

INTRODUCTION

I AM honored to write this introduction for Iris's book but I think you should know she and I were not speaking. When you read *After Claude*, you will understand how perfect this actually is—what a stroke of genius on the part of fate and her evil handmaiden, literary criticism, that I should be the one chosen to discuss her in print, and postmortem at that, but then it was through writing about Iris's work that I first encountered Iris—in 1984, I reviewed her second novel, *Hope Diamond Refuses*, favorably, for *The New York Times*.

We had a mutual friend, the satirist Lynn Phillips, who introduced us after that, and I recall quite clearly walking over to Iris's apartment in the Village, where we both lived, meeting her, and then spending the next nine hours on her sofa laughing hysterically. We had things in common. We were both humorists, bohemians, and intellectuals, and we were trying to live in the '80s in New York City, which, between cocaine and AIDS, was a period of such frothing shallowness mixed with such bone-crushing sadness that it was

an unending font of human mortification—a state which we both revered deeply.

I did not know much about Iris's days with the Olympia Press in Paris but my father did, and he was impressed that I met her. My father was exactly that American soldier that Maurice Girodias was out to target in 1953 when he enlisted the twenty-year-old Iris and other writers for the literary magazine *Merlin* in creating pornography to make some money. Girodias christened her Harriet Daimler and, under this pseudonym, she went on to write six novels for his Traveller's Companion series. The most famous of these, *Darling*, is a lengthy and rather vicious rape fantasy, which makes sense since the conundrum of rape—that in fantasy it's a turn-on but in reality a horrific nightmare—was the kind of female madness that Iris was interested in.

We never talked about her stint at the Olympia Press because in those days it was quite common for humorists to have gotten their start in pornographic books or magazines, particularly black humorists because, and this is so hard to believe now it's like saying we all once owned horses, until the '70s, really, you could not talk or write about sex in public, much less make fun of it, without being arrested or charged with witchcraft. But shady publications welcomed us with open legs.

Reading *After Claude* again, I was struck by how much the main character, Harriet, resembles Iris in kind of a hyperbolic way. Iris had, like Harriet, an incredibly Semitic beauty—"exotic cheekbones, you'd wonder what Egyptian tomb had been pilfered"—and a brilliant intelligence which

manifested in a devastating napalm-like wit. She was the mistress of understatement. Reading throwaway lines like “as an American my war against injustice knows no bounds” brings me right back to sitting on the couch with her. And like Harriet, Iris preferred life to just take its course, accepted being sometimes mangled in its wake, and truly enjoyed hanging out.

It is in Harriet’s fathomless neediness, in her manic desperation to find a man, any man to barnacle on to, that the fiction appears, because when I knew her, Iris was a loner. There was always some genius, creative guy mooning around her, and, true, she had been married twice and loved a party, but because of her insistence on honesty mixed with a very gentle sweetness, she had a love/hate relationship with humanity; as Harriet puts it, hers “was a large and generous nature, and, therefore, it [was] not like [her] to notice how base practically everyone is.”

After Claude is the hilarious story of a breakup as it takes place in the dissolving mind of a brilliantly funny, parasitic ne’er-do-well. But it is also a withering statement about intelligence in women. On the one hand, Harriet says, “I have . . . learned never to be amazed at what men will resort to when cornered by a woman’s intelligence,” a sentiment with which any feminist of salt could agree. On the other hand, Harriet also says, referring to Claude whom she doesn’t love, “I reached up and grabbed his arm, clinging to it as though it were the overhanging branch between me and the fatal drop,” as if she cannot even think of how to survive without him. This predilection of bright women to twist

themselves into bizarre submissive postures from which only humor can release them is something die-hard feminists will never address. But Iris and I were in agreement: there is nothing that warms a smart girl's heart like a smile on the face of a sadist.

Throughout the book, Harriet is psychologically paralyzed. Whether from depression, mononucleosis, or mind-numbing laziness, she stays in bed most of the day, watches daytime quiz shows, and seems to be on a quest to accomplish as little as possible. Even when Claude finally throws her out of the house, she is instantly thumbing the next free ride, and when she flags down Roger the guru at the Chelsea Hotel, she's ready to climb right on board despite his rather blistering account of the domination that awaits her at the hands of his boss, the Mansonesque Victor. "You mean nobody has to work," she crows, singling out the most salient point of his discussion of the commune. "Living is our work," he replies to her delighted relief.

