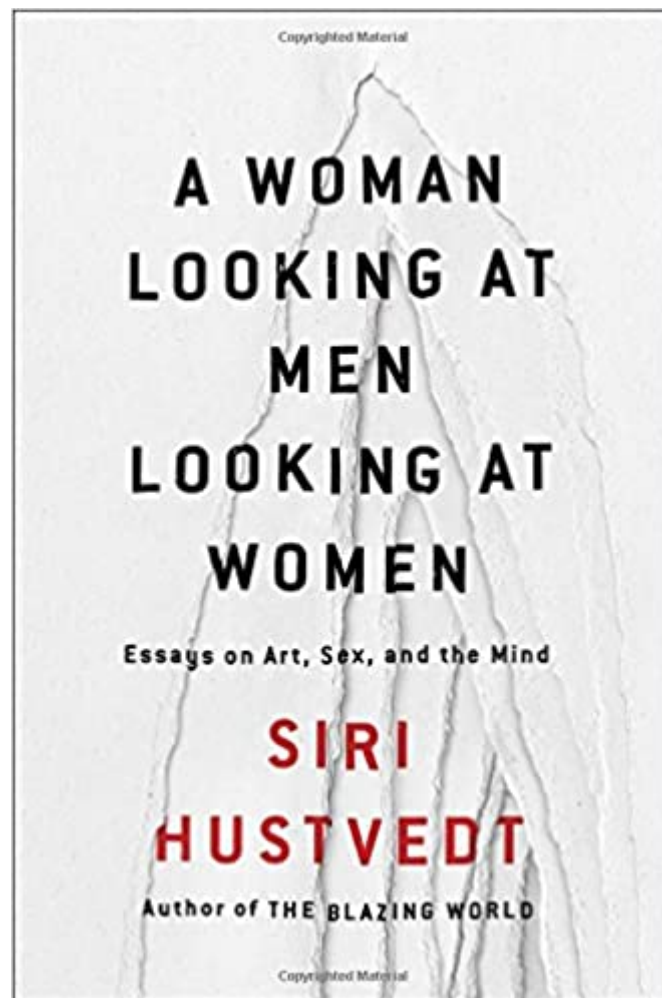




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# **A Woman Looking At Men Looking At Women: Essays On Art, Sex, And The Mind**



## Synopsis

A compelling and radical collection of essays on art, feminism, neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy from prize-winning novelist Siri Hustvedt, the acclaimed author of *The Blazing World* and *What I Loved*. Siri Hustvedt has always been fascinated by biology and how human perception works. She is a lover of art, the humanities, and the sciences. She is a novelist and a feminist. Her lively, lucid essays in *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* begin to make some sense of those plural perspectives. Divided into three parts, the first section, "A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women," investigates the perceptual and gender biases that affect how we judge art, literature, and the world in general. Among the legendary figures considered are Picasso, De Kooning, Jeff Koons, Louise Bourgeois, Anselm Kiefer, Susan Sontag, Robert Mapplethorpe, the Guerrilla Girls, and Karl Ove Knausgaard. The second part, "The Delusions of Certainty," is about the age-old mind/body problem that has haunted Western philosophy since the Greeks. Hustvedt explains the relationship between the mental and the physical realms, showing what lies beyond the argument of desire, belief, and the imagination. The final section, "What Are We? Lectures on the Human Condition," discusses neurological disorders and the mysteries of hysteria. Drawing on research in sociology, neurobiology, history, genetics, statistics, psychology, and psychiatry, this section also contains a profound and powerful consideration of suicide. There has been much talk about building a beautiful bridge across the chasm that separates the sciences and the humanities. At the moment, we have only a wobbly walkway, but Hustvedt is encouraged by the travelers making their way across it in both directions. *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* is an insightful account of the journeys back and forth.

## Book Information

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"Richly explored...and, when art is the subject, touchingly personal...It's hard to overstate the pleasure and the comfort that such demystification provides...it does indeed make the world feel larger, more expansive, more alive to the touch." [New York Times Book Review](#)

"Insightful." [Vanity Fair](#) [A](#) "A wide-ranging, irreverent, and absorbing meditation on thinking, knowing, and being." [Kirkus Reviews](#) (starred review) [A](#)

[A](#) "Erudite and intellectually sophisticated" [Hustvedt](#) is beguiling and wholly present in each lively, first-person, thrillingly interdisciplinary narrative. [A](#)

[Booklist](#) [A](#) (starred review) "Canonical . . . A dense, succinct overview of the mind/body problem . . . Conveys the wide range of [Hustvedt](#)'s reading as she focuses on the

interstices between people; between disciplines; and between concepts such as art and science, truth and fiction, feeling and perception." [Publishers Weekly](#) [A](#)

"[Hustvedt](#) has provided us with an impressive collection that celebrates critical thinking." [The Guardian](#) "We are fortunate to have [Hustvedt](#) voicing doubt so intelligently." [Financial Times](#) "Searing."

