

DINNER WITH OSAMA

Marilyn Krysl

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Did you read that title right? Yes. Is it a cookbook? No. Is it some kind of a joke? Well, yes and no. Was it really published by the profoundly earnest University of Notre Dame Press? Why, yes. But before I begin to carry on about this book, I'd like to back up and take a breath.

A poet, fiction writer, and essayist, Marilyn Krysl is known both for her lively sestinas and for her accounts of volunteering with a human rights non-governmental organization in war-torn Sri Lanka and at Mother Teresa's home for the destitute and dying in Calcutta. She has written two books of poems commissioned by the National League on Nursing, though she is not herself a nurse.

Dinner with Osama is a book of tragicomic stories, meditations, and a novella, written in a style that's fast, snarky, parodic, anguished, passionately engaged politically, screamingly funny, seriously erotic, vastly maternal. Think Grace Paley, updated and without the Yiddish accent. An equal opportunity satirist happy to skewer the bleeding heart lefty she herself is, her finger is on the pulse of political correctness along with political infamy. Here's the opening of the title story:

I'm on the Boulder mall half an hour before my herbal wrap appointment, shopping for an eyeliner not tested on rabbits, when I get the idea: Why not ask Bin Laden over for a glass of Chardonnay and something light but upscale? Me, Sheila, your average liberal neocolonial with a whiff of Cherokee thrown in way back when.

Krysl's Boulder has been officially declared a compassionate city by its city council, which means it has "more meditation per square mile than in Lhasa and Varanasi combined," a Negative Attitude Ordinance which will get you arrested if you oppose stem-cell research, and a Nonslaughter of Mosquitoes policy which requires all residents to use DEET pending the importation of an appropriate mosquito predator. Not that all is completely peaceful. Sheila's neighbors hurl habitual insults on the stairwell:

—Hey, you with the clitoridec-tomy! Rachel shouts from the landing.
—Where's your *jallabiya* husband? At the mosque with his rear end in the air?

Rehima hurls another rock up the stairs. —Have *you* crawled past sniper to get to water truck?! Have *you* given birth to sixth child while standing at army checkpoint?

When Osama arrives with his dialysis machine, courtesy of the corner gyro seller, and Sheila feeds him the "Salmon à la Tetsuya topped with chives and kombu on a bed of rice paper noodles surrounded by parsley oil and ocean trout caviar," world peace seems almost at hand. But not quite; for the dark ending of the story, think Kurt Vonnegut.

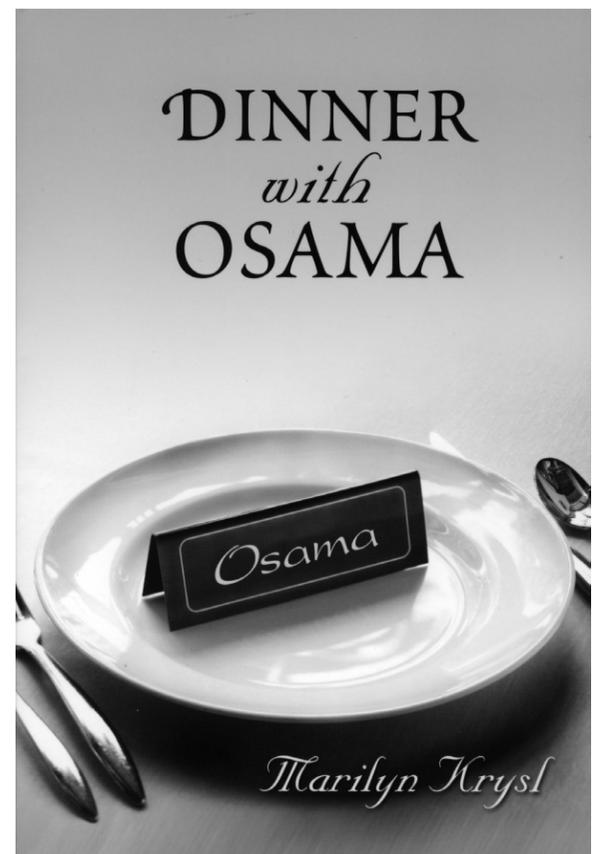
One of Krysl's fantasies features Hathor, the Egyptian love-goddess, checking Boulder out for an appropriate annual male sacrifice. Two pieces explore the passion, pleasure, and greed of mother-daughter love. A story called "Belly" celebrates the way the female belly "ranks up there with the great universals: love, death, and the changing of the seasons." It's also a story about friendship, betrayal, and generosity. Krysl advocates love in all its forms, not least the forms of sex. She would be a supporter of the William Blake who claimed in "The Marriage of Heaven & Hell" that it is better to murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires, that Energy is Eternal Delight, and that everything that lives is holy. When a belly-praising female protagonist sees her lover caressing her best friend's hitherto-rejected belly in the supermarket, she tackles jealousy nobly in an imaginary dialogue with Charlie Rose. "What's important," she asks herself, "Having a dog on a leash or putting more love into the world?"

