

# FINDING Dora Maar

AN ARTIST, AN ADDRESS BOOK, A LIFE

**BRIGITTE BENKEMOUN**

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY JODY GLADDING

In search of a replacement for his lost Hermès agenda, Brigitte Benkemoun’s husband buys a vintage diary on eBay. When it arrives, she opens it and finds a treasure dating back to 1951 tucked inside—twenty pages of phone numbers and addresses for Balthus, Brassai, André Breton, Jean Cocteau, Paul Éluard, Leonor Fini, Jacqueline Lamba, and other art luminaries of the European avant-garde.

After realizing that the address book belonged to Dora Maar—Pablo Picasso’s famous “Weeping Woman” and a brilliant artist in her own right—Benkemoun embarks on a two-year-long quest to learn more about this provocative, passionate, and enigmatic woman and the role that each of these famous figures played in her life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Picasso said, “First I find, then I seek.” The author has used this quote as one of the epigraphs for her book. Have you ever found (or acquired secondhand) an object and tried to uncover its history, either through research or imagining who might have owned it? Is there an object in your life that holds a great deal of personal meaning?
2. Dora Maar wrote, “My destiny is magnificent whatever it seems. In the past I used to say my destiny is very hard whatever it seems.” What do you think she meant by this? How have your thoughts about your own future changed over time? What does the concept of destiny mean to you? Do you think this author, a journalist with an interest in art, was destined to find this address book and learn its story?
3. How do you think the theme of obsession plays a role in this story—for the author, for Dora Maar, or for other people in Dora’s life?
5. If someone found your address book—or perhaps today’s equivalent, the contact list in your cell phone—do you think they could use it to discover who you were and what relationships you had? How do you think that process would be complicated, or simplified, by the digital tools we use today?
6. Dora Maar seems to have undergone a transformation from her student days as a leftist, anti-fascist revolutionary to her later years as a religious conservative. Do you think it is possible to have a complete reversal of beliefs from one period in your life to another? What kind of event or experience might cause that to happen?
7. The author suggests that Dora Maar may have learned to be anti-Semitic from her father. Does this imply that we can’t escape becoming like our parents? Why do you think Dora kept a copy of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*?
8. Dora Maar is widely known through Picasso’s representations of her as the “Weeping Woman.” Do the author’s theories about who Dora was and what happened in her life line up with the image of the Weeping Woman? Why or why not?
9. Why do you think Dora Maar wanted to be known as a painter rather than a photographer?
10. What do you think of the author’s insertion of herself and her personal history into this story? Why do you think she does this? Does it improve or take away from the story?
11. Dora Maar’s real name was Henriette Theodora Markovitch. She chose the name Maar for herself. The author explains that Maar is a German word that means crater and has a relationship with fire and fusion. Why do you think Dora chose this name?
12. How would you classify this book? Biography? Memoir? Cultural history? Fiction? A combination of these genres? The author often imagines what Dora Maar and her friends might have said or thought based on facts she learns about them. Do these imagined conversations enhance or complicate the credibility of the story?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRIGITTE BENKEMOUN is a journalist and writer. She is the author of *Albert le Magnifique* and *La petite fille sur la photo*.

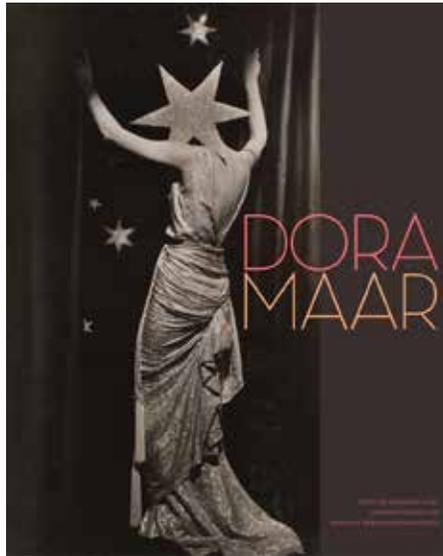
## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

JODY GLADDING is a poet and translator. She has translated some thirty books from French, including, most recently, Jean Giono's *Occupation Journal*, Michel Pastoureaux's *Yellow: The History of a Color*, and Roland Barthes's *Album: Unpublished Correspondence and Texts*.

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