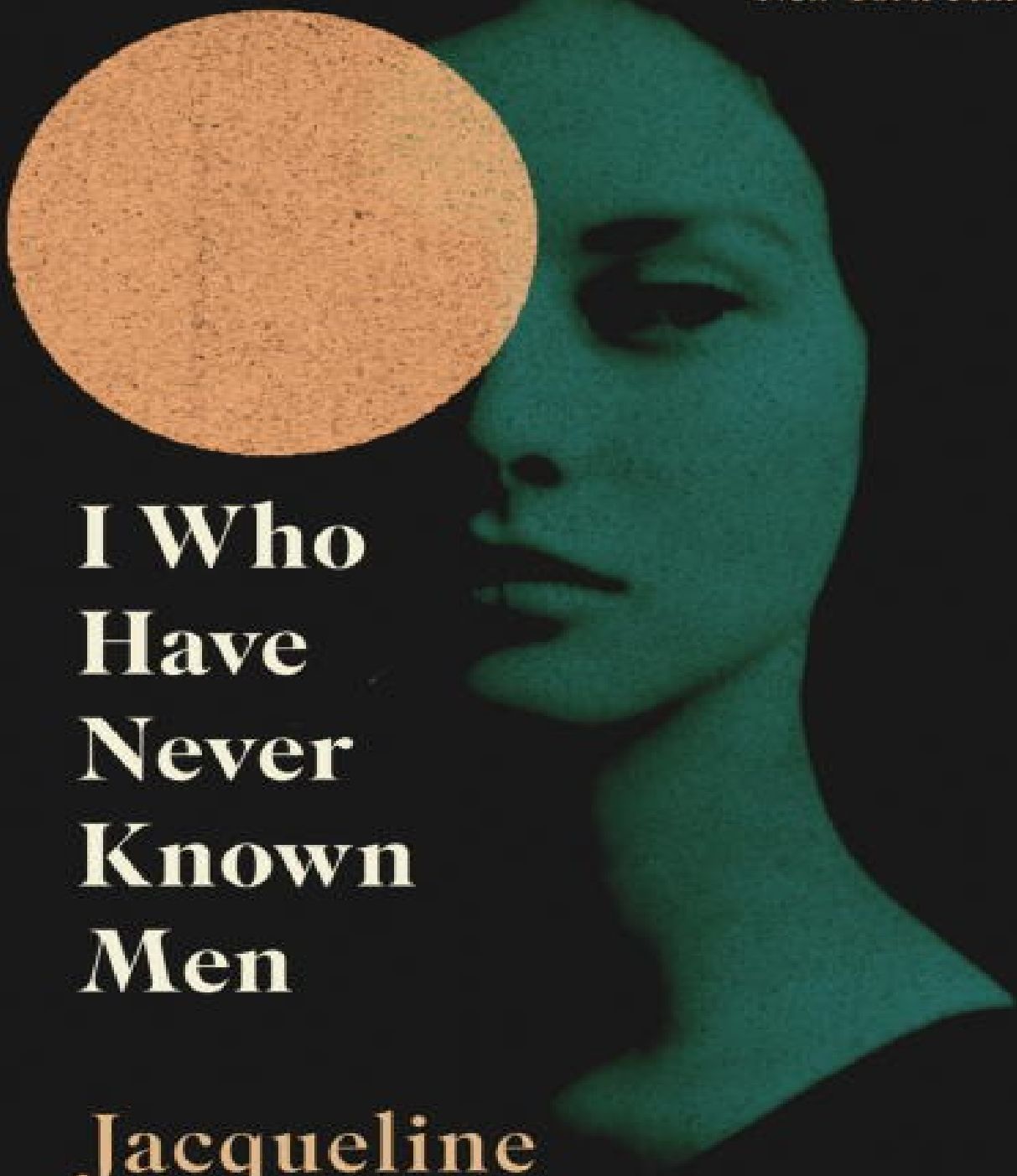
'A small miracle'
New York Times



I Who Have Never Known Men

Jacqueline Harpman

Annotation

A haunting, heartbreaking post-apocalyptic tale of female friendship and intimacy.

‘A small miracle’ *The New York Times*

‘For a very long time, the days went by, each just like the day before, then I began to think, and everything changed’

Deep underground, thirty-nine women live imprisoned in a cage. Watched over by guards, the women have no memory of how they got there, no notion of time, and only vague recollection of their lives before.

