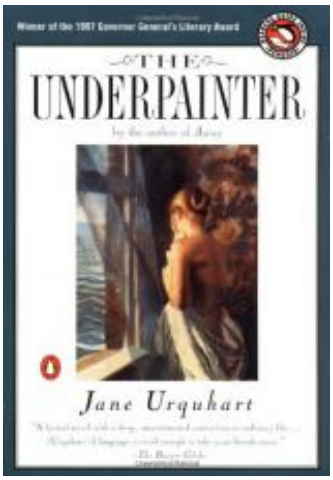
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The Underpainter

by Jane Urquhart



About the Book

> **"Each afternoon now, when I have finished my work, memory beckons me into the street, insists that I walk with her in the snow."**

With these words, Austin Fraser, a seventy-five-year-old American minimalist painter, beckons us into his world?a world populated by the ghosts of his past, a world that has come to be as cold and fractured as the icy terrain upon which he has treaded so carefully his entire life. In the name of art, Austin Fraser has perfected?if not the craft of painting?then the craft of guarding the inner chambers of his heart from those who love him.

In her stunning new novel The Underpainter, Jane Urquhart contemplates the weight of a life not truly lived and the consequences of sacrificing one's humanity for the sake of art. A series of canvases called The Erasures earns Austin Fraser fame in the art world. After painting a highly detailed narrative scene, he systematically "erases" the images with progressively lighter shades of color. Richly textured, multilayered, brimming with precisely drawn characters and unforgettable images that rise?and then disappear?from its pages, The Underpainter's narrative echoes The Erasure series. In a masterful twist, Jane Urquhart uses these paintings as an ingenious metaphor for the love that Austin cannot accept, and the people that he continually exiles to the corners of his mind.

It is, perhaps, the philosophy of Austin's mentor Robert Henri that most influences the solitary path of his life. About the emotions and sensation of life Robert Henri said to his students, "Each sensation is precious. Protect it, cherish it, keep it. Never give it away. When you are alone, without the distraction of the community and affection, this will be easier to achieve." While Austin admits that before meeting his teacher "neither community nor affection played a significant role in my life," he also says that the words of Robert Henri "gave [him] permission to remain aloof." Jane Urquhart surrounds Austin with a cast of individuals who, unlike her narrator, are intensely attached to the physical world and unafraid to love?or to lose. We meet Austin's eccentric mother?with her passion for visiting graveyards and taking her uneasy young son on vigorous walks through the wild rocky landscape of Rochester, New York. Austin's father is driven

by the pain of Austin's mother's death to a life of riches and capitalism, and a china-painter named George finds respite from the carnage of World War I in the arms of a similarly shell-shocked nurse named Augusta. Sarah, a waitress who lives in the remote mining settlement of Silver Islet, Ontario, is Austin's long-time model and mistress. For fifteen summers she gives both body and soul to Austin, who suddenly exits her life saying, "I have finished painting you." We also meet Rockwell Kent, a famous artist who follows his own advice to "get drunk and have a love affair"; and, finally, Vivian, the woman whose reappearance after many years irrevocably splinters Austin's life while driving the novel to its powerful climax.

In the end, Austin Fraser embarks on the very last canvas of The Erasure series. He begins to paint a portrait of himself incorporating "the love that I could not accept coming towards me, despite my cloak of fear, the implacable rock man, the miles and miles of ice." At last, he attempts to reach beyond the dark shorelines of loneliness and the endless snowy plains of memory, to a place where the creative process is no longer solitary, where the images of his past can finally remain vibrant?and unerased.

Discussion Guide

1. How do Austin Fraser's Erasure paintings echo the narrative of The Underpainter?

2. Austin Fraser says that, for the sake of his painting, he "trespasses everywhere and I thieved constantly." The most obvious example of this is his relationship with Sarah, his model and mistress. Do you think that Sarah understands that Austin is "mining" their relationship in order to perfect his paintings of her? If so, why do you suppose she continues to pose for him? Who else does Austin "thieve" from?

3. Is there any character in the novel that does not allow Austin to exploit their relationship?

4. Are there any similarities between Sarah's father and Austin's mother? How is Sarah's relationship with her father similar? or different?from Austin's relationship with his mother?

5. Why does Augusta need to tell Austin her life's story? Do you think that the fact that Augusta offered him her story, rather than him having to "thieve" it from her, changed the value of it in Austin's eyes? Was this a turning point for him? Austin is intensely interested in Augusta's story?a woman whom he barely knew, yet, other than learning about Sarah's father, he shows absolutely no interest in learning the details of Sarah's life. Why is this so?

6. What is the significance of Augusta's "lost girl in the woods" dream sequence? Are there other examples of characters disappearing, or feeling like they are lost in The Underpainter? Is this a theme that surrounds only the female characters? If so, why?

7. Think about the topography of the places that are important parts of Austin's life: Rochester, Davenport, and Silver Islet, Canada. How do these landscapes mimic Austin's inner self? Why does he choose to paint the cold, rocky landscapes of the north?

8. Compare Austin's minimalist paintings with George's narrative china painting. How are their respective choices of painting styles reflected in how they live their lives? Is it surprising that these two men remained such good friends for

so long? What common bond do you think they shared? Consider Austin's friendship with Rockwell Kent. How is it different from his friendship with George?

9. Compare George's occupation, china-painting, to the war. Could he have ever returned to painting idyllic narrative scenes after experiencing the chaos of battle? What is the significance of the shattered pieces of china found throughout The Underpainter? How is George's response to the broken china different from Austin's response?

10. Do you think that the fate of Augusta and George would have been as tragic if they had not been involved in the war? Was George damaged more by the war than he was by Vivian's rejection?

11. Do you think that George's art is inferior to Austin's art? Why is Austin so profoundly affected by Rockwell's criticism of his paintings of Sarah? Is his criticism valid?

12. A very powerful scene in The Underpainter is the one in which Austin waits for Sarah at the hotel. For days, he continually visualizes himself finally opening up to her, finally giving?and receiving?love. In the end, though, he leaves before Sarah even arrives. Did you know that Austin would reject this opportunity to regain his humanity?

13. It has often been said that the essence of art lies in the way an artist lives, rather than in the way an artist paints. Is this true of Austin after the death of Augusta and George? What about at the end of The Underpainter?

Author Bio

Born in 1949 in Little Long Lac, Ontario, Jane Urquhart was a child with passionate artistic ambitions. She often staged impromptu performances in a corner of the schoolyard, and as a teenager became fascinated with the works of Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Urquhart, who writes vividly about young love, grief, and loss, experienced widowhood at the tender age of 24 when her husband, an art student, was tragically killed in an accident. Soon afterwards she met Tony Urquhart, the painter to whom she has been married for over twenty years and the father of her teenage daughter. She has earned two degrees, in English and Art History.

Jane Urquhart is the author of three previous novels: **The Whirlpool**, which won France's prestigious Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in 1992, **Changing Heaven**; and **Away**, which won the Trillium Award in 1993, spent 132 weeks on the Canadian bestseller lists and was shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. She has also published a volume of short stories and three collections of poetry. She lives in a small village in southwestern Ontario, Canada.

Critical Praise

"An engaging and moving exploration of love: mother-love, romantic love, love of country....Away is a melancholy Irish ballad sung on foreign soil, its words and music all the sweeter for being heard so far away from home."

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