[Elle](#) "Erudite." [Vulture](#) PRAISE FOR SIRI HUSTVEDT [A](#)'S NONFICTION

[A](#) "A brilliant explorer of brain and mind." [Oliver Sacks](#) [A](#) "No one writing about art today comes closer than [Siri Hustvedt](#) to the elusive strangeness of a great painting." [Calvin Tomkins](#) [A](#)

[A](#) "[[Siri Hustvedt](#)] brings both knowledge and an artist's insight to the discussion of memory, language, and personal identity" [A](#) | It is [Hustvedt](#)'s gift to write with exemplary clarity of what is by necessity unclear. [Hilary Mantel](#)

[A](#) "[[Hustvedt](#)'s] responses to paintings are both visceral and intellectual" [A](#) | At their best, her essays combine the insights of her intuitive eye with an extensive knowledge of

Western painting. [San Francisco Chronicle](#) [A](#) "Armed with her great gift for elucidation, the novelist and essayist [Siri Hustvedt](#) has omnivorously devoured and digested complex debates from neuroscience, psychiatry, philosophy and psychoanalysis and journeyed into

the mind/body problem." [George Makari](#) PRAISE FOR [THE BLAZING WORLD](#) [A](#) LONGLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE "The [Blazing World](#) offers a spirited romp...constructed as a Nabokovian cat's cradle....[Hustvedt](#)'s portrait of the artist as a

middle-aged widow is searingly fresh. It's rare to encounter a female protagonist who throws her weight around quite so grandiloquently as Harriet Burden, a heroine who is "well, more like the hero of a Philip Roth or a Saul Bellow novel." (New York Times Book Review) "Ingeniously and energetically put together. . . . The Blazing World never runs out of steam in dispensing ideas and peeling back layers of truth." (Chicago Tribune) "The Blazing World is Siri Hustvedt's best novel yet, an electrifying work with a titanic, poignantly flawed protagonist. Harriet Burden's rage, turbulence and neediness leap off these pages in a skillfully orchestrated chorus of voices both dark and brilliant." (The Washington Post) "Incandescent. . . . Hustvedt's greatest triumph here is not the feminist argument she makes. It's that we ache for her characters. This is a muscular book, and just enough of that muscle is heart." (The Boston Globe) "A glorious mashup of storytelling and scholarship. . . . [The Blazing World's] touching conclusion blazes hot and bright from the perspective of an aura reader, Harriet's caretaker, whose vision of the artist's work is at once spiritually charged and whimsical." (The San Francisco Chronicle) "In certain respects, The Blazing World is a didactic novel, presenting arguments about the place of gender in American cultural life, yet it avoids preaching or settled judgments by putting at its center a figure whose strongly held beliefs are undermined by the hazards of real life. The effect is more fluid and nuanced than any scholarly study or political diatribe could be." (The Wall Street Journal) "The Blazing World is unique and recognizably so, a bracing examination of the act of creation, of fame and identity, gender bias and feminism, love and desire, psychology and philosophy. . . . Full of life and ideas and intellectual prowess, it's also a compelling story with richly drawn characters. . . . [An] extraordinary puzzle." (The Miami Herald) "Complex, astonishing, harrowing, and utterly, completely engrossing." (NPR) "This is feminism in the tradition of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, or Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own: richly complex, densely psychological, dazzlingly nuanced. And at the same time, the book is a spectacularly good read. Its storytelling is magnificent, its characters vivid, its plot gripping; it's rare that a novel of ideas can be so much fun." (Slate) "Siri Hustvedt has earned her reputation as a brilliant thinker and articulate writer. This is not her first work of fiction, and The Blazing World is strong proof that her talents are unmatched in the genre. . . a delightful, quirky story that shares many truths about women in the arts, and the struggles they encounter in rising to fame." (Seattle Post-Intelligencer) "Dazzling. . . ingeniously constructed. . . . The Blazing World is a serious, sometimes profound book, tackling head-on the knotty issues of identity and sense of self, and our

