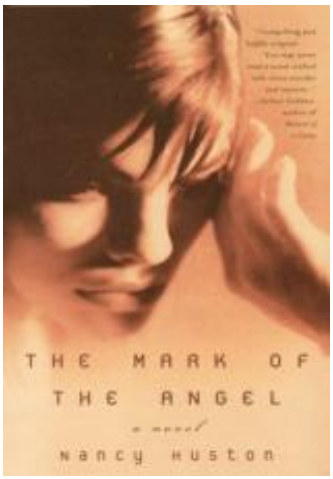
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Mark of the Angel

by Nancy Huston



About the Book

This novel marks the stuning American debut of an internationally acclaimed writer. Combining the narrative drive of Birdsong with the emotional resonance of The Reader, The Mark of the Angel is a haunting and unforgettable tale of three lives woven together by longing, fate, and the weight of history.

The year is 1957, and the place is Paris, where the psychic wounds of World War II have barely begun to heal and the Algerian war is about to escalate. Saffie, an emotionally damaged young German woman, arrives on the doorstep of Raphael, a privileged musician who finds her reserve irresistible. He hires her, and over the next few days seduces her and convinces her to marry him. But when Raphael sends Saffie on an errand to the Jewish ghetto, where she meets András, a Hungarian instrument maker, each of their lives will be altered in startling and unexpected ways. As Saffie learns to feel again, her long buried memories coupled with the inexorable flow of historical forces beyond anyone's control, create a tableau of epic tragedy. The Mark of the Angel is a mesmerizing novel of love, betrayal, and the ironies of history.

Discussion Guide

1. Why is **The Mark of the Angel** narrated in the present tense? What effect does this have on the reader? In addition, the narrator often addresses the reader directly--for example, "While we were busy drinking pastis with Mademoiselle Blanche, the real drama was taking place" [p. 45]. She even comments on the flow of the story itself: "Let's speed things up here a bit--it's so exhilarating, this power" [p. 47]. What does the author accomplish by interjecting these remarks in the flow of the narrative?

2. Raphael claims that "had it not been for his mother's explicit and unshakable opposition, he would have joined the Resistance movement at the end of '43" [p. 9]. Has the passage of time colored Raphael's recollections of his wartime experiences, or is he, at age twenty-eight, simply reiterating the opinions he formed as a fifteen-year-old boy? What does

the description of the death of Raphael's father and his mother's reaction to it [p. 8] tell you about the Lepage household even before the war and about the man Raphael grew up to be?

3. On Saffie's first day as his maid, "Raphael sprinkles his explanations [of her duties] with little jokes and stories to put her at ease" [p. 17]. Which character is more uncomfortable and why? Why is the scene recounted entirely from Raphael's point of view?

4. When he and Saffie make love for the first time, does Raphael's pleasure come from genuine feelings of love for Saffie [p. 27]? What other emotions are at play? Is Saffie entirely untouched by the experience or does she also find some satisfaction? What does each of them hope to achieve by getting married? Are their motivations similar in any way? Is Raphael naïve in thinking motherhood will change Saffie [p.44]? Does fatherhood change him?

5. Memories of her own childhood surface for the first time when Saffie is alone with Emil for a weekend. Why do they prompt her to say, "When Emil starts to talk, he'll call her not Mutti but Maman. Mutti is over and done with and so is Muttersprache, both are over and done with, once and for all" [p. 67]? Is she expressing regret or hope? What did Saffie learn from her teacher's "macabre history lesson" [p. 69]?

6. Compare Saffie's initial encounter with András to her first meeting with Raphael. How do the descriptions of András and his workshop set the stage for Saffie's "total metamorphosis" [p.91]? What literary devices does the author use to make this scene at once realistic and magical?

