



The Women

Hilton Als

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A *New York Times* Notable Book

Daring and fiercely original, *The Women* is at once a memoir, a psychological study, a sociopolitical manifesto, and an incisive adventure in literary criticism. It is conceived as a series of portraits analyzing the role that sexual and racial identity played in the lives and work of the writer's subjects: his mother, a self-described "Negress," who would not be defined by the limitations of race and gender; the mother of Malcolm X, whose mixed-race background and eventual descent into madness contributed to her son's misogyny and racism; brilliant, Harvard-educated Dorothy Dean, who rarely identified with other blacks or women, but deeply empathized with white gay men; and the late Owen Dodson, a poet and dramatist who was female-identified and who played an important role in the author's own social and intellectual formation.

Hilton Als submits both racial and sexual stereotypes to his inimitable scrutiny with relentless humor and sympathy. The results are exhilarating. *The Women* is that rarest of books: a memorable work of self-investigation that creates a form of all its own.

The Women Details

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Author : Hilton Als

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From Reader Review *The Women* for online ebook

Dinah says

Although I need to read this book again before I can make any claims on understanding, I can say now that I admire Als' memoir. While his take on race and gender are sweeping and problematic, his characterizations are incredible and many of the difficult truths he tells about being a marginalized person are undeniable even in their ugliness. The section on fag hags was particularly cutting. It is hard to imagine Als writing a genuinely likeable person, but that is the charm of the story -- the characters are unpleasant and opinionated and refuse your pity if not your judgment, Als himself included.

Laura Tanenbaum says

Hilton Als is one of our best essayists and critics and one of our best writers, full-stop. These portraits of those who shaped him have nothing and everything to do with the familiar story of thwarted lives. Als' keen and compassionate eye traces what happens ambition and desire go unfulfilled - they do not die or explode but curdle into neurosis and eccentricity. Als is among a handful of male writers who have the interest and ability to imagine what women's lives look like from the inside out - his meditation on his identification with the women in his life does not necessarily answer why or how, but the evidence of this rare craft is on every page.

Cymru Roberts says

I don't often stop and gasp when reading non-fiction. I don't know if you can call *The Women* non-fiction; perhaps a better classification (if one is necessary) for this book is wisdom literature.

I first came across Mr. Als from a tweet, saying that he was receiving some award. I looked him up, came across a review he'd done of "2666: The Play" and found his insights interesting. He'd obviously read and apprehended the Bolaño book, so I wanted to see what else he'd done. I read an article in *The New Yorker* in which he referred to Beyoncé as "Knowles" and I thought, OK, this dude is on the level.

I wasn't prepared for *The Women*. This is a book I deem absolutely essential to the contemporary conversation regarding race and politics. Mr. Als would probably cringe to read such a sentence, but I say this precisely because he operates from a level so unconcerned (but not aloof) to contemporary notions of "oppression", "patriarchy", "black", "gay". He writes for *himself*, and in this deep sense of subjectivity an entire new way of looking at such groups is available to us; through books like these we are taken closer to the point of seeing people (let alone peoples) as *individuals*. This subjectivity might not be what is en vogue right now on the right or the left, but it is the only mode that could ever hope to see another person on their own terms, which is to say, to try and *see people as they see themselves*. This may indeed be impossible—we can only view others through our own lens—but it is the closest thing to equality that exists.

An example of the wisdom held in this book:

"But 'maleness' is not a viable construct in colored life. Colored life is matriarchal; any matriarchal

society can be defined as colored."

These two sentences shatter what I thought I knew about the terms "male" "colored" "matriarchy" "patriarchy" and their meanings in contemporary America. But Als doesn't speak of a matriarchy as if it is the antidote to patriarchy and all of its problems. Using his mother as the model Negress, he shows that matriarchy comes with its own problems that are extremely complex; it's a mode steeped in self-sabotage and masochism, one that seeks furiously to define itself as a wholly separate entity from everything else, animate and inanimate, while simultaneously trying to hold together everything around it. Freud said religion was about a search for the Father. That search produced the God of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus, monumentally complex and problematic figures. The search for the Mother as Als describes it is no less fraught.

I found myself, as I always do, trying to relate to Als as a person. I find him intimidating—he is erudite, can be scathing, and the opposite of myself in every classification without having any of the hangups associated with those distinctions. The point isn't to try and relate to him (I wonder how many doe-eyed white boys lavish him with praise and respect, and if he tries to sleep with them or not). Als knows that he is writing for himself, in order to try and understand himself through the analysis of the people he cares about most. In his deep quest for self-understanding, I'm content to be a fly on the wall, reading, trying to learn as much as I can.

katie says

Quote I like, " For years I could not face my own complicity with the man in the blue cotton shirt and blue cotton pants. I could not face the way in which I had wanted him to make me a Negress, or the fact that I wanted to be consumed by him so that I could be a part of a narrative as compelling to me as my mother's was, a narrative in which I too would be involved with a bad man, resulting in heartache that would eventually lead to depression, an endless suicide, and the attention that can be garnered from all that. I was dwarfed by my mother's spectacular sense of narrative and disaster: she could have been a great writer..." Makes me think about how our greatest pain as humans are all part of our narrative, the story we tell ourselves to define ourselves. But not all that often are we willing to take responsibility for that role we play. We create it.

