The Mark of the Angel
by Nancy Huston

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About this Book

This novel marks the stunning 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 Questions

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?

**Critical Praise**

"The writing style is almost tactile, like a dressmaker caressing a fine piece of silk or satin the better to show it off. Huston has a sensitive yet sure-handed grasp of her craft."

*Washington Times*

"A brilliant, powerfully written novel."

*Rocky Mountain News*

 Courtesy of Vintage Books.
Nancy Huston

1953-

Also known as: Nancy Huston, Nancy Louise Huston

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"Sidelights"

Canadian-born Nancy Huston has won acclaim and commercial success as a prolific writer in both Canada and France. She writes in English and French, and translates her own novels. Huston went to Paris as a university student in the early 1970s. After studying for a time with esteemed semiologist Roland Barthes, she began a writing career that has encompassed both fiction and nonfiction, and she has won or been nominated for numerous awards in both France and Canada. In the latter country, this has been somewhat controversial, with many Canadians feeling that the country's awards should be reserved for authors who live and work in Canada. Even so, she has received praise in Canada, France, and the United States as a creator of strong plots and characters, something, that, according to some observers, is often lacking in French literature. Since World War II, "French literature has been dominated by people talking about ideas, but they're not great storytellers," noted Huston's first U.S. publisher, Chip Fleischer of Steerforth Press, in an interview with Publishers Weekly.

One of Huston's much-lauded works is Plainsong, which won the Canadian Governor General's award in French translation as Cantique des plaines in 1993. It tells the life story of a man named Padon Sterling through his granddaughter, Paula. The novel...
begins, shortly after Padron's death, with Paula who has inherited a sheaf of papers which carry her grandfather's scribblings. Paula pieces together the life of a man with ambitions who is gradually beaten down by the realities of harsh prairie life. Paula discovers that Padron was involved in an affair that lasted fifteen years and changed the way in which he viewed the world. Padron's lover later succumbed to a disease that eroded her memory, forcing him to accept the realities of his life. "Besides offering an account of prairie history that strips away the reader's complacency, it takes on one of the world's oldest literary subjects--how time and life slide inexorably through a man's fingers," noted Joan Thomas writing in the Globe and Mail. Sandra Martin commented in Quill & Quire that "the novel is compelling and sometimes haunting."

Huston made her U.S. debut with The Mark of the Angel. The protagonist, Saffie, is a mysterious young woman who immigrates from Germany to Paris in 1957 and finds work as housekeeper to a gifted classical musician named Raphael, whom she eventually marries. They have a son together, but Saffie remains an enigma. A simple errand, however, changes her life: Saffie takes Raphael's flute to a repairman, Andras, who turns out to be a Hungarian Jew and Holocaust survivor. Saffie opens up to him about her sufferings during the World War II and her agonized speculations about her family's affiliation with the Nazis. In spite of not knowing anything about each other apart from their respective nationalities, Saffie and Andras become lovers, but their affair is further complicated by Andras's role in aiding Algeria's rebellion against France's colonial rule. Brown Daily Herald reviewer Gabrielle Johnson stated that "the two embark on a passionate affair that is interrupted only by the marked differences in their cultures."

Johnson also suggested that "through the love story of Saffie and Andras, Huston makes the connection between the political and the personal. She asks the question, 'Which truths are we required to pay attention to?'" The Mark of the Angel is dark and moving, at once love story, war tale and psychological thriller," added Denver Post Online's Jean Charbonneau.

"Once [Huston] establishes her story's central ironies, the narrative achieves relentless velocity," a Publishers Weekly critic remarked. Library Journal's Barbara Hoffert lauded Huston's writing style as "strong, ironic, and refreshingly original." Time commentator Katherine Govier applauded Huston's "refusal to judge the searchers for love, even for their terrible betrayals," and summed up the novel as "elegant and somber." Bill Ott, critiquing for Booklist, felt "the story of Saffie and Andras hits a perfect melancholy note and sustains it superbly." Library Journal's Shirley E. Havens called The Mark of the Angel a "hauntingly elegant U.S. debut novel." David Valdes Greenwood, reviewing the novel for the Boston Phoenix Web site, wrote, "The tension gets so profound that one is afraid to turn the page, fearful for these characters. Huston achieves this effect with more than just a good story and good characters. Her language is beautiful, with startling juxtapositions of imagery... and musical phrasing." He added, "As the noose grows tighter around our trio of adults and the boy in their keeping, we begin to realize that the long-armed horrors of war will ever continue reaching out for new lives to claim, for new horrors to set in motion. From that terrible truth, Huston has made a chilling and beautiful work of art." Jessica Aldred, a contributor to an online review for Lifeline, noted that Huston "weaves her beautifully-written novel The Mark of the Angel with threads that are both universal and complex: Love, infidelity, trust, and betrayal." Charbonneau, in Denver Post Online, praised Huston's style as being "crisp and clean," and called her writing "powerful." He described the novel as containing a "rapid back-and-forth movement between present and past, alternating episodes of sadness, violence, tragedy, romance and horror." He summed up The Mark of the Angel as an "engaging, intelligent novel."

