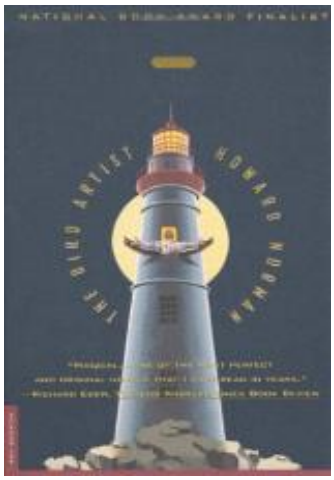
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The Bird Artist

by Howard Norman



About the Book

Howard Norman's **The Bird Artist,** the first book of his Canadian trilogy, begins in 1911. Its narrator, Fabian Vas is a bird artist: He draws and paints the birds of Witless Bay, his remote Newfoundland coastal village home. In the first paragraph of his tale Fabian reveals that he has murdered the village lighthouse keeper, Botho August. Later, he confesses who and what drove him to his crime--a measured, profoundly engrossing story of passion, betrayal, guilt, and redemption between men and women.

The Bird Artist is a 1994 National Book Award Finalist for Fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. Toward the end of **The Bird Artist** Fabian paints a mural on the church wall depicting not only the physical aspects of Witless Bay, but also representations of its residents and recent events. How is Fabian's narration of his story similar to the mural he paints?

2.. Howard Norman spent time in an Inuit whale-hunting community in Greenland. **The Bird Artist** opens with the following epigraph: "Suddenly, with extreme violence, he felt himself seized by the desire to be, rain or no rain, at any price, in the midst of the valleys: alone" (*Giorgio Bassani,* **The Heron**). What role does the theme of isolation, both geographic and emotional, play in Norman's novel?

3.. Howard Norman has said that he originally wrote *The Bird Artist* because of Margaret Handle -- that "she puppeteers many things in the book." He also "tried to develop landscape as a character." What do Margaret and the landscape of Witless Bay have in common, and how do they shape and affect the book's events?

4. The final chapter of **The Bird Artist** comments on the etiquette of correspondence: "A man sends a letter, a man expects a reply." This chapter also contains a lengthy letter from Orkney to Fabian. What role do letters, and mail, play

in the book? Which characters write letters, and which do not? What purpose (purposes) does writing play in this narrative?

5. On page 163, Margaret remembers a song her mother sang: "There's no love/true as the love/that dies untold," and tells Fabian that "It means, once a third person -- outside the couple in love -- knows a bout the love, it's diminished somehow." How does her interpretation relate to the novel's events? Could the song have a different meaning?

6. Some critics found mythic qualities in **The Bird Artist**. If a myth is "traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon," what does Fabian's story explain or unfold? How does it pertain to the world beyond Witless Bay?

7. At his trial, Fabian recalls, "I saw Bevel Cabot, Miriam Auster, Giles La Cotte, Ruth Henley, Olive Perrault. Toward the back were Elmer Wyatt, Peter Kieley, Patrick Flood holding his son Colin, Seamus Doyle." How does the community play a role in Fabian's crime and punishment? Although we never "meet" these characters, what is their significance here? What other writers have used a similar device to convey a group's identity and role?

8. In saving Alaric's life, Enoch warns her against straying too far away from her known village. And yet, the novel also presents the unknown, Halifax, for example, as an exciting place of opportunity. Which view does the book, as a whole, support? Safety or limitlessness? The comfort of the familiar lighthouse or the opportunity of the vast ocean?

9. Norman's protagonists, at various points in the book, commit murder and adultery, lie and steal. Does **The Bird Artist** condone, or even admire, such behavior? What stance does the novel take on religion and the church? Is there religious imagery in Fabian's mural? In the text as a whole?

10. The narrator, Fabian Vas, introduces himself immediately as a bird artist. What is the role of the artist in this book? How dose it relate to Fabian's position as narrator, or storyteller?

Author Bio

Howard Norman was twice a finalist for the National Book Award. He is the author of COME TO THE WINDOW, THE BIRD ARTIST, WHAT IS LEFT THE DAUGHTER, MY DARLING DETECTIVE and other novels. He received a Lannan Award in literature. He lives in East Calais, Vermont.

Critical Praise

A BOOK THAT IS . . . " magical "***-The Lost Angeles Times***"bewitching "***-The New York Times***"original and compelling "***-The Boston Globe***"Startling and ambitious . . . it should be an opera. "***-Time***"so vivid and finely imagined that to finish it is to leave behind some of the warmest-blooded people you're ever likely to meet. "***-Harper's Bazaar***

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