I also liked, " She had the gift of language, but she couldn't use it. Her drinking brought forth the sense that language had turned to waste in her twilight mind, which lived in the past while she went on uttering the old, old female story: her inability to forgive life for what it had not allowed her to claim: herself." This reminded me of my mom, and her sisters. And make me think about the distance between their experience and my own.

Kevin says

Three essays looking at gender race and identity told in both memoir and literary criticism. Tough going and dense at times but ultimately shimmering, redemptive and worth it.

Oliver Bateman says

The first essay, on Als' mother, is one of the best American essays of the 20th century. It might be better than anything James Baldwin ever wrote. The second, on fag hags/flame dames in general and Dorothy Dean in particular, is tremendous. The third, which covers Als' affair with the African-American playwright Owen Dodson, is a bit underdeveloped in comparison. What was the sex between the two actually like? Als continues to maintain a weird distance from Dodson that surely existed due to the age gap, but now, maintained in retrospect, appears to conceal more than it reveals.

But man, those first two pieces. A++.

Laura says

Somehow I came across this inventive memoir from New Yorker theater columnist Hilton Als. It's a really creative mash-up portrait of his husbandless immigrant mother and sister interspersed with cultural commentary on the archetype of the Negress, specifically that of Malcolm X's mother, the before-her-time "fag hag" intellectual Dorothy Dean and of Owen Dodson, Als's erstwhile, older, female-identified lover.

Leeann says

The only part worth reading is Als' first section about his mother and Malcolm X's mother. Beyond that, he gets high and mighty imagining what a woman's life must be like and trails on for too long about Dorothy Dean, dehumanizing her in his attempts to make her visible.

Floyd says

An uneven performance. The section about the author's mother is searing and memorable the rest of the book is rather mannered and precious. There's intelligence and talent here but this author needs to restrain his pretentious impulses.

Starlon says

I started reading this book sometime last year when I was floundering in poetry workshop. I was looking for a voice that was distinctly mine yet I was really worried if I was responding to my blackness. At the time this book came as a revelation. Here is a queer writer who wasn't afraid of speaking down on the black identity poets that came to prominence in the 70s. I guess I always felt like since they were on the ass end of history due to their skin color they were of some worth. Specifically Nikki Giovanni. Well ol' Als really destroyed her.

But for whatever reason, all the fervor I had for this book waned and I never read the last essay until a week or so ago. I devoured it. I picked it up really just starrng at the words but all of a sudden I was sucked deeply

into the dust and decay he described. I will be coming back to this book again. I am sure there are some jewels I haven't savored. Might read *White Girls* sometime later this year. In some sense Als seems like he desperately wants to Baldwin and I can't blame him either. These essays sit on the border of essay and fiction at some points.

Fernando says

Hilton Als me desbarata. "*White Girls*" es una obra maestra, pero su primer libro, "*The Women*", se acerca. La combinación de memoria, ensayo, crítica y ficción es inusual y poderosa, lo cual significa que también toma riesgos que no logra sortear. El libro gira en torno al concepto de "the Negress", que le sirve a Als para identificarse, a su mamá, a Dorothy Dean, a la mamá de Malcolm X y al poeta Owen Dodson. Cruzando de uno y otro, el libro se aventura a hacer mucho daño. Es espeso y cruel.

Jeff says

It is beautiful and uncomfortable, vivid and dusty, much like memory.

Regina Clarkinia says

What I did was ate this book for so much dinner. Like a box of kfc! like cheese-crust pizza! Like buttery popcorn! This book is fattening. This book's words, published and popular :), are things I feel and have felt for like ever. It is good when something that has been so private and of highest concern, but private, is voiced by someone and is published and popular. It is opulence. And to those other goodreads reviewers, unpaid like me, who say mr als is pretentious, I say yes I know isn't he though. The way the world we humans invent is so deliberate, flat-footed, brutal and desperate... how else would compassionate intelligence come across, except as pretentious.

Bradley says

Hilton Als is a tough read. He's a tough read but a great read. I had to read this book for my gender and sexuality class.

This book is broken into three parts. The first part Als writes about his mother and his sisters and how they helped shape him.

The middle part deals with NYC socialite and proclaimed "fruit fly", Dorothy Dean. She's my new hero. Google her now. She's the bomb.

The last part deals with Als and his intergenerational love affair with the Harlem Renaissance writer, Owen Dodson.

"*The Women*" was a rough read because of the way it's written. But, if you can get into it, the journey is

unforgettable.

Jenny says

So my reading resolution for 2019 was to read at least 1 book that I own but have not yet read each month and *The Women* was my first choice. I usually love to read Als' writing, but I think maybe this particular set of essays was a little early on in his career and I could not connect with it as well. Some of the assumptions he seems to make about women did not seem accurate to me. For example, he comments on how it is difficult for women to be friends with other women. Something that I have never personally found to be true. There were also other comments on women putting up with behavior from men because women are somehow biologically or socially trained to do so. I just don't think that is a universal truth. Otherwise, I did enjoy his prose and found the subject matter intriguing.
