

# I Who Have Never Known Men

## and Resistance with Resurgence

Emma Hurst

*The end of the world: what if I told you it could be here? A normal person might think this statement to be ridiculous, a fear mongering idea that only a few crazies could think to be true. But the world is always ending, an eternal process of entropy, encapsulated by our little world in the limitless expanse of the universe.*

**B**ut what do we say when our personal world is ending, or when it has gone beyond the end? The thing is that humans have an attachment to our daily routine. When we read the news of wars abroad, concerning governmental affairs going on at home, we wrinkle our brow and set aside our phone. Current events remain a fleeting moment—we consider it for a moment while sipping bitter coffee, then we check our email. After all, what can we do? The increasingly dystopian landscape we live in might offer an answer. We peer into the digital landscape filled with tweets, TikToks, Instagram posts, observing the endless feed that we are somehow wholly separate from but deeply intertwined with. Despite what our feelings toward this media may be, there is no denying one thing: it reflects a cultural consciousness, and one that is constantly shifting.

In 2022, the book side of TikTok (also known as BookTok) was overtaken with a swarm of creators focused on one novel in particular: Jacqueline Harpman's *I Who Have Never Known Men*. A novel that previously only sold a few copies a year exploded into an online phenomenon, fixing our attention on a dystopia amidst rising political tensions. A reissue of the novel sold a hundred thousand copies in 2024, exceeding typical expectations for such a work. Yet, this novel does ask the same crucial question: what do you do at the end of your world?

The novel follows the story of the narrator Child, a young girl who lives in captivity among a group of women in a cage in a bunker. The women are unaware of the day or time and afforded no privacy; they are guarded day and night by men who do not speak. These women have had names and lives before their imprisonment, but they cannot remember more than fleeting details about what brought them there.

The women know simply nothing about their circumstances, not even if they are on Earth. Child is different from the rest, younger and with no memory of "before."

**C**hild struggles with adjusting for her differences from the women. She yearns to learn the secrets of the women, to be educated. Any withholding of information enrages her.

So, we see Child's grating development in a dystopian landscape, stripped down to somehow less than her womanhood. Eventually, after days upon days of the same routine, a siren goes off, and the men leave (with one leaving the keys in the cage door). The women wait a few moments, and Child runs forward to open the gate and frees the group. After reaching the surface, the women discover that they are on their own in an unfamiliar land and begin to explore.

They soon discover other bunkers similar to their own, but with cages of corpses having been abandoned by the guards. Their days soon consist of traveling from bunker to bunker, obtaining any supplies that were left behind by the guards. The women believe they will eventually find civilization, other people, something—but they never do.

Members of the group begin to pass away, and Child quickly realizes that she will become a woman, and she will be alone. And this is how the novel ends, with Child having never known men, and living within this solitude. Her world as she knew it had ended and so had the world before hers.

*I Who Have Never Known Men* defies genres, following the story of Child as she faces her reality and her world. We see a story of a woman's becoming as she experiences an environment unknown to the older women but only known to her, and how she finds a certain freedom in her new reality.

Now, this book may seem too dystopian and obscure to have grasped the attention of a TikTok trend. And yet, it did—notably rising in popularity after the 2024 U.S. election in November. This brings us back to our question: what can we do at the end of the world?

**W**hen it feels like the world is ending, sometimes the answer can be right in front of us. Maybe not the answer, but an answer. As we live our day-to-day lives, the weight of the world and its endings press on us, making their presence known.

We continue on, cycling through the news and feeling helpless. But the algorithm that brings us this news could also be what saves us. *I Who Have Never Known Men* had a resurgence that was entirely unexpected, with hundreds of thousands of users hearing Harpman's story of a woman finding her way in an ending world. This connection, this cultural shift, can be harnessed into resistance.

Even in the face of absolute desperation, Child and the rest of the women do not give in to their circumstances. They find the ability to resist in the same circumstances that confined them, discovering resilience in Child who is different from all the rest. Child sees the difference in the women, even at the beginning of their journey outside of the bunker as the women discuss the possibility of being forced into captivity once again:

"Not me," said Annabel. "I'd rather die, I won't go back. They can drug me as much as they like, I'm sure I could turn the most carefully dosed drug into a lethal poison."

