



Photo by Jill Krementz

Iris Owens (née Klein) (1929–2008) was born and raised in New York City, the daughter of a professional gambler. She attended Barnard College, was briefly married, and then moved to Paris, where she fell in with Alexander Trocchi, the editor of the legendary avant-garde journal *Merlin* and a notorious heroin addict, and supported herself by producing pornography (under the name of Harriet Daimler) for Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press. Back in the United States, Owens wrote *After Claude*, which came out in 1973. A second novel, *Hope Diamond Refuses*, loosely based on her marriage to an Iranian prince, was published in 1984.

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AFTER CLAUDE

By Iris Owens

Introduction by Emily Prager

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“Like our best women writers (Joan Didion, Joyce Carol Oates), Owens is not afraid to take risks...Owens is a highly intelligent writer and a fiendishly sardonic one—to the extent that her outrageous wit rescues her freaky Jewish anti-heroine from becoming a pain in the Asphalt Jungle. On every page wisecracks explode like anti-personnel mines. We laugh, nervously perhaps, but often.” — *Newsweek*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Harriet is not a particularly pleasant human being. Indeed, she is a decidedly *unpleasant* one. She is messy, self-centered, inconsiderate and loud, and it is hard to imagine a more wrong-headed, self-serving vision of the world and the people around her than that which Harriet displays in *After Claude's* vitriolic first-person narration. After spending a few pages with Harriet, we are hardly surprised that her friend Rhoda-Regina kicked her out and threw her belongings into the street, nor that her French boyfriend Claude has finally reached the end of his rope and decided that he has had it, and he wants her out. Harriet neither works nor cleans; she sits around all day watching quiz shows and feeding her inner resentment at the ways in which the people in her life mistreat and under-appreciate her.

And yet, despite all her bitterness and delusions, Harriet is an entertaining, addictive and, indeed, at times even insightful narrator. She is unsparing in her critique of her friend Maxine's sugar-coated vision of her life of bliss with her overweight periodontist husband. Nor does she pull any punches in tearing to pieces her director boyfriend Claude's leftie, bleeding-heart fetish for junkies and protesters. You wouldn't want to live with Harriet or, heaven forbid, to *be* her, but the two-hundred-page roller coaster ride through her mind which *After Claude* takes us on is, in these uptight, politically correct times of ours, perhaps just what the doctor ordered.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Harriet has a particularly marked voice as a narrator. Describe this voice and think about how it colors our understanding and experience of the events of the novel. Is the voice in which Harriet narrates different in any significant way from the voice she uses when speaking to other characters? Can you imagine the novel written in the third person? How about from Claude's or Rhoda-Regina's perspective? What would be lost and what would be gained by this?
2. How reliable is Harriet as a narrator? Do we trust anything that she says? How do we decide which things to believe and which to dismiss? Would we trust Rhoda-Regina or Claude more? Does reliability even matter to us as readers of Harriet's narrative, or are we content just to be swept away into the biting, absurd world which Harriet inhabits and creates for herself?
3. In their fight after the movie at the beginning of the novel, Claude lashes out at Harriet, telling her, “Has anyone ever told you what a terrible bore you are?...You don't communicate. You trample over other people's feelings. You don't even listen to what anyone else says, except to tell them how stupid they are” (pp. 21-2). How apt is this critique? Why do you think Harriet is so unreceptive to other people's experiences and take on the world? What would it cost her to let down her hard shell and actually listen and try to understand and respect others?

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The Furies

by Janet Hobhouse (introduction by Daphne Merkin)

The Unpossessed

by Tess Slesinger (introduction by Elizabeth Hardwick)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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4. Iris Owens wrote a number of highly popular erotic novels under the pseudonym Harriet Daimler, and the vulgar and smutty are frequent preoccupations of Harriet's narrative. For example, when Maxine asks Harriet what she uses to keep her complexion so beautiful, Harriet answers, "Sperm" (p. 46). Later, towards the end of the novel, Owens includes a particularly detailed description of Harriet masturbating under Roger's tutelage (pp. 185-91). What is the role of the vulgar and the erotic in the novel? For Harriet, is there any connection between the needs of the body and emotions such as love and affection? Think, in particular, of her experience with Roger and of her "altruistic" efforts on Rhoda-Regina's behalf. Finally, do you think that the fact that Owens's pseudonym and her protagonist share the name Harriet is a coincidence? Might the Harriet of *After Claude* "be" the author of Owens's erotic novels? Can we imagine Harriet as the writer of such novels?
5. *After Claude* is set in 1970s New York City and includes frequent references to particular New York streets and landmarks. How important is New York City for the novel? Could the events be transplanted to, for example, Chicago or Philadelphia? Are Harriet and the novel she narrates in any way distinct products of the city in which they grew up?
6. Owens called her novel *After Claude*, and in its opening line, Harriet declares, "I left Claude, the French rat" (p. 3). And yet, as becomes very quickly apparent, it is Claude who leaves Harriet, rather than the other way around. Moreover, contrary to the title, it is not until page 125—that is, more than halfway through the novel—that Harriet is finally without Claude. Why do you think Owens chose such an, as it were, inaccurate title for her novel? Is this the title that Harriet herself would have chosen?
7. One of features of *After Claude* which helps to make it an addictive romp rather than an excruciating vicarious self-flagellation is the novel's frequent humor. What is it about *After Claude* that makes it so funny? Are we laughing along with Harriet, or do the things which strike us, as readers, as funny not register with her as such? Do we feel bad when we find ourselves laughing? What was your favorite funny bit?
8. Think about gender roles in the novel. Claude is annoyed at Harriet, among other things, because she doesn't take his shirts to the cleaner and the apartment is always filthy. Does his annoyance stem, as Harriet would have it, from the fact that he wants her to perform the female role of homemaker for him, or does Claude just want her to do *something* rather than sitting around all day eating his food, complaining at him and making his living quarters a mess? How would Harriet's situation be different if she had a job and could support herself? Also think about the gender roles which we witness in the scene with Roger at the end of the novel. What feminist concerns, if any, does the novel raise? Can it rightly be considered a "feminist" novel?
9. Do you like Harriet? Does she have any redeeming features? Would you want to be her friend? Why do you think that Maxine, after dropping Harriet for three years, decided to come back and rekindle her friendship with her?
10. Is *After Claude* a Jewish novel? What is the role of Judaism—cultural, religious or culinary—in the novel? What is the role of religion or spirituality more generally?
11. Why does Harriet sometimes say that her parents are alive (for example, in her conversation with Maxine on pp. 47-8) but at others that they are dead (for example, in her fight with Claude on p. 23)? Why do you think she does this? What other flat-out lies does she tell? Given what she says about her parents (she tells Maxine, "I miss them like I miss having the clap" p. 48.), what can we piece together about Harriet's home life? What effect do you think this has had on her future inability to function or to form healthy, lasting relationships?
12. Maxine tells Harriet, "The thing you won't believe is that Rhoda-Regina is not your enemy. Far from it, she's worried about you. We've discussed how you lay, day after day, flat on the mattress in her studio, either too exhausted or too afraid to go out. She thinks that something awful happened to you in Europe, and I do, too" (p. 56). Do you think that Maxine and Rhoda-Regina are right? What do you think happened in Paris to cause Harriet to return so suddenly in such a horrible state?
13. Think about the ending of the novel. Why do you think Owens chose to end it how and when she did? What do you think will happen to Harriet now? Has she changed in any way and learned anything, or will she simply continue her downward spiral?