unconscious ideas about gender and celebrity. It offers an exhilarating reading experience for anyone willing to meet its challenge. (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette) "Siri Hustvedt has a rare gift for finding the human heart in what might be cerebral musings and rarefied settings. (Columbus Dispatch) "Immediately engrossing. . . . None of the narrators, even Harriet, are precisely reliable, and this ingeniously supports Harriet's own theory that we are all just monsters wearing masks. (San Antonio Current) "The absence of women artists in the history of painting is an old feminist topic, but it is one The Blazing World approaches head-on." (The Guardian) "Hustvedt's novels What I Loved, The Enchantment of Lily Dahl, The Summer Without Men, among others have always been smart, accomplished, critically acclaimed but this one feels like a departure. There is more heat in it, more wildness; it seems to burst on to a whole other level of achievement and grace." (Financial Times) "Densely brilliant, but terrifyingly clever too... you don't need a PhD in Kierkegaard to enjoy Hustvedt's writing, and it's a pleasure to feel your brain whirring as it forges links and finds the cracks across differing accounts. Even if The Blazing World is about ambiguity and mutability in everything from authorship to gender to memory, Hustvedt's text is carefully, impressively constructed: she's as convincing in each fictional voice as Harriet is in her masks." (The Independent) "An exuberantly clever piece of work.... [A] novel that gloriously lives up to its title, one blazing with energy and thought." (The Times) "Masterful. . . . [Hustvedt's] long-running explorations have rarely been merged together as fluidly as they are here, an achievement that has everything to do with rendering the novel's abundant intellect in a deeply felt and accessible manner. Six novels and more than two decades into her career, it is altogether fair to argue that Siri Hustvedt is quietly becoming one of North America's most subversive and fearlessly intelligent writers. (Toronto Star) "Both intellectually and emotionally gripping the generosity of the storytelling leads to full and often affecting backstories for all the main characters [it] feels like one of those novels in which a well-established author triumphantly sums up, and possibly even surpasses, everything they've done before." (The Spectator) "The Blazing World is poundingly alive with ideas, personalities, conviction, fear, fakery, ambition, and sorrow. The reading mind is set on high, happy alert. (The New York Journal of Books) "A heady, suspenseful, funny, and wrenching novel of creativity, identity, and longing." (Booklist (Starred Review)) "Larger-than-life Harry reads vociferously, loves fervently, and overflows with intellectual and creative energy. Hustvedt dissects the art world with ironic insight. This is a funny, sad, through-provoking, and touching portrait of a woman who is blazing with postfeminist fury and

propelled by artistic audacity." (Publishers Weekly) "Readers of Hustvedt's essay collections (Living, Thinking, Looking, 2012, etc.) will recognize the writer's long-standing interest in questions of perception, and her searching intellect is also evident here. But as the story of Harry's life coheres . . . it's the emotional content that seizes the reader . . . As in her previous masterpiece, *What I Loved* (2003), Hustvedt paints a scathing portrait of the art world, obsessed with money and the latest trend, but superb descriptions of Harry's work—installations expressing her turbulence and neediness—remind us that the beauty and power of art transcend such trivialities . . . Blazing indeed: not just with Harry's fury, but with agonizing compassion for all of wounded humanity." (Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)) "Intelligent and . . . knowledgeable about the world of modern art, theory, and philosophy, Hustvedt describes in detail the insular world of the New York City art scene." (Library Review)

Siri Hustvedt was born in 1955 in Northfield, Minnesota. She has a PhD from Columbia University in English literature and is the internationally acclaimed author of six novels: *The Blazing World*, *The Sorrows of an American*, *What I Loved*, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, *Blindfold*, and *The Summer Without Men*, as well as a growing body of nonfiction including, *A Plea for Eros* and *Mysteries of the Rectangle*, and an interdisciplinary investigation of the body and mind in *The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves*. She has given lectures on artists and theories of art at the Prado, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, the novelist Paul Auster.

Brilliant.

