

**A Q&A with
Kate Christensen, author of
THE ASTRAL**

Q: You write THE ASTRAL from the perspective of a 57-year-old male narrator, Harry Quirk. What was it like writing from a different gender?

A: “The Astral” is the third novel I’ve written from a male point of view, so apparently I must enjoy it! Writing from a male perspective is very comfortable for me. Each of my three male narrators is different from the others. Unlike the other two, Harry has raised children, has had a long marriage, and is old enough to feel washed up in his career. Therefore he has few illusions and a realistic sense of who and what he is, which makes him a trustworthy guide to his own story.

The story became more poignant and urgent because I wrote it from Harry’s perspective than it would have been if I’d chosen his wife, Luz, or his friend, Marion. In my experience, women are emotionally tougher than men, on the whole, and better able to weather personal crises. The fact that Harry is a man rather than a woman makes him seem more emotionally vulnerable to me. It raises the stakes on his loneliness, confusion, and remorse.

Q: Each character is remarkably drawn and very different. How do you approach creating your characters? Do you identify with one more than another? Were any of them difficult to write?

A: My characters tend to exist in relation to one another, like the cast of a play – I see them as parts of a whole that fit together to make the novel complete. Each of them is essential; I hope none of them feels superfluous. And all of them are parts of myself. I write intuitively, from the gut: I feel what each of them feels. I want all of them to be fully drawn, to feel real and complex, even if they’re only in the novel for a brief moment. I relate to all of them because in order to write them into being and bring them to life, I have to enter them, imaginatively, and see through their eyes.

Q: You write intimately of Greenpoint and with rich detail. How do you think place influences art? Your own, and Harry’s (who is a poet)?

A: Some places seem to have a complex, almost contradictory richness of both history and forward motion, qualities that suggest plot and lend themselves to stories. Greenpoint, for example, has a sepia cast to its air that reminds me of old photographs. It feels like a small town, its ways preserved, its old-timers stubborn, its storefronts pointing back to the past. However, Manhattan is just across the river – down almost every side street of Greenpoint are views of the spangled, sparkling, soaring island city. The air is electric and urban, but the flavor is historical and local, and this deeply influences the way people behave there, especially with the recent influx of young artists and entrepreneurs. Greenpoint is caught in a very strong cross-current of constant change, but the power it exerts on everyone who moves there is equally strong. It preserves itself. So Harry is caught, too, in the past, even as his life moves on into the present. Greenpoint is therefore the perfect setting for his struggle to simultaneously salvage his past and free himself of it to move on..

Q: You’ve recently moved to Portland, Maine. How has that changed your writing, if at all?

A: After living in Brooklyn for so many years, a place where I had so much history, Portland feels like a fresh, new start. I don't know many people here yet, and I have no history here, either. I am anonymous and perfectly serene here – a rare luxury for a writer, but I'm sure is only temporary. Places have a way of accruing weight and depth the longer we live in them, but I'm enjoying it as long as it lasts. I'm halfway through a food memoir called *Blue Plate Special*. I've wanted to write this book for many years, and I started it as soon as I moved to Maine. Something about living here has freed me to do so – to recollect the strong emotions of the past in tranquility, to paraphrase Wordsworth.

Q: Harry is separated from his wife, Luz, and spends much of the novel reflecting on their relationship and missing her. How do you think people navigate through loss and what makes it just so compelling in fiction?

A: Loss creates desire, which creates narrative energy and forward momentum. I find that most plots are set in motion by unfulfilled desire, whether it's desire for money, love, fame, freedom, justice, escape, children, work, identity, etc. Harry has lost his marriage and home and work, and the plot of the novel is driven by his desire to get them back. Struggle is always interesting to read about, at least for me, and so is self-examination. People who are undergoing an unexpected upheaval, who are forced to reckon with the consequences of their own behavior and mistakes, are in a state of unusually heightened awareness. They've been shocked awake. They're more prone to frank reflection and change than a complacent, settled character who has no reason to want anything to be different.

What interests me are people who've been challenged who can rise to it somehow without compromising themselves, who remain true to themselves even as they take stock and accept responsibility for their actions. Harry knows what he's done and what he hasn't done. He's been falsely accused. He's spurred to act by the need to set the record straight, to prove to Luz that he hasn't betrayed her. In the process of this, he learns things about himself and his marriage that he never would have realized if she hadn't thrown him out. Because he has the courage to face the truth, he is better for it in the end.

Q: Harry's son Hector is involved in a religious cult. What kind of research into cults did you do to properly create the character and situation?

A: My sister was in a group called the Twelve Tribes for many years. They have been called a cult by many experts and former members, and they exhibit all the classic signs and hallmarks of a cult. As my mother and I planned an intervention to try to get my sister out with her husband and children, we read "Combatting Cult Mind Control" and "Releasing the Bonds" by Steve Hassan, met with cult exit counselors for months, and talked to many former members, who told us what life had been like in the group. After a lot of painful work and wrenching anxiety on our part, my sister came out of the group on her own with her family. We talked extensively about her life in the Twelve Tribes, why they left, and what happened afterwards. Through all of this, I gained a deep understanding of life in a cultlike group.

Q: What is your writing regimen? Can you describe your process?

A: When I'm writing a book, I write every day, or at least I try to, until I have a first draft completed. I write 1,000 words a day, minimum. It doesn't matter when I start or how long it takes, I just have to complete the daily word count. I find that it's long enough for me to go forward, but not so long that I run out of steam and start writing drivel to fill out the count. I also

take a long walk every morning and cook dinner in the evening. And finally, after a day of writing, there's nothing like a glass of wine.

Q: What authors inspired you as you were writing this book?

A: I generally seem to have a model in mind when I write a novel, another novel I use as an inspiration and touchstone..Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* served that purpose for me with *The Astral*. Harry felt like a more earnest, younger, more self-conscious version of Gully Jimson. I also thought a lot about various poets, since Harry is a poet – in particular, Czeslaw Milosz, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Frank O'Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, and Philip Larkin.

Q: Did anything surprise you as you wrote this book?

I was surprised by the ending. It was not at all the ending I'd expected when I began the book. So as not to give it away, I won't say how or why, but I will say that Harry himself also surprised me, by being a lot more courageous than I'd originally thought he was.

I never know the endings of my novels when I begin them – I spend the beginning of every novel generating characters, finding out what they want, determining the obstacles in their way, and setting them loose to try to overcome them, to achieve their ends. It's up to them. In this case, Harry's own character determined the outcome of the novel. If he'd been a different man, it would have ended differently. One of the most interesting things about writing novels this way is that I get to be surprised at the end, if I do it right.