As the burn of electric light merges day into night and numberless years pass, a young girl – the fortieth prisoner – sits alone and outcast in the corner. Soon she will show herself to be the key to the others’ escape and survival in the strange world that awaits them above ground.

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY SOPHIE MACKINTOSH, MAN BOOKER PRIZE-LONGLISTED AUTHOR OF *THE WATER CURE*

Jacqueline Harpman
I WHO HAVE NEVER KNOWN MEN
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

Ros Schwartz

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Sophie Mackintosh

To Denise Geilfus in friendship

Introduction

Sometimes we read a book of such singularity and uniqueness, yet such ringing truth, that we wonder why it has not found a larger audience. Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* is beloved by a small and intense core of readers, and yet has not entered mainstream awareness. Perhaps that's not so surprising, refusing as it does to be put into a neat genre box. It's a philosophical treatise as much as it is a story about an alien world, one that prizes the humanity of its characters and places this humanity square, front and centre, even in a disorientating landscape of total strangeness. The prose is cool water. Its images are lonely, weird, sometimes horrific, and always arresting.

In recent years we have seen a boom in science and speculative fiction written by female authors, but *I Who Have Never Known Men* seems eerily prescient, a book from a hundred years ago or a hundred years in the future. Lumping together female-centred science fiction can be reductive; problems of women are still problems that affect everyone living under patriarchy. In fact, femaleness is somehow both central to and almost incidental in this novel. Yes, there are men among the dead, but the novel would look very different were men to make an appearance beyond their roles as guards and dead prisoners.

The narrator is at the heart of this doubleness, presenting her memories and theories to us from a space of peculiar neutrality. She is not like the other women of the novel, with their memories of the outside world and knowledge of relationships, sex, love and family. Her body never developed the markers of reproduction, and being raised in an underground bunker since an early age, she is in a unique position to be a person without any of the signifiers of personhood. She is an example of a person raised without culture, without societal constructs, without knowledge. She is a pure experiment asking: what does a person become when stripped to the core, raised in isolation? What might a woman be like under these conditions? It is testament to the strength and beauty of this novel that she remains a character too, not just a device; she is formed, sympathetic, and possessing both curiosity and courage.

Nowhere in this novel is exploitation, pain for the sake of pain, or

needless cruelty. The entire novel manages to balance its elegant philosophical concerns with also being an amazing feat of human tenderness. Everything is pared down, and everything has a purpose. Harpman shows the worst of what humans can inflict on humans, but also the best that love and togetherness can do. It is a 'minute account of a nightmare' (Hector Bianciotti, *Le Monde*) and yet also a triumph of the small, seemingly trivial fragments that make up who we are. '"It's all so ordinary, it's the same as everybody else!"' exclaims one of the women when talking about her previous life; to which the narrator responds with 'As if she did not realise that for me, nothing was ordinary, since nothing had happened to me'.

No life is ordinary, the book seems to say. No life is without hope, without light, even during the unimaginable.

The plot of *I Who Have Never Known Men* is simple. Forty women are held in what appears to be an underground bunker, where they have been for many years. They are controlled by male guards, and the usual basic provisions of modernity – electricity, food, water – are available to them. Life continues for many years, until one day a siren goes off. By a stroke of luck the women are able to free themselves, and they start out upon a mysterious world gradually realising, horror after horror, that they might be the last people on this alien-seeming planet.

Despite this the novel chooses to begin with life – focusing on the narrator's coming of age, as shown through her fascination with the youngest male guard. The narrator gives us a frank description of her own burgeoning sexuality, while simultaneously remaining dislocated from it. In many ways she is as much an alien as the planet she lives on, compared to the other women, who spent their lives working service jobs and raising families. She has no idea of what a 'normal' human life might look like, and the other women react to this with unease.

But maybe it is femininity itself that is the strange thing. From the offing the narrator's sexual fascination with the guard calls up modern echoes of submissiveness and fantasy. What could be more human than want and desire: the machinations of your body kicking in? (And what a strange thing we are forced to admit desire is, when seen at this distance.) The narrator observes human behaviour and bodies objectively, in a way that is both curious and dehumanising; her perspective emphasises both her disconnection with her body, and the essential strangeness of having one,

particularly one that you have not been taught about, one controlled by others. She may not have the learned behaviours of dances and marriages, but even a person raised in captivity learns to want, yearns to see beyond their cage.

