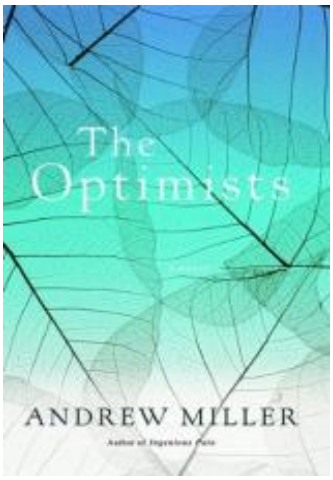
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The Optimists

by Andrew Miller



About the Book

Clem Glass was a successful photojournalist, firm in the belief that photographs could capture truth and beauty. Until he went to Africa and witnessed the aftermath of a genocidal massacre.

Clem returns to London with his faith in human nature shattered and his life derailed. Nothing-work, love, sex- can rouse his interest and no other outlook can restore his faith. The one person Clem is able to connect with is his sister, who has made her own sudden retreat from reality into the shadows of mental illness, and he finds some peace nursing her back to health in rural Somerset. Then news arrives that offers him the chance to confront the source of his nightmares.

From the celebrated author of **Ingenious Pain and Oxygen**, this is a masterfully rendered novel that explores the perilously thin line between self-delusion and optimism.

Discussion Guide

1. How does the epigraph at the beginning of Part 2 (p. 75) relate to the larger themes of the novel? What does Sontag mean when she writes "understanding is rooted in the ability to say no"? What are the different ways the characters in the novel "say no"? Do any of them seem to have arrived at this kind of deeper understanding? What does saying no mean for Clem?

2. Both Clem and Clare see for a living, in a sense--Clem through photography and Clare through art history--and yet their conditions have left both of them unable to practice their visual professions. What other motifs of sight and seeing does Miller use in the novel? For example, what is the significance of the eye problems Clem begins to develop?

3. What role does Clem's father play in the novel and in the lives of his children? Before she falls ill, Clare had defended her father's decision to enter the monastery to Clem, who harbors a "continuing exasperation at [his father's]'withdrawal'

from the world, a retreat that Clem had always considered extravagant, baffling, perverse even" (31). Why is Clare reluctant to see her father once her condition recurs? Why does she "hate the thought of his being kind to me. Forgiving me"? Do you think his retreat to monastic life is selfish or naïve, or has he simply found a way to be at peace with the world?

4. How does Christianity figure in the novel? Seeing a wooden crucifix in London, Clem feels "an ill-defined affection" but remembers the marble Christ in the church where the massacre occurred, "an object of such utter inutility, dumb, wicked in its deceiving"(27). Does Christianity have an answer for the kinds of horrors Clem has seen? The detective to whom Clem attempts to confess describes him as a "sins-of-the-world type" who believes that "everyone [is] guilty because everyone's the same" (309). Is this in any sense a Christian idea, in that it echoes the idea of original sin? Do we all bear guilt for the crimes that some of us commit, simply because we are all on some level capable of those crimes?

5. In the author's note, Miller writes that "this novel is not about the Rwandan genocide." Why do you think he chose not to make the massacre itself the center of the novel? Do you think it is possible to write a novel about genocide?

6. Compare Silverman's and Clem's chosen methods of coping with the pain of what they have witnessed. Both of them are comforted and sustained by helping others, but what are the differences between the two? Is it significant that Silverman is helping strangers, while Clem is helping his sister? Why is Silverman more ready to move on than Clem?

7. The town of Radstock seems to be dying. Its traditions and economic health are fading, and even the ground beneath it is hollow, as evinced by Clem and Clare's sinking cottage. Laura and Kenneth have been slowly selling off valuable objects and using fewer rooms in their house, their "lives in slow retreat, each year shutting another door whose handle they would not turn again" (150). Why do you think Miller has Clem and Clare take refuge in a place that seems to have no future? How does this setting contrast with the other locales in the novel?

8. What do you think of Ray, Frankie's fiancé? Is he the most optimistic character in the novel? Does his advice to "think of people as better than they are" represent an alternative to Clem's disenchantment with humanity? Ray says that he has had a lot of practice; do you think one must experience the worst of humanity before one can truly become optimistic about it? Is optimism an act of faith? When Clem distributes his own cards with pictures of the Bourgmestre's victims, is he refuting the optimism of Ray's "good news" cards?

9. What do you think of Laurencie's criticism of Clem, that "you go to Africa. You see something, something bad. Then you believe what was in your heart all the time. These blacks are savages. You go there ignorant. You come back ignorant" (260). Do you think there is any truth to this in Clem's case? Is it a valid criticism of Western attitudes toward Africa in general? Does the fact that "half of Europe grew fat on blood and theft" mean that Westerners don't have a right to be outraged at African atrocities?

10. Why does Clem find his encounter with the Bourgmestre so anticlimactic? After their meeting, Clem thinks "it was as though the man he wanted to grapple with no longer even existed" (253). Is justice less important or satisfying when the guilty party has become a different person than he was at the time he committed the crime?

11. Why do Clem and Laurencie sleep together? What do you think attracts them to one another?

12. What are some of the differences between the ways in which painting and photography represent the real world?

Clare says of The Raft of the Medusa that "it's not one of your photographs. In Gericault's day the dead were still sacred." Has photography made death and suffering less sacred in our culture? Does seeing photographs of suffering and cruelty make us more sensitive to it, because the reality is brought home to us, or less so, because it becomes commonplace?

13. Look at and discuss a reproduction of the The Raft of the Medusa. Why does Clem write a story about the scene in the painting? Does the way he imagines the "philosopher" figure in the foreground ring true to you? Do you think the philosopher has completely given up hope?

14. Why does Clem attempt to confess to a rape that he didn't commit? At the end of the novel, he reaches "a point where he might be able to work some slight but useful faith in himself, some small, stubborn belief in the others" (311). Is the rekindling of his optimism a result of his experience in the police station? Is it significant that the crime to which he attempts to confess in order to admit his universal human guilt turns out never to have been committed at all, by anyone?

Author Bio

Andrew Miller?s first novel, INGENIOUS PAIN, was published by Sceptre in 1997. It won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Grinzane Cavour Prize for the best foreign novel published in Italy. It has been followed by CASANOVA; OXYGEN, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Novel of the Year Award in 2001; THE OPTIMISTS; ONE MORNING LIKE A BIRD; PURE, which won the Costa Book of the Year Award in 2011; THE CROSSING; NOW WE SHALL BE ENTIRELY FREE; THE SLOWWORM'S SONG; and THE LAND IN WINTER, which won the Winston Graham Historical Prize and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2025. Andrew Miller?s novels have been published in translation in 20 countries. Born in Bristol in 1960, he currently lives in Somerset.

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