7. When Saffie is with András, "Her life in Germany no longer exists; nor does her life on the Left Bank--she can say, do, be anything she wants" [p. 101]. What does András offer her that she doesn't find with Raphael? Beyond her profound connection to András himself, why does she feel so at home with him and the stream of visitors to his shop? Does András's angry impatience with Saffie's ignorance about the French-Algerian war [p. 106] and about Jewish culture in the Marais help to bring the two of them closer together or does it symbolize an unbridgeable gap between them? Why is Saffie "overcome by a weird euphoria" when she learns András is Jewish [p. 112]?

8. In contemplating what he should reveal to Saffie about his past, András asks himself a series of questions: "Why should I tell her the true story instead of the made-up one? How does this truth concern her? Which truths are we required to pay attention to, and which can we ignore" [p. 116]? How do each of the three main characters answer these questions in the course of the novel? Which responses come closest to your own and why?

9. The novel's title comes from a love scene at the height of András and Saffie's affair [p. 124]. How does it relate to the novel as a whole? Discuss how Saffie, András, Raphael, and Emil each embody a different definition of "innocence." Do András and Saffie violate Emil's innocence by making him a silent accomplice in their affair? In your opinion, do the reasons the narrator offers for Saffie's ease in leading a double life [p.159] absolve Saffie from guilt?

10. Why is Saffie so reluctant to allow Emil to start school [p. 175]? In what ways does Emil's presence affect the relationship between Saffie and András?

11. Saffie recalls both the evils her family experienced--the death of her best friend [p. 73], her mother's rape by Russian soldiers [p. 120], and the Allied bombing of her village church that resulted in the deaths of dozens of children [p.128]--and the evil her father perpetrated as a research doctor for the Nazis. Did one of these legacies play a greater role in

Saffie's withdrawal from reality after the war?

12. Why is András able to face the horrors of the past more willingly than Saffie does? What strengths does he draw from his experiences in Hungary during World War II and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956? What role does his support of the Algerian underground in Paris play in healing the wounds of the past? Is he motivated only by idealism?

13. When Saffie and András have a violent argument about András's political activities, Huston writes: "The truth--which both of them sense though they refrain from saying it out loud--is that they've finally touched on the essence of their love, its secret sacred core. What they love in each other is the enemy" [p. 149]. Do you agree with this characterization? If so, do you think it is unusual for two people to create a relationship on this basis?

14. Compare Emil's relationship with András to the one he has with his father. If Raphael had been a more attentive father, would the story have unfolded differently? What do you think happened to Saffie in the years following the events recounted in **The Mark of the Angel?**

15. Throughout the novel, Huston charts the escalating tensions between France and its former colony, Algeria. How does this emerging war color your reactions to András's and Saffie's stories of World War II? Why does Huston use news bulletins about the war and other events to frame the story? How does she illuminate the private lives of the characters and their internal reactions to external events?

16. Huston writes, "How can so many worlds exist simultaneously on one little planet? Which of them is the most genuine, the most precious, the most urgent for us to understand? The connections among them are complex, yet not chaotic . . . causes sparking off effects that become causes in turn and so on and so forth, ad infinitum" [p. 159]. Is it possible to give an objective answer these questions? Are there events or tragedies so compelling that everyone is forced to react to them? How do the events in **The Mark of the Angel** support your position? Can history be understood through bare facts alone or is it always informed by subjective perceptions? Are the connections Huston writes about political and historical, or are there other ties among disparate, often contradictory, co-existing realities?

17. How does **The Mark of the Angel** compare to other books you have read about the war and the postwar period? What does a work of fiction reveal about historical events that nonfiction books don't?

Author Bio

As a student at Sarah Lawrence College, Nancy Huston went to Paris in 1973 for a year of study and never moved back. She writes in both French and English and is the author of seven novels and numerous works of nonfiction published in France and in Canada, where she was born.

Critical Praise

"A brilliant, powerfully written novel. "

The Mark of the Angel

by Nancy Huston

Publication Date: August 8, 2000
Paperback: 240 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 0375709215
ISBN-13: 9780375709210