

BOOK OF CLOUDS

CHLOE ARDJIS

VINTAGE

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About the Book

Tatiana, a young Mexican woman, is adrift in Berlin. Choosing a life of solitude, she takes a job transcribing notes for the reclusive Doktor Weiss. Through him she meets 'ant illustrator turned meteorologist' Jonas, a Berliner who has used clouds and the sky's constant shape-shifting as his escape from reality. As their three paths intersect and merge, the contours of all their worlds begins to change...

About the Author

Chloe Aridjis was born in New York and grew up in the Netherlands and Mexico City. She studied for a BA at Harvard and gained her DPhil in nineteenth-century French poetry and magic from Oxford University. She then spent five years in Berlin and now lives in London. *Book of Clouds* won the Prix du Premier Roman Etranger in France in 2009.

Praise for *Book of Clouds*:

‘Required reading of the most pleasurable sort’

Wendy Lesser, *New York Times*

‘*Book of Clouds* is a post-Sebaldian, post-Benjamin peripatetic meditation, at once casual and deeply sourced, on post-Wall Berlin ... One of my favourites this year’

Ali Smith

‘The impartial, slightly caustic, narrator and the precision of her language reminded me of early Atwood. Tracing the listless days of a young woman living in Berlin, this brilliant debut novel charts the relationship between self and city seamlessly and is one of the most exact depictions of loneliness I’ve come across’

Rosalind Porter, *New Statesman* Books of the Year

‘Irresistible ... Aridjis brings a bit of realism, a bit of wonder, a hint of darkness and true originality to this sharp, lyric and beguilingly strange tale of a life in flux ... *Book of Clouds* soars and shimmers through its assured writing, whimsical observations and its sheer ease ... Every nuance counts in this virtuoso performance ... Aridjis knows all about conveying the complex inner life of the mind ... [An] offbeat, engaging and compelling narrative with wry intelligence and a grasp of the darker fears of the imagination’

Eileen Battersby, *Irish Times*

‘A fresh and original voice ... the book is a portrait of Berlin, a city famed for its richness and strangeness, hauntingly captured by Aridjis’

Francesca Segal, *Observer*

‘A most unusual debut ... An entirely refreshing portrait of young womanhood, it is unselfconscious, uncompromising, wholly authentic’

Justine Jordan, *Guardian*

‘Aridjis is an insightful observer of post-reunification Berlin ... Her lyrical, restrained prose conjures a dream-like atmosphere that borders on magical realism. This haunting debut is a significant and memorable addition to the literature of a troubling city’

C. J. Schuler, *Independent*

‘As a study of a mind struggling to come to terms with where the self ends and the world begins, and a portrait of a city where history intrudes painfully on every corner, *Book of Clouds* impresses’

Financial Times

‘Magic and poetry are everywhere in *Book of Clouds* ... An unsettling atmosphere unlike anything in recent fiction’

Los Angeles Times

‘This first novel by a former Berlin resident captures exquisitely the mood of an aimless young expat in the city ... Tatiana’s lonely, hallucinatory imagination is a fascinating place’

Times Literary Supplement

‘This is a haunting debut with an individual, poetic slant’

Alastair Mabbot, *The Herald*

‘Brave ... Weighty in its intelligence and thoughtfulness. Aridjis pens an odd kind of love letter to Berlin ... [in a] highly appealing writing style – which is clean and spare, restrained yet direct [Aridjis] impressively conjures Berlin as an essentially unknowable place in spite of all the history we think we know about it’

Lesley McDowell, *The Scotsman*

‘An immensely pleasurable and thought-provoking read ...
Like the city in which it takes place, this novel holds layers
of stories, some on the surface, some buried, and some far
above the ground’

Erika Dreifus, *Fiction Writers Review*

‘Chloe Aridjis writes with a fine-tuned sensitivity and a
captivating charm. Her universe is off-beat, rich and
disturbing in equal measure – but always utterly
compelling’

Tom McCarthy

‘In her first novel, Chloe Aridjis succeeds where many have
failed, blending past and present, real and imagined, in a
believable realism’

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

For my parents and Eva

CHLOE ARIDJIS

Book of Clouds

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

AUGUST 11, 1986
BERLIN

I SAW HITLER at a time when the Reichstag was little more than a burnt, skeletal silhouette of its former self and the Brandenburg Gate obstructed passage rather than granted it. It was an evening when the moral remains of the city bobbed up to the surface and floated like driftwood before sinking back down to the seabed to further splinter and rot.

Berlin was the last stop on our European tour—we'd worked our way up from Spain, through France, Belgium and the Netherlands—and soon we would be flying home, back across the Atlantic, to start the new school year. My two brothers, still thrumming with energy, lamented that we had to leave. In every town and city they'd wandered off into the night and not returned until breakfast, answering in cranky monosyllables, between sips of coffee, whenever anyone commented on the amount of money being wasted on hotel rooms. My two sisters, on the other hand, weighed down by stories and souvenirs, were desperate to unload, and my parents too felt weary and ready for home. Not to mention that we'd used up 60 percent of the money we'd just inherited from my grandfather, and the remaining 40 had allegedly been set aside for our ever-expanding deli.

