

★ **I Who Have Never Known Men**

Jacqueline Harpman

Ros Schwartz, Translator

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Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men* is a brilliant, spare science fiction novel in which a curious girl asks what remains after everything has been stripped away.

In the beginning, the girl is caged with thirty-nine women in a bleak underground bunker, tended by men guards with a boundless supply of food, water, and electricity. The women share fleeting memories of a time before; they don't know why they were imprisoned, or where they are. With no attachment to the past, the girl feels like an outsider. She proves her value as the timekeeper, telling time by counting her heartbeats, and mirrors the passing years as she matures from a child to a woman.

When a siren sounds, the guards flee. The women free themselves with keys left, by chance, in the lock. They find that the world above ground is as sterile as their prison, a "boundless desolate plain, under a sky that is nearly always grey." In this strange and barren place, the women build homes, care for each other, and search for other survivors. They also seek hints about the "insoluble mysteries" they face. They glimpse scant moments of beauty—a remembered hymn; the "changing shapes of the clouds, softly falling rain...slowly moving stars, and a few flowers."

As the women age and die, the girl faces the future with the courage of a classic existential hero: "I felt the burden of the inexplicable, of my life, of that world to which I was the sole witness. I had nothing else to do in it but continue my journey."

Translated from the French, *I Who Have Never Known Men* is a radiant, austere post-apocalyptic novel that poses profound questions about hope, surrender, beauty, loss, and the meaning of community.

KRISTEN RABE (May / June 2022)

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