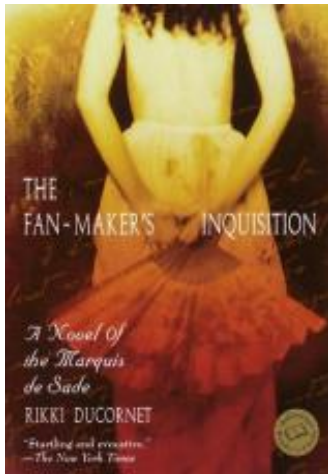


# The Fan-Maker's Inquisition

by Rikki Ducornet

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## About the Book

"A fan is like the thighs of a woman: it opens and closes." And so begins this lush, historical novel --- a mixture of imagination and conceit, passion and suspense. In a tense courtroom during the French Revolution, a young fan-maker, renowned all over Paris for her sensual and graphic objets d'art, is on trial because of her collaboration with the Marquis de Sade. Heads will roll unless the independent fan-maker, erotically cast in the shadow of Sade, can justify her art and friendships to a court known for its rigid and prudish proprieties.

## Discussion Guide

1. A central theme in *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition* is the ability of imagination to bring a world into existence. What role does imagination play in the worlds created by Sade, Gabrielle, and Bishop Landa?
2. Parodying Descartes' intellectual starting point, "I think therefore I am," Gabrielle and Sade have their fictional laborers assert "I stink therefore I am." According to the novel, can the world sometimes be best known through the body? When?
3. Lists of exotic kitchens, fantastic meals, bizarre machines and other inventions appear throughout *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition*. Discuss how these lists serve as "miniatures" within the novel. How do they help tell the story?
4. According to the novel, does unlimited personal freedom always lead to murder and perversion? Does unlimited institutional freedom?

5. Class differences were central to the French Revolution. Do you think Sade's opinions would differ if he, like Gabrielle, had been a member of the artisan/worker class instead of a member of the aristocracy? Would Gabrielle's values differ if she was a member of the aristocracy? Do class differences play a role in this novel?
6. At the beginning of the novel, Gabrielle states that a fan opens like the "thighs of a woman" and "produces its own weather." Later we are told that a "book will open like a fan." Discuss how this novel is like one of Gabrielle's fans. What is the nature of the "weather" it produces? What is its desired effect on the world?
7. According to Gabrielle, is brutality, like beauty, always in the eye of the beholder? Is all truth subjective?
8. Rather than trying to explain the world, *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition* often tries to show how mysterious it can be. Is this a worthwhile goal? Explain.
9. Do you agree with Sade's statement that "The best books cause us to dream; the rest are not worth reading?" Explain how Ducornet's lyrical prose style reinforces this world view.
10. According to the novel, are "idealism" and "reigns of terror" two sides of the same coin? Do Sade's crimes differ from those he accuses governments and religions of committing? Do intentions matter?
11. How would you describe the relationship between Gabrielle and Sade?
12. Gabrielle tells the court that "Sade offers [us] a mirror." Does he? What do we see reflected in him? How does reading about Sade and Gabrielle make you feel about your own life? Your own country? Your own moment in history?

## Author Bio

The author of eight novels, three collections of short fiction, a book of essays and five books of poetry, Rikki Ducornet has twice been honored by the Lannan Foundation. She has received the Bard College Arts and Letters award and, in 2008, an Academy Award in Literature. Her work is widely published abroad. Recent exhibitions of her paintings include the solo show *Desirous* at the Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2007, and the group shows: *O Reverso Do Olhar* in Coimbra, Portugal, in 2008, and *El Umbral Secreto* at the Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende in Santiago, Chile, in 2009. She has illustrated books by Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Coover, Forest Gander, Kate Bernheimer, Joanna Howard and Anne Waldman among others.

## Critical Praise

"Startling and evocative? A novelist whose vocabulary sweats with a kind of lyrical heat."

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