"Same here," said Greta. "I'll stop breathing. It must be a matter of willpower, I'm sure you can stop your heart from beating." (Harpman)

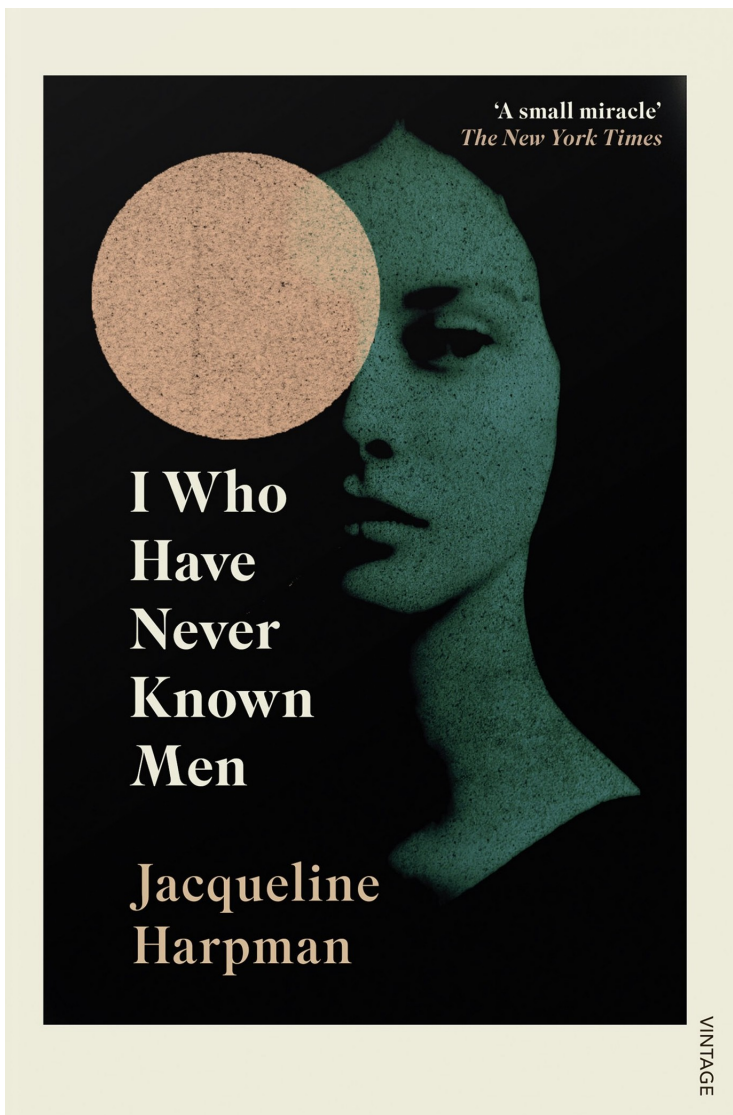


Image credit, Anna Morrison, cover design for Vintage, 2019.

# Rebellion

was stirring, it was plain that this time, they would not be caught unawares, as must have happened in the past, that they wouldn't allow themselves to be over-taken by events like terrified creatures who could be led to the slaughterhouse. They drew themselves up and gazed at the landscape. They planted their feet more firmly on the ground, and there were smiles. (Harpman)

**C**hild notes in her observation that the women, noticeably more fortified than before, will accept death before another forced submission. They draw up plans for such an event and won't risk being treated as creatures being led to the slaughter.

Gazing at the landscape, the reader can feel the resistance bubbling up inside these women, who are now taking charge of their fate regardless of where these conditions may lead them. They even find joy in this resistance, smiling, as resistance comes with the possibility of freedom.

Harpman provides an invitation to the reader here: how can we, despite the bleakness of our world, steel ourselves for inevitable rebellion? Child, as the women carry on in their journey of traveling between bunkers, recalls a call to action from one of the women during her usual bouts of speculation.

"After our escape, Dorothy used to say: 'Let's organize our life, let's not waste our thoughts.' The fact was, I could use my thoughts as I pleased, the idea of wasting them was absurd" (Harpman).

Our thoughts, while being possibly the most elusive aspect of the human condition, still offer us another method of operation. As Child says, thoughts can be used in any way possible, and it would be wise not to waste them. We can observe the world and its approach into possible disaster, desperately clutching to what we still have, yet organization of our thoughts to mobilize is our salvation.

While we may never be certain when the end is here, it seems natural to be apprehensive. But rather than continuing with the status quo, continuing to maintain decorum, maybe the moment calls for something else entirely. A resurgence, just as this novel had, as an interruption of the current moment, another shift in the cultural conscience.

Let us consider taking after Child, after the women: resist even in the bleakest of circumstances and organize thought into action. Better to resist now, rather than later.



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