



The blazing world

By Siri Hustvedt

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Genre & subject

Women artists

Teachers

Psychological fiction

Mystery fiction

Man Booker Prize Nominee for Longlist (2014)

Synopsis

When Professor Hess stumbles across an unusual letter to the editor in an art journal, he is surprised to have known so little about the brilliant and mysterious artist it describes, the late Harriet Burden. Intrigued by her story, and by the explosive scandal surrounding her legacy, he begins to interview those who knew her, hoping to separate fact from fiction, only to find himself tumbling down a rabbit's hole of personal and psychological intrigue.

Before she died, Harriet had claimed credit for three shows of contemporary art that had been the biggest sensations of the previous decade, sending the critics into a tailspin, since no one had even thought to connect the three shows before. The sculptures and paintings, while all of unquestionable quality, would seem to have nothing in common, and of the three young male artists who presented the work, one has fled the country, another isn't talking to anyone, and the third appears to have committed suicide. As Hess seeks to solve the puzzle, he soon finds everyone has a different story to tell, and that nothing, and no one, is as it seems.

Author biography

Siri Hustvedt (born February 19, 1955) is an American novelist and essayist. Hustvedt is the author of a book of poetry, six novels, two books of essays, and several works of non-fiction. She is best known for *What I Loved* (2003) and *The Summer Without Men* (2011), both were international bestsellers. Her work has been translated into over thirty languages.

Siri Hustvedt attended public school in her hometown Northfield, Minnesota and received a degree from the Cathedral School in Bergen, Norway, in 1973. She graduated from St. Olaf College with a B.A. in History in 1977. She moved to New York City to attend Columbia University as a graduate student in 1978. Her first published work was a poem in *The Paris Review*.

Discussion starters

- How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored?
- Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities. Why do characters do what they do? Are their actions justified? Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship). How has the past shaped their lives? Do you admire or disapprove of them?
- Discuss the plot: Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting? Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns? Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?
- Talk about the book's structure. Does the time-line move forward chronologically? Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints? Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way she did?
- What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas?
- What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?
- Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?
- If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?
- Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

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