



# DURING THE REIGN OF THE QUEEN OF PERSIA

by Joan Chase

Introduction by Meghan O'Rourke

\$14.95 US • \$17.95 CAN • £7.99 UK • Paperback

ISBN 978-1-59017-715-0

“Moving, unusual and accomplished. . . *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* is a Norman Rockwell painting gone bad, the underside of the idyllic hometown, main-street, down-on-the-farm dream of Middle America.” —Margaret Atwood, *The New York Times*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Winner of the PEN/Hemingway Prize for First Fiction by an American author

Joan Chase’s subtle story of three generations of women negotiating lifetimes of “joy and ruin” deserves its place alongside such achievements as Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* and Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*.

The *Queen of Persia* is not an exotic figure but a fierce Ohio farmwife who presides over a household of daughters and granddaughters. The novel tells their stories through the eyes of the youngest members of the family, four cousins who spend summers on the farm, for them both a life-giving Eden and the source of terrible discoveries about desire and loss. The girls bicker and scrap, they whisper secrets at bedtime, and above all, they observe the kinds of women their mothers are and wonder what kind of women they will become. But always present is the family’s great trauma, the decline and eventual death from cancer of Gram’s daughter Grace.

A powerful story about family ties and tensions, *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* is also a book about place, charting the transformation of the old hard-scrabble Midwest into the commercial wilderness of modern America.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. The book presents a cohesive clan, with Gram at the head. What do you make of the way Chase presents motherhood and mothering in this book? Does daughterhood ever take importance over motherhood?
2. What do you make of the non-chronological sequence of the book? Summers seem to blend together in the narrative and memories zip through the text like starlings. Even the sections themselves are out of chronological order. Why might Chase present the story this way? Did this make you feel outside of the clan or part of it?
3. Chase tells the story using the first person plural. The narrating group refers to Gram’s daughters as “Aunt Libby” and “Aunt Grace” when each woman is mother to at least part of the group. The “we” also adjusts throughout the book. For example, Celia is sometimes a part of it and sometimes not. Do these adjustments and separations make sense to you? What do you make of the very end of the book in relation to the separation and cohesion of the narrative voice?

Joan Chase was born and raised in Ohio. She graduated from the University of Maryland with a degree in philosophy and history and later enrolled in the Writing Workshop of the University of Vermont. After being turned down by several publishers, *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* was released by Harper & Row in 1983 and went on to win numerous prizes, including the PEN / Hemingway Foundation Award for first fiction by an American writer.

Chase is also the author of the novel *The Evening Wolves* (1990) and the story collection *Bonneville Blue* (1991).

She lives in Massachusetts.

Meghan O'Rourke, a former editor at *The New Yorker* and *Slate*, is the author of the poetry collections *Once* and *Halflife* and a memoir, *The Long Goodbye*. Her poetry and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, and elsewhere.

She is the recipient of the inaugural May Sarton Poetry Prize, and teaches at NYU and Princeton.

NYRB Classics are available  
from all booksellers and at  
[www.nyrb.com](http://www.nyrb.com)

4. During the cheese scene in the Elinor section, the narrators tell us, “Aunt Elinor looked patient, as one who had seen a wider world, one she constantly made visible to the rest of us—accepting the fact that a wider world might mean a weaker place in the old one” (149). In what other ways does the wider world infringe upon the farm?
5. For millennia, one of the great literary characters has been Death. How does Chase treat death in this book? Does death become part of the landscape—simply another facet of the otherwise idyllic life on the farm—or interrupt it violently?
6. This is not a book in which animals receive particularly kind treatment. Grandad talks dirty to his cows then drags their carcasses out to a corner of the field. Gram has a tendency to want kittens drowned in a sack. Is this suggesting something more than that farmers are unsentimental about animals? What do you make of the extended description of the part-wild Queenie in the Gram section (pages 204-205)?
7. Chase divides the book into five sections, each for a character or couple: Celia, Grandad, Grace and Neil, Elinor, and Gram. Are these characters the most important in the book? If not, what do you think Chase accomplishes in giving them sections? Are the sections telling the story of each character, or is something else at play?
8. The Gram section (starting on page 177) is not a particularly kind portrait of her. In fact, we get a much more sympathetic description of her life in the Grandad section. Consider how sympathy works in the book. Sometimes the characters are despicable and other times they are easy to sympathize with. Sometimes they are silly and sometimes they are full of sound and fury. On page 78, Gram (then just called ‘Lil’) suggests that the sympathy of others weakens her. Do you think she’s right? How does this connect to the occasionally ugly ways Chase depicts her characters?
9. How are male characters treated in this book? Are they well-rounded characters with nuanced motivations and conflicts, or are they merely supporting actors, proping up the real work of the female characters? Does this change section to section?
10. The book is filled with hints of sex, but it rarely discusses the act in a straightforward way. When Gram talks about it, she talks about a violent burden, almost another level of daily abuse. The description of Anne’s rape (page 57) is very brief and leaps quickly to frightening images of bloated, bloody rats in a grain silo. But are there any other values placed on sex other than the negative ones? Do the Aunts seem to have a different approach to sex and sensuality? How do you see it play out?
11. What does this book tell you about dependence and independence? Gram clearly values being self-sufficient (see page 70, for example), but she also opens her doors to her daughters and their families, buys them houses, and generally sets up a lifestyle in which very few people actually have to work. Is there any way in which she teaches her family independence?
12. On page 150, Aunt Libby says of Christian Science, “It would be wonderful if you could believe it. But I just can’t understand how a person can turn their back on all the terrible things that happen and say they aren’t real.” Does that sentence have any bearing on the way of telling that Chase establishes? The book is filled with pain, but is the pain ever *just* bad? Similarly, are any of the good memories ever *just* good? Is there something about using children as narrators that allows for a kind of nostalgia even for the most bitter of memories?