Slow Emergencies, winner of two international awards, and published in the United States in 2001, is a tale about a woman's preference for a profession as a ballet star over her family life with her husband and two daughters, and the resulting consequences. Booklist's Vanessa Bush called Huston's prose "eloquent and poetic," concluding that Huston "masterfully portrays the convergence of artistry of dance, parenting, and human relationships." Lisa Nussbaum, a reviewer for Library Journal, called it a "haunting story about an uncommon subject," while a Publishers Weekly reviewer observed, "Huston produces a sensitive, sweeping account of the difficulty of reconciling maternal and artistic callings."

Reba Leiding, reviewing Huston's 2001 book Dolce agonia: A Novel for Library Journal,
commended the author, pointing out that "Huston deftly marshals... the crowd of characters, her clear prose leading the reader into the characters' individual and collective histories."

PERSONAL INFORMATION


AWARDS


CAREER


WRITINGS:


- Dire et interdire: Eléments de jurologie (nonfiction), Payot (Paris, France), 1980.


• (With Samuel Kinser) A l'amour comme à la guerre, Seuil (Paris, France), 1984.


• (Editor, with Patrizia Magli) Le Donne e i segni: Scrittura, linguaggio, identità nel segno della differenza femminile, Ancona (Italy), 1985.


• Trois fois septembre (novel), Seuil (Paris, France), 1989.

• Journal de la création (nonfiction), Seuil (Paris, France), 1990.

• (With daughter Léa Huston) Véra Veut la Vérité (juvenile; also see below), Ecole des Loisirs, 1992.


• (With Léa Huston) Dora demande des détails (juvenile), Ecole des loisirs, 1993.


• Tombeau de Romain Gary (nonfiction; also see below), Actes Sud (Arlès, France), 1995.

• Désirs et réalités: textes choisis 1979-1993 (nonfiction), Leméac (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 1995.

• Pour un Patriotisme de l'ambiguïté (nonfiction), Fidès (Quebec, Canada), 1995.


• In Deo (also see below), Editions du Silence (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 1997.

• (Translator) Eva Figes, Spectres, Actes Sud (Arlès, France), 1995.

• L'Empreinte de l'ange, Actes Sud (Arlès, France), 1998, translation published as The Mark of the Angel, Steerforth Press (South Royalton, VT), 1999.


• (With Yves Angelo) Voleur de vie (screenplay; based on the novel by Steinnun Sigurdardottir), 1998.


- Chants Polaires, Leméac (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 2002.

- (With Valérie Grail) Angela et Marina: Tragicomédie Musicale, Leméac (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 2002.


- Professeurs de Désespoir, Leméac (Montreal, Quebec, Canada), 2004.


### RADIO SCRIPTS

- Fragments of a Warrior’s Discourse, France-Culture, 1981.

- (With Raymond Bellour) Scènes littéraires, scènes de ménage, France-Culture, 1986.


- Vies à vit, France-Culture, 1989.


• *Passions instrumentales*, France-Culture, 1993.


• (With Mariana Loupan) *Tonino Guerra, mille poètes*, France-Culture, 1996.


Huston’s articles and books have been translated into Czech, Slovak, Serbo-Croat, Polish, German, Hungarian, Dutch, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, Portuguese, and Russian.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

• *Advocate*, May 23, 2000, Jan Stuart, review of *Set Me Free*, p. 88.

• *Booklist*, September 15, 1999, Bill Ott, review of *The Mark of the Angel*.

• *Boston Phoenix*, September 16, 1999, David Valdes Greenwood, "Innocence Lost."


• *Quill & Quire*, September, 1993, p. 59.

• *Time*, November 8, 1999, Katherine Govier, "Sex and Violence."


**OTHER**

• *Lifewise*, http://www.argonauts.on.ca/ (September 10, 2001), Jessica Aldred, "Timeless and Thought-provoking Prose."

• *Sunday Times*, http://www.suntime.co.za/ (September 10, 2001), review of *The Mark of the Angel.*

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