Too sophisticated for me sorry .Bought it because love earlier book " My life "

In her introduction to *A WOMAN LOOKING AT MEN LOOKING AT WOMEN*, essayist and novelist Siri Hustvedt asks readers to think of this book as her "journey back and forth across what she sees as the unfortunate chasm between the physical sciences and the humanities. Her own interest in both sides of this seeming divide, especially in the visual arts, literature, philosophy and neuroscience, is deep, and in this collection she tries to bridge it with a number of writings on provocative and challenging themes. With a diversity of examples and ideas, she explores gender, the meaning of art and the mind itself through lenses such as

feminism and psychology. The book is divided into three large sections, though there is much overlap in subject matter and references. The first, *“A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women,”* not only provides the title of the entire collection, but sets the tone and introduces readers to the kinds of questions Hustvedt is interested in, as well as several of the answers she offers. She begins with short essays on the visual arts, opening with an examination of perspective (visual and emotional) in the works of Picasso, Beckmann and de Kooning. *“Balloon Magic”* looks at personal aesthetics and the value of visual art, starting with the sale of a Jeff Koons sculpture for over 58 million dollars. The third essay, *“My Louise Bourgeois,”* is one of the stand-outs in the book, perhaps because the art of Bourgeois is so important to Hustvedt as a viewer, scholar and writer. She writes, *“I have long argued that the experience of art is made only in the encounter between spectator and art object. It is this encounter and the response it elicits that Hustvedt returns to again and again here, and the images created by Bourgeois --- feminist, visionary, psychological and complicated --- are ones that provide a solid foundation for her arguments and questions. Bourgeois’s own reliance on psychoanalysis further cements Hustvedt’s intellectual interest in her. In literature, too, Hustvedt finds much to explore in regards to meaning, perception and authorship. She writes about Dickinson, Sontag and her own fictional work. Most interesting is *“The Writing Self and the Psychiatric Patient,”* about her experiences working as a volunteer writing instructor for psychiatric inpatients for four years. This insightful piece gives a compelling and fascinating look at the power of writing, and the nuances and mysteries of psychiatric treatment. The first section of the book has the lightest touch as far as writing style and readability are concerned. Hustvedt’s style throughout this work tends toward meandering, and because these essays are shorter and less technically and academically deep, they are easier and, in some ways, more enjoyable. The second part, *“The Delusions of Certainty,”* tackles neuroscience and many issues of the “mind-body problem. While just as profound as the essays on art and literature, this long-form essay is richer in insider vocabulary and content. The book wraps up with *“What Are We: Lectures on the Human Condition,”* which brings together many of the themes Hustvedt previously introduced. In *“Becoming Others,”* she shares her reality with mirror-touch synesthesia, a condition that makes sense of her interesting views and ideas about the visual arts and the interior world. Throughout the book, Hustvedt poses poignant and worthwhile questions, though her narrative can be a bit rambling or even disorganized. Sometimes it*

reads like a very long lecture couched in conversational language, and she always assumes the reader has at least a basic understanding of the vast set of concepts and examples she references. This is a collection for committed and persistent readers, and engaged and curious minds. Reviewed by Sarah Rachel Egelman

Its title made me buy this book. What could I learn from this author yet unknown to me. A woman usually has a different voice and also experiences the world differently from a man. The title promised some sparkling writing and valuable insights. Actually, this 550 pages collection of independent pieces is a roller-coaster in terms of quality of writing and interest. Occasional gemstones can be scraped out of heaps of dense charcoal slag. Siri Hustvedt's insistence about writing about herself is tiresome, Kierkegaard is not a good excuse. Siri H. has a very high opinion of herself, but she is not able to converse with her reader like, say, Montaigne. Too often the reader does not feel he is in good hands. The opening essay, which gives this volume its catchy title does not work without visual access to the paintings of the three artists Siri H. writes about with intensity. In other reprints of her work, the book is best when Siri H. does not talk about herself. This is when you encounter flashes of insights. After a few pages, I stopped reading the dense and turgid 220 pages of Part II about "The delusion of certainty." When it comes to the mind-body relationship Siri H. falls far behind the beautiful clarity and scientific insights on the same issue of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in his book "Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain." I did not try to read Part III. The titles did not appeal to me: Shouldn't I expect further intense darkness, self-absorption and ponderous academic writings? When it comes to "Art, Sex and the Mind", which is the (commercial) subtitle of Hustvedt's book, I much prefer to go to a book by Chinese-British writer and film-maker Xiaolu Guo right now..

I always say, the top reason I read is not to be entertained or moved. I read in the hope of finding out I'm not alone. I haven't finished this large work yet, because I'm savoring it. But in just the first hundred pages I can say with delight, "She gets me." Hustvedt even addresses feelings I never knew I felt, and I am so comforted and grateful. And I'm grateful to Paul Auster in the New York Times book review for recommending this fantastic mind.

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