On our final evening, after an early dinner, our parents announced they were taking us to a demonstration against the Berlin Wall to protest twenty-five years of this "icon of the Cold War." Wherever you went in Berlin, sooner or later you would run into it, even on the day we visited Hansa Studios where Nick Cave and Depeche Mode used to record, or the secondhand shop that sold clothes by the

kilo. No matter where you went—east, west, north, south—before long you hit against the intractable curtain of cement and were able to go no further. That was our impression, anyway, so we figured that we too might as well protest against this seemingly endless structure that limited even *our* movement, though we were just seven tourists visiting the city for the first time.

When we arrived at the demonstration there were already thousands of people gathered on the west side of the Brandenburg Gate, young couples, old couples, scampering children, punks with dogs, Goths, women with buzz cuts, men in blue overalls—a cross section, looking back, of what West Berlin had been in those days. Most people remained standing but there were also large groups spread out on the pavement, singing and chanting and passing around bottles of beer. Two nights before, we'd heard, a human chain had started to form along the Wall with an aim to cover all 155 kilometers.

On the east side, meanwhile, men in grey uniforms and steel helmets were marching up and down Karl-Marx-Allee. I envisioned dramatic clashes between metal and flesh, order and chaos, homogeny and diversity, but I knew that in real life these clashes were far more abstract. My parents had wanted to take us across the border to show us “a true portrait of Communism” but there had been a mysterious problem with our visas so we'd stayed in the West all week, left to imagine as best we could what life was like on the other side, ever more intrigued by notions of “this side” and “beyond.”

People continued to arrive. The singing and chanting grew louder and I could hardly hear when anyone in my family leaned over to say something, as though on that night our language had been put on hold and German was the only means of communication. But there were other ways of having a voice, and before long we had joined the lengthy chain following the Wall and I found myself

clasping the hand of a man with a ponytail and a black leather jacket until one of my brothers insisted on changing places with me. I tried to imagine the thousands of people across West Berlin to whom we would be connected through this gesture of solidarity but the thought was dizzying so I focused instead on the punks playing nearby with their dogs, as they threw what looked like battered tennis shoes, which the dogs would race to retrieve. The punks would then throw the bait in another direction, every now and then missing and hitting someone on the head or shoulder, the sight of which triggered boisterous rounds of laughter.

Twilight came on. Some of the organizers walked through the crowd passing out white candles. A number of people declined and flicked on their lighters instead. Against the sea of lights the Reichstag looked even gloomier and more forsaken and the Brandenburg Gate, with its goddess of Victory and twelve Doric columns, doubly silenced by dusk. Not far from us an old punk with a torch jumped onto the Wall and screamed some words into the East, rabid words, though we couldn't understand what he was saying. On the other side, my mother told us, invisible eyes would be following his every movement. There didn't seem to be anyone in the watchtowers across the way yet we imagined men in round caps with cat slit eyes surveying the whole spectacle, ready to pounce should any of us trespass one inch into their territory.

We stayed at the demonstration until the candles burned down and the fuel in the lighters ran out and all the voices grew hoarse, until our watches read midnight and people gathered their things and began to leave. We followed our parents down the street, then down many more, in the direction that everyone seemed to be heading. There was no chance of finding a taxi, we would have to take the U-Bahn, so along with hordes of others we descended into

Gleisdreieck station like a screaming eight-hundred-headed monster.

The frenzied crowds made it impossible to get within arm's reach of the ticket machines so when the next train pulled into the station we jumped on without having paid. It was one of those nights, we sensed, when anything was permitted. Hundreds of people were crammed into the carriage, it was impossible to even turn around, and with the heat my sweater began to feel like a straightjacket but there was barely enough room to remove it. After tugging on the zipper and successfully extracting one arm I noticed that my family was standing at the opposite end of the car; swept up in the confusion, we must have boarded through different doors and now dozens of bodies were between us, though it didn't really matter since I knew where to get off, and as if in some bizarre Cubist composition, all I saw were corners and fragments of their angled faces, my mother's lips, my father's nose, my sister's hair, and I remember thinking to myself how this amalgam would have been far more attractive, a composite being, cobbled together from random parts of each, rather than the complex six-person package to which I was bound for life.

