

THE UNDERPAINTER

Jane Urquhart



EMBLEM
McClelland & Stewart

INTERNATIONAL ACCLAIM FOR

The Underpainter

“Urquhart is one of Canada’s most accomplished and interesting writers.”

— *Edmonton Journal*

“Original and dazzling, radiant and quietly perceptive, Urquhart’s new novel delights the senses even as it astonishes the mind....”

— *London Free Press*

“A lyrical novel with a deep, unsentimental connection to ordinary life.... [Urquhart’s] language is vivid enough to take your breath away.”

— *Boston Globe*

“Urquhart explores the ability to love and the failure to love; the visual pictures and images of humanity beneath the surfaces on which art is created. *The Underpainter* is a savory read.”

— *Flare*

“Urquhart’s evocation of time and place shimmers with clarity....”

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Urquhart has written a novel whose narrative power matches her delicate artistry with words ... lodges in the mind and heart forever.”

— *Montreal Gazette*

“Richly textured prose, and an intricate, many layered structure.”

— *Sunday Times* (U.K.)

“A rich, multi-faceted story, skillfully told”

— *San Francisco Chronicle*

“*The Underpainter* has the force of an idea whose time has come....”

— *Globe and Mail*

“Her writing shimmers with lyric sensuality.”

— *Vancouver Sun*

“It is the sadness of stoic self-denial, of huge sacrifices made for questionable ends, of small and large renunciations, that haunts our collective past and rises so powerfully out of the pages of this novel.”

— *Toronto Star*

“Elegant and unpretentious ... an absorbing, beautifully cadenced novel.”

— *Daily Telegraph* (U.K.)

“Urquhart writes forcefully; her imagery is vivid, and her evocation of time and place is accomplished and assured.”

— *Times Literary Supplement* (U.K.)

“Urquhart... is a skilled word-painter.”

— *Washington Post Book World*

“Brave, intelligent and vivid.”

— *Literary Review* (U.K.)

“*The Underpainter* is a sad, subtle work that continues [Urquhart’s] tradition as one of Canada’s finest contemporary authors.”

— *Winnipeg Free Press*

JANE URQUHART

THE
UNDERPAINTER



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Table of Contents

Cover

International Acclaim For The Underpainter

Title Page

Dedication

Part 1: THE LAKE EFFECT

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Part 2: NIGHT IN THE CHINA HALL

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Part 3: ONTARIO LAKE SCENERY

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Copyright

For Tony Urquhart,
whose spirit is visible in art, in life

For Amy Quinn,
who discovered the letters, and knew

For Ellen Seligman,
with affection and gratitude

“Although an even north light is preferable in the greater number of cases, direct bright sunlight is sometimes useful in examining blacks and other very dark colours.”

— RALPH MAYER,
The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques

The woman is standing near the window in the downstairs front room of a log house on the north shore of Lake Superior.

It is the winter of 1937.

She is wearing a grey tweed skirt and a checked woollen bush jacket. Her dark-blond hair is pulled back from her face and hangs in a thick braid almost to her waist. Despite the fact that she has kept her fires — both in the Quebec heater in this room and in the stove in the kitchen — burning all night, it is cold enough that she can see her breath. In her hand she holds an unopened envelope with the words “Canadian National Telegram” printed on it. Her head is bent and her shoulders are slightly stooped as she stares at this folded and glued piece of paper.

To the left and to the right of the house in which she stands lies a series of similar homes built for the miners who arrived in this place in the 1860s. Since the penultimate closure of the silver mine in 1884, all but a few of these dwellings are abandoned in winter. In recent decades they have been used as summer residences only by certain adventurous families from the small twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, which are situated sixteen miles to the west but cannot be seen from here because a limb of the huge, human-shaped peninsula of rock, known as The Sleeping Giant, hides them from view.

This unconscious granite figure is famous. In the summer, tourists driving the gorgeous north shore of Lake Superior stop their cars and stare across Thunder Bay at his reclining body. Passengers who have travelled on the Trans-Canada train can bring his physique to mind long after mountains and prairies have faded from memory. He is twenty miles long, this person made from northern landscape, and, in 1937, no roads as yet have scarred his skin. According to the Ojibway, who have inhabited this region for hundreds of years, he was turned to stone as punishment for revealing the secret location of silver to white men greedy enough to demand the information. He will lie forever obdurate, unyielding, stretched across the bay.

The little settlement of Silver Islet Landing, where the woman lives, occupies a site on his anatomy sometimes referred to as “the toe of the giant.”

During the brief summer season, bonfires bloom nightly on the small offshore islands she can see from her front windows. Swimmers dive from the dock near the large clapboard building that acts as a hotel and a store. Steamers, which provide the only transportation to the spot, ply back and forth from Port Arthur; the narrow track near the shore is filled with running children. Occasionally games and entertainments take place on the sand beach at the end of the lane. There is often laughter, and sometimes singing.

By mid-September, stillness and quiet are reinstated, the summer population having returned to the schools and industries of daily life. One old government official, who is responsible for the maintenance of two lighthouses and for the sporadic winter postal deliveries, remains in his house near the dock. And the woman remains in her cabin a little farther down the shore. By the time the world begins to frost, and then to freeze, even the memory of the summer activity seems unreal, as if it had been a mere performance and she a witness — not even a member of the audience but a stranger in the wings.

When these houses were built, almost eighty years before, the need for shelter was so pressing that the mining company was