It occurred to me as I read that Harriet's paralysis might be a veiled allusion to Iris's struggle with writing. She was one of those writers who hates doing the writing and avoids it like the plague and is tortured night and day by the specter of what should be written. This was, of course, in large measure due to the perfection she required of her jokes and the perceptions behind them, "the terrible isolation of integrity" Harriet calls it, as well as to the extreme sensitivity she needed to produce them, a sensitivity which makes Harriet's descent into madness at once excruciatingly funny, all too familiar, and terribly scary. Iris's preference for the fast,

exciting ingestion of life rather than its painful, drawn-out, solo regurgitation is something with which I can well identify. If every woman's fears and frailties can be hysterically articulated in one book, this is it.

I asked Lynn Phillips for her favorite joke of Iris's. "My personal favorite," she e-mailed, "was from a write-in interview of downtown New York City authors in that neighborhood newspaper, *The Villager*. The question put to the interviewees was, 'What was the biggest lie you have ever been told?' The other writers gave answers like, 'The check is in the mail,' and 'This won't get you pregnant.' But Iris's answer was, 'Work will make you free.'

"It was a joke about the American dream," Lynn continued. "It was a joke about being Jewish. (The Nazis erected a sign at the gates of Auschwitz reading, *Arbeit macht frei*, or 'work makes freedom.') It was a joke about writer's block. (When your standards of psychological honesty were as strict as hers, impending deadlines feel like advancing storm troopers.) More, it was a joke about the second-wave feminist delusion that entering the workforce would somehow liberate women from male domination—rather than simply changing the signage. On top of those jokes, there is also, of course, the joke of finding career coaches, the Nazis, literary agents and feminists telling her the same lie. But the biggest joke of all is the tacit puzzle that underlies it . . . if work won't make you free, what will?"

One time I took a friend of mine over to meet Iris. She was a French-Canadian girl, very pretty in a kind of *Little Women* way, an affect she summoned up by wearing

Victorian-inspired clothes. She was one of those girls who looks like a child but has a mind like a steel trap. She was an agent in the music business and one of the first people I knew to make money playing the market on the Internet. We were talking about pool parties and she suddenly confessed that she hated them because she didn't particularly care for her legs. Iris stopped dead and turned to her. "Are you looking for perfection?" she asked.

After Claude is definitely a meditation on the ends to which intelligent women will resort not to use their intelligence. But the latter half of the book is a scorching lampoon of the 1970s everyone-loves-each-other gooey groupthink that made the period so fertile for con men. But here, Victor, the cult leader, and his pathologically understanding lackey, Roger, are also in danger. "It's been a long time, many moons, since a chick pulled me into her movie," Roger snorts, leaving one wondering whether he has an inkling of what he and Victor might be getting themselves into if they seduce and recruit Harriet.

I can't remember exactly why Iris and I weren't speaking, but I know I was in good company. Over the years Iris found herself no longer on speaking terms with all sorts of friends, including Samuel Beckett, Susan Sontag, Pauline Kael, Ad Reinhardt, Rudy Wurlitzer, and Robert Mapplethorpe. Iris liked smart company. I believe she accused me of stealing her joke or something, and I was so outraged by the fact that she would accuse me of such a thing that I flounced out of her apartment and, before we knew it, years had passed. But the truth is that right before it happened I

became a mother, and suddenly it wasn't easy to hang out and time was scarce and babysitters required. (One of the more interesting revelations of parenthood is with which of your friends you would pay to have dinner.)

My relationship with Iris was too delicate to become casual. It was like a jazz riff that needed to spin out over hours, to build and build to the perfect rejoinder, the one possible topper in the elusive but celestial humorous rhythm. You had to be good, really good. That's how Iris liked it.

One night, late into the evening in the early '90s, we were, I admit, blasted, and laughing like crazy when Iris went dead serious. She fixed me with her smart, black eyes and gave me some advice I have followed to this day. "Whenever you feel yourself wanting to do good," she said somberly, "run in the opposite direction."

—EMILY PRAGER