The train continued its journey and I began to examine the passengers sitting and standing nearby. There was general mirth in the carriage and I began to feel as if I was in some kind of aviary, though one populated with less exotic species than those we had at home. Groups of large black and grey birds with blond tufts laughed and told jokes while scruffy brown birds with ruffled feathers waved bottles of beer. Solemn birds read the evening paper, others squawked over crossword puzzles and the smallest birds, of which there were only a few, emitted the occasional chirp, as if aware of the hierarchy but uncertain how to participate. And then I noticed one bird, a bird with unusual plumage, which, unlike the others, didn't seem to want to draw attention to itself. Sitting directly in front of

me was a very old woman, nearly a century old I would say, wearing a scarf that framed a wide forehead, which peered out like an angry planet. She had dark, deep-set eyes and a square, jowly face that was remarkably masculine. Stiff and erect, the old woman sat in her seat clutching her purse and stared straight ahead.

The jowly face, the sweeping forehead, the deep-set furnace eyes, everything seemed horribly familiar and I felt as if I had seen this face before, but in black and white. Since I was standing directly in front of her I had the perfect perspective to really study it, and the more I stared the more certain I was ... Yes, that it was Hitler, Hitler as an old woman, riding westwards. *This is Hitler*, I said to myself, *there is no doubt that this is Hitler*. The old woman had the same-shaped face, the same black eyes and high forehead, and, now that I looked again, even a shadowy square area where the mustache would have been. I stared and then I stared some more, petrified, horrified, amazed by what I saw. All of a sudden the train jerked around a curve. The woman, startled out of her rigid position and thrown back into the present, finally looked up and around and it was then that she caught me staring. I couldn't believe it: I was making eye contact with Hitler. Hitler was making eye contact with me. At least for a few seconds. The woman frowned and turned away, then back to me and smiled faintly, her lips barely moving, probably to ingratiate herself since my staring must have unnerved her.

My heart pounded. The sight in front of me, added to the stifling heat in the carriage, might have been enough to give anyone a heart attack, even me, at age fourteen, yet a heart attack at age fourteen was still more probable than seeing Hitler on the U-Bahn disguised as an old woman. How could it be, I wondered, that forty years after the war I found myself face-to-face with the devil himself, the devil whose very name cast a shadow on nearly every landscape of my young life? I waved to my brother Gabriel, who

happened to glance my way, and made an urgent sign for him to join me even if he had to bulldoze his way through the crowd, but he took one glance at all the large Germans standing between us and shrugged. I then pointed at my parents, motioning to him to get their attention, but the fool just shrugged a second time and turned away. My mother, nose deep in a guidebook, was a lost cause, as was my father, busy trying to decipher the signs on the walls of the train. My two sisters were just as useless, huddled together in a conference of whispers, oblivious to everything but each other, and I couldn't even see my other brother, who was eclipsed by at least ten bodies.

My entire family stayed rooted like metal poles on the U-Bahn while I stood one foot away from Hitler with not a witness in sight. To my great surprise, *not a single person* seemed to notice the old woman in the head scarf. All these birds were simply too caught up in their feather ruffling and gregarious squawking to pay much attention to their fellow passengers, especially to those seated below eye level, on a different perch. But how could no one else notice the forehead and the eyes and the shaded patch between nose and mouth, when the combination of these features seemed so glaringly, so obscenely, real and factual and present?

We plowed deeper into the West. The train stopped at Wittenbergplatz and then, a few minutes later, at Zoologischer Garten. Dozens of people stepped out, freeing up the space considerably but my family stayed where they were. Now that the crowd had thinned, although there were still quite a few people between us, I noticed strapping men posted at each of the four doors of the carriage, four buzzards in their sixties or seventies, all wearing the same bulky grey coat. There was no need for these coats in August, coats cut from a cloth so thick it barely dented, and I couldn't help wondering whether they were hiding weapons beneath them.

Their eyes were riveted on the old lady. Every now and then one of them would turn to study the passengers around her, monitoring their movements with narrowed eyes, but most of the time they just watched her. *These are former SS men, it then occurred to me, here to guard the incognito hag, aging secret agents who survived the war and have for the past forty years lived in hiding with their Führer.* The old woman raised an arm to rearrange her scarf. Two guards tensed their shoulders, mistaking the gesture, fleetingly, for a command. I couldn't bear it any longer and again tried to wave my parents over, but my mother was glued to her guidebook, my father to the signs on the train, my sisters to their gossip and my brothers to who knows what.

At Sophie-Charlotte-Platz the old woman rose from her seat and brushed past me, her shoulder nudging mine a little harder than necessary. I moved aside. Within seconds all four men left their stations by the doors and closed in to form a tight circle around her. The train came to a halt. Two of the buzzards stepped out, then the old lady, followed by the other two. The grey gang had disembarked. The doors closed and the train, its load considerably lightened, continued on its way.

No one in my family believed me, not even my brother Gabriel, the most adventurous-minded of the lot. They told me it was absurd: Hitler shot himself in his bunker in 1945. It was common knowledge. His skull had been found by the Soviets and was on display in a museum in Moscow. There was more than enough proof. End of story.

Three years later, the Wall fell. And I, in one way or another, grew up.