. They never really understand why they are there or how long they would be kept for." Or any sense of time at all.

They may be on Earth. They may discover the reasons why they are there. They may find other people. Or they may not.

"It's quite bleak but incredibly -powerful," Brown added. "It was unbelievably gripping for something so desperate."

Rather like the questions posed by the post-apocalyptic novel, there are few clear answers to why it has become so successful. Harpman was a Belgian writer who died in 2012 aged 82. Her family fled to Casablanca during the second world war in fear of persecution for their Jewish roots.

The novel's translator, Ros Schwartz, said she was -gobsmacked by the turnaround of the book's fortunes. "I guess it just strikes a chord with the younger generation, which it didn't at the time – and whether that's to do with -publicity or whether it's completely random, I don't know. That's one of the wonderful things about publishing – you never know."

Brown lists the book's qualities as being "accessibly written" and "not very long" (about 200 pages), as well as resonating with the modern -political context of attacks on -women's rights and diversity at work.

"There's lots happening in terms of women feeling like things are going backwards and not really -understanding why or how that's able to happen," she said. The -politics of Harpman's world are sparse, unlike other dystopian fiction such as *The Handmaid's Tale* or *The Hunger Games*. "Its political understanding of the world, I think, is relatable to a lot of young women," Brown added.

Perhaps another reason for the book's success second time round is that Schwartz revised her -translation with the benefit of two decades' more experience as a translator, with works including a fresh version of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* and honours such as becoming a chevalier in the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

Schwartz's first attempt in the mid-90s used words that were often -similar to their French counterparts. The effect of the more direct -translation was to make the -narrator seem too erudite for a young girl kept in a cage without education and no ability to read or write. "So I went through it and got rid of all the Latinate -language. It was about -finding the right voice for the -narrator that didn't make her sound over--educated but without making her sound stupid or a caricature."

Another factor may be a title change. Nick Skidmore, publishing director at Vintage, said the book was originally published in -translation as *The Mysteries of Silence*, rather than the French title, *Moi Qui N'ai Pas Connus Les Hommes*.

"A colleague of mine found this book at the time when Trump was in [his first term] and *The Handmaid's Tale* was back in the bestsellers' list. So we read it and we were -mesmerised by it," Skidmore said. The book was print-on-demand, selling only "two or three a year".

Switching titles to a more direct translation of the French may be "one of the markers of its success", he added. "I think the book captures this sense of the world where -people are feeling bewildered. It's a -profoundly existential book, like some of the classics resonating with gen Z right now – Dostoevsky's *White Nights*, for example. The type of stories that engage with very weighty -questions of our existence."

Susan Watkins, professor of women's writing at Leeds Beckett University, said that dystopian fiction was often popular because it allowed readers to "identify with someone who's resisting the totalitarian or authoritarian world in which they're placed".

Another factor in the appeal of dystopian fiction, Watkins said, is the process of "cognitive estrangement", a term used by critic Darko Suvin to describe how science fiction writers create unfamiliarity in an invented world so they can examine a social or cultural change in the present day.

“For readers who perceive the threats to women’s reproductive rights and their sexual liberty, and the idea that feminism is being curtailed in large parts of the world, they’re seeing something of that in the text.”

Read-Alikes

The Memory Police by Yoko Ogawa

"A deft and dark Orwellian novel about the terrors of state surveillance, from the acclaimed author of *The Housekeeper and the Professor* On an unnamed island off an unnamed coast, things are disappearing. First, animals and flowers. Then objects--ribbons, bells, photographs. Then, body parts. Most of the island's inhabitants fail to notice these changes, while those few imbued with the power to recall the lost objects live in fear of the mysterious 'memory police,' who are committed to ensuring that the disappeared remain forgotten. When a young novelist realizes that more than her career is in danger, she hides her editor beneath her floorboards, and together, as fear and loss close in around them, they cling to literature as the last way of preserving the past. Part allegory, part literary thriller, *The Memory Police* is a stunning new work from one of the most exciting contemporary authors writing in any language"--Provided by publisher.

Women Talking by Miriam Toews

One evening, eight Mennonite women climb into a hay loft to conduct a secret meeting. For the past two years, each of these women, and more than a hundred other girls in their colony, has been repeatedly violated in the night by demons coming to punish them for their sins. Now that the women have learned they were in fact drugged and attacked by a group of men from their own community, they are determined to protect themselves and their daughters from future harm. While the men of the colony are off in the city, attempting to raise enough money to bail out the rapists and bring them home, these women--all illiterate, without any knowledge of the world outside their community and unable even to speak the language of the country they live in--have very little time to make a choice: Should they stay in the only world they've ever known or should they dare to escape? Based on real events and told through the "minutes" of the women's all-female symposium, Toews's masterful novel uses wry, politically engaged humor to relate this tale of women claiming their own power to decide.