This kind of chipper tone is a constant in Krysl's work. Krysl has a habit of addressing the reader when niceness threatens to overwhelm, teasing us for our addiction to fictional conflict. She addresses us as well, however, and with pointed detail, on topics such as war, famine, drought, the thirst for oil, pollution, governmental and corporate corruption, the melting icecaps, the global traffic in radioactive material and human organs, and our own (and her own) complicity and hypocrisy. Pronouns have a way of shifting around in Krysl's writing so that "I," "you," "we," "he," "she," "they," and "them" keep trading places. In the book's novella, "Welcome to the Torture Center, Love," which takes place in the Sudan, she points out that the supposedly Arab and olive-skinned North and the supposedly pure African South are—thanks to time-tested practices of slavery, kidnapping, rape—in fact quite mixed. Might this remind an American audience of anything in our own demographic history?

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The novella transpires in a time of war which might remind us of something in our own post-9/11 military history, though in the Sudan things are more visibly up close and personal: "Cooperative, mutual suicide is what's going on between northern and southern Sudan in '89." The main setting is a United Nations refugee camp, the main characters a handsome Cambridge-educated Dinka M.D. and a white girl in flight from wealth. Robert Stone material, you might think, but no. Krysl doesn't do Christian sin, guilt, self-loathing plus sensational violence. So we have that mix of Grace Paley and Kurt Vonnegut, plus a love story. Plus constant reminders of the facts of life. "I did this, then I did that, then they took me off the respirator." "The Sahara was held in place by a thin crust of lichen and tiny stones. Then bye-bye, camels; yo, vehicles." "And guess what: the research is in that people are generally happier when they're around dirt. Why do you think people go nuts every spring planting gardens, filling flower pots, buying rose bushes?"

After a story of soldiers burning a trainload of refugees alive, Krysl's narrator remarks, "war stories are a notorious turn-on. The closer and the more heated the slaughter, and the more hungry and skeletal the Africans are, the more soldiers, aid workers, and refugees fuck." In the voice of her



female protagonist, "The train story was peyote." If you don't like it, the narrator quips at one point, close the book.

I, for one, could not close the book. The story, the writing, is over the top, over the top again, relentless. But I read on. Near the novella's close, we watch a woman outside the refugee camp's chainlink fence climbing on a man's shoulders, teetering, "clutching chainlink with one hand, and with the other she reached into the sling and lifted out a handful of baby," a newborn with the chalky sheath still on it. The woman heaves the baby over the fence, "and I caught it, barely.... I stood there holding this live event...and a shout rose," says our heroine. The next paragraph switches to third person: "You imagine Annie adopts the baby, one of her lover's people.... But the child won't live: too tiny."

Why do I not close the book? There are writers whose prose is so beautiful that it enables you to tolerate more pain than you thought you could. Toni Morrison is such a writer. Krysl is not. The wisecracking—if you like that sort of thing, and I do—helps. Comedy is both an essential survival strategy, and a weapon against tyranny. I have always believed that *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) did more to stop the arms race than any number of demonstrations and marches. I loved it when Abbie Hoffman and his fellow hippies threw dollar bills down on the New York Stock Exchange back in 1967. I love the Guerilla Girls and CODEPINK. I loved Tina Fey as Sarah Palin.

One more thing: by the close of *Dinner with Osama*, Krysl has revealed herself as a mystic, someone for whom a kelson of the creation is love, as it was for Walt Whitman. All human lovers, she tells us, using one of her favorite food metaphors, are "doing temp work, on loan from the stacked grain bags of the universe." Wanting to believe this, I read on.

Alicia Ostriker is a poet and critic. Her most recent critical book is Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics, and the Erotic.