How much of our humanity is intrinsic? How much remains, when all else is stripped away?

The story and the world the novel takes place in is pared down to the point of frustration. It possesses a Daliesque surrealism; its landscape owes as much to Beckett as it does to Bradbury. The world the liberated women walk through seems desolate, dotted from time to time with trees, rivers, and nightmare bunkers just like the one they have escaped from. There is no sense of who has confined them and for what reason, whether they're even wandering Earth. The sparse clues muddy the water further: unchanging seasons, a bus full of dead guards, captives in cages, a luxurious bunker underground. Nothing is explained, but nothing needs to be. The beauty and power of the novel is in its ambiguities, in the hypotheticals allowed to flourish and demonstrate what they need to demonstrate. It should be unremittingly bleak, for all the ingredients for bleakness are there; and yet there is a shining, searching humanity at its core that carries it through.

As the narrator discovers her own sense of selfhood and agency, the older women cling on to theirs: they discuss their pasts, they rail against having to use the toilet in front of everybody else, they discuss recipes when cooking their meagre rations of meat, water and potatoes. They are aware that the narrator exists in a different world to them, that she is of this world in a way that they are not, a bridging person between the old order and the new. Later on, devastatingly and compassionately, it is this difference that enables the narrator to enact fatal acts of love upon the older women. Death, in this world, has its own dignity, a dignity repeatedly exhorted as human. The other caged humans they discover have died terrible deaths, but the narrator admires those who have died calmly, facing the terror, unafraid. It is human to be afraid of death, of unimaginable pain, and it's another kind of humanity to transcend it.

This approach to death, to suffering, makes it difficult to analyse such a novel without acknowledging that the author was Jewish, having fled to Casablanca with her family during the Second World War. There are echoes of concentration camps in the senseless cruelty of their confinement, the

endless cracking of the whips of the mysterious prison guards, the sickening inevitability as they discover, over and over and over, that everyone else on the planet imprisoned in the same way as them has perished. And for what? A project with a vague beginning – the ‘confusion’ the women allude to, sirens and fire and being taken from their homes – and then nothing but an endless, pointless confinement.

Forty women in a cage; a freezer full of food at temperatures low enough to last indefinitely; electricity and water that never ceases. These situations of confinement, of cruelty, of hopelessness, are not without precedent – we’re kidding ourselves if we think of these cruelties as ones unique to a fictional alien planet.

But there is love, as well as horror, all the way through the novel. The quiet not-quite-utopia – the best that they can manage, given the strange world, their isolation – recalls a subverted *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. It is a peaceful world they create, one where they stop searching, where they build houses and settle into routines and pair into couples. They form the best possible utopia available to them, despite all the odds, and so they live out their lives that way, despite the unimaginable trauma laid upon them for years. While they mourn the absence of men at least a little, particularly at the start, they also manage very well without them. The only man dwelled upon at any length in the novel is the youngest prison guard, and only in the context of the narrator’s physical reaction to him.

Though this utopia is one without hope of their discovery, or the possibility that they might learn more about their condition, it is one where the characters can live out their days. The women can continue to find a sort of beauty in companionship, adapting to a new way of being, existing in an environment empty of what they know but still underpinned by compassion. But it’s not necessarily extolling this kind of existence. Perhaps in its own way the novel slyly demonstrates the natural peacefulness that a world without men might possess, but also suggests that this settling is the downfall of the women, that they do not go on searching. Would they have searched further, railed more, had men been part of their party? Would they have found the answers over a distant horizon, even if decades in the future?

I love this book; I love its implacable calmness, its unwillingness to give its secrets away. It’s a puzzle that cannot be solved, isn’t supposed to be solved, because it is in the process of grappling with it that we discover the

point for ourselves. Every time I have read the novel has been prismatic, opening up reflections on cruelty, on human nature, on capitalism. Reading it is not a passive experience but one that provokes, that exasperates, that moves.

If there is an essential message in a book full of such truth, the following sentence is a good place to take it from: ‘I was forced to acknowledge too late, much too late, that I too had loved, that I was capable of suffering, and that I was human after all’, our narrator muses at the start of the novel, as her life draws to an end. Then shortly afterwards, ‘After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear, or of Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail.’ The smallness of one person left alive in the vast and mysterious world is a daunting concept. But doesn’t the best science fiction make us think about our world anew, and who we are? If the narrator has lived a life as best as she could – wildly unconventional, but one that has given her joy in many ways – hasn’t she triumphed over cruelty after all, over having everything stripped from her, her dignity and essential humanity winning in the end?

Sophie Mackintosh

2019

Since I barely venture outside these days, I spend a lot of time in one of the armchairs, rereading the books. I only recently started taking an interest in the prefaces. The authors talk readily about themselves, explaining their reasons for writing the book. This surprises me: surely it was more usual in that world than in the one in which I have lived for people to pass on the knowledge they had acquired? They often seem to feel the need to emphasise that they wrote the book not out of vanity, but because someone asked them to, and that they had thought about it long and hard before accepting. How strange! It suggests that people were not avid to learn, and that you had to apologise for wanting to convey your knowledge. Or, they explain why they felt it was appropriate to publish a new translation of Proust, because previous efforts, laudable though they may be, lacked something or other. But why translate when it must have been so easy to learn different languages and read anything you wanted directly? These things leave me utterly baffled. True, I am extremely ignorant: apparently, I know even less of these matters than I thought I did. The authors express their gratitude to those who taught them, who opened the door to this or that avenue of knowledge, and, because I have absolutely no idea what they're talking about, I usually read these words with a degree of indifference. But suddenly, yesterday, my eyes filled with tears; I thought of Anthea, and was overcome by a tremendous wave of grief. I could picture her, sitting on the edge of a mattress, her knees to one side, sewing patiently with her makeshift thread of plaited hairs which kept snapping, stopping to look at me, astonished, quick to recognise my ignorance and teach me what she knew, apologising that it was so little, and I felt a huge wrench, and began to sob. I had never cried before. There was a pain in my heart as powerful as the pain of the cancer in my belly, and I who no longer speak because there is no one to hear me, began to call her. Anthea! Anthea! I shouted. I couldn't forgive her for not being there, for having allowed death to snatch her, to tear her from my clumsy arms. I chastised myself for not having held on to her, for not having understood that she couldn't go on any more. I told myself that I'd abandoned her because I was frigid, as I had been all my life, as I shall be when I die, and so I was unable to hug her warmly, and that my heart was frozen, unfeeling, and that I hadn't

realised that I was desperate.

Never before had I been so devastated. I would have sworn it couldn't happen to me; I'd seen women trembling, crying and screaming, but I'd remained unaffected by their tragedy, a witness to impulses I found unintelligible, remaining silent even when I did what they asked of me to assist them. Admittedly, we were all caught up in the same drama that was so powerful, so all-embracing that I was unaware of anything that wasn't related to it, but I had come to think that I was different. And now, racked with sobs, I was forced to acknowledge too late, much too late, that I too had loved, that I was capable of suffering and that I was human after all.

I felt as if this pain would never be appeased, that it had me in its grip for ever, that it would prevent me from devoting myself to anything else, and that I was allowing it to do so. I think that that is what they call being consumed with remorse. I would no longer be able to get up, think, or even cook my food, and I would let myself slowly waste away. I was deriving a sort of morbid pleasure from imagining myself giving in to despair, when the physical pain returned. It was so sudden and so acute that it distracted me from the mental pain. I found this abrupt swing from one to the other funny, and there I was, I who not surprisingly never laugh, doubled up in agony, and laughing.

When the pain abated, I wondered whether I had ever laughed before. The women often used to laugh, and I believe I had sometimes joined in, but I was unsure. I realised then that I never thought about the past. I lived in a perpetual present and I was gradually forgetting my story. At first, I shrugged, telling myself that it would be no great loss, since nothing had happened to me, but soon I was shocked by that thought. After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear or of Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail. I made the decision almost without realising it: I would do likewise. Over the years, I'd learned to read fluently; writing is much harder, but I've never been daunted by obstacles. I do have paper and pencils, although I may not have much time. Now that I no longer go off on expeditions, no occupation calls me, so I decided to start at once. I went into the cold store, took out the meat that I would eat later and left it to defrost, so that when hunger struck, my food would soon be ready. Then I sat down at the big table and began to write.

As I write these words, my tale is over. Everything around me is in order