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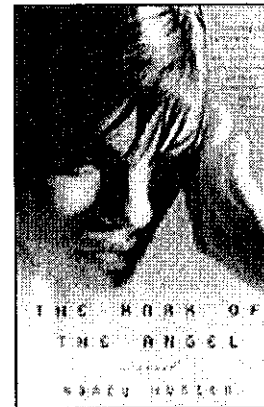
Critical Praise

Author Biography

Excerpt

The Mark of the Angel by Nancy Huston

List Price: \$12.00
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Publisher: Vintage



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Vintage Books

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 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.

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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 Andrés to her first

meeting with Raphael. How do the descriptions of Andrés 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 Andrés, "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 Andrés offer her that she doesn't find with Raphael? Beyond her profound connection to Andrés himself, why does she feel so at home with him and the stream of visitors to his shop? Does Andrés'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 Andrés is Jewish [p. 112]?
8. In contemplating what he should reveal to Saffie about his past, Andrés 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 Andrés and Saffie's affair [p. 124]. How does it relate to the novel as a whole? Discuss how Saffie, Andrés, Raphael, and Emil each embody a different definition of "innocence." Do Andrés 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 Andrés?
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?

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• 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

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Nancy Huston

1953-

Also known as: Nancy Huston, Nancy Louise Huston

Birth: September 16, 1953 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada
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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 nation'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 Paddon Sterling through his granddaughter, Paula. The novel

begins, shortly after Paddon's death, with Paula who has inherited a sheaf of papers which carry her grandfather's scribbles. 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 Paddon was involved in an affair that lasted fifteen years and changed the way in which he viewed the world. Paddon'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 *Lifewise*, 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 agonía: 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

Born September 16, 1953, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada; daughter of James (a professor) and Mary Louise Engels (a clinical psychologist; maiden name, Kester) Huston; married Tzvetan Todoro (a scholar and writer), May, 1981; children: Léa, Alexandre. **Education:** Sarah Lawrence College, B.A., 1975; L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Diploma, 1977. **Addresses:** Homeoffice: 4, rue Lacépède 75005 Paris, France. Agent: Mary Kling, La Nouvelle Agence, 7 rue Corneille, 75006 Paris, France.

AWARDS

Prix Binet-Sangle, French Academy, 1980, for *Dire et interdire: Eléments de jurologie*; Prix Contrepoint, 1981, for *Les Variations Goldberg, Romance*; United Nations Peace Prize, 1981, for *Fragments of a Warrior's Discourse*; Prix Canada-Suisse, Prix Luciole, and Governor-General's Award for best French-language novel, all 1993, all for *Cantique des plaines*; Prix "L" de Limoges and Prix Louis Hemon de L'Académie du Languedoc, both 1944, both for *La Virevolte*; Prix Goncourt des lycéens, Prix du Livre-Inter, and Prix des lectrices d'Elle, and shortlisted for Prix Goncourt, Prix Femina, and Prix du Gouverneur-Général, all 1996, all for *Instruments des ténèbres*; Prix des Libraires, Prix des lycéens de Chartres, and Prix des lectrices de ELLE, all 1998, all for *L'Empreinte de l'ange*; Prix Halif, Royal Academy of French Language and Literature, 1998; Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des lettres, 1999; nominations for Giller Prize and Governor-General's Award for English Translation, both 1999, both for *The Mark of the Angel*; Prix Marianne, 1999, for *Nord Perdu*; Prix Aliénor-d'Aquitaine, 1999, for *Prodige*; named Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, 1999; Honoris Causa doctorate, University of Montreal, 2000. An international colloquium, "Nancy Huston: Vision and Division," was held at the Université de la Sorbonne, April 27-28, 2001; Prix Fémina, 2006, *Lignes de Faille*.

CAREER

Writer. University of Columbia, Paris, France, professor of French feminist theory, 1976, 1983-89, professor of composition and stylistics, 1990-91, professor of French literature, 1992-93; Académie Commerciale Internationale, Chambre de Commerce, Paris, professor of English, 1976-78; Institut Supérieur Libre des Carrières Artistiques, Paris, professor of French literature, 1977-78; Centre de Formation Permanente et de Perfectionnement, Ministère des Finances, Paris, professor of English, 1978-85; Sarah Lawrence College, Paris, professor of literature and semiology, 1983-86. Fiction writer-in-residence, Women's Institute for Continuing Education, American University, Paris, 1989; visiting professor, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, 1994; writer-in-residence, l'Abbaye de Royaumont, 1994. Member of radio-plays reading committee for France-Culture (French national radio), 1987-90.

WRITINGS:

- *Jouer au papa et à l'amant: De l'amour des petites filles* (nonfiction), Ramsay (Paris, France), 1979.
- *Dire et interdire: Eléments de jurologie* (nonfiction), Payot (Paris, France), 1980.
- *Les Variations Goldberg, Romance* (novel), Seuil (Paris, France), 1981, translation published as *The Goldberg Variations*, NuAge Editions (Montreal, Canada), 1998.
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- (With Samuel Kinser) *A l'amour comme à la guerre*, Seuil (Paris, France), 1984.
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- (Editor, with Patrizia Magli) *Le Donne e i segni: Scrittura, linguaggio, identità nel segno della differenza femminile*, Ancona (Italy), 1985.
- (With Leïla Sebbar) *Lettres parisiennes: Autopsie de l'exil*, Barrault (Paris, France), 1986.
- *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.
- (Translator, under pseudonym Annécie Rosiers) Molly Gloss, *The Jump-off Creek*, Ecole des Loisirs, 1992.
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- *Tombeau de Romain Gary* (nonfiction; also see below), Actes Sud (Arles, 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.
- *Instruments des ténèbres*, Actes Sud (Arles, France), 1996, translation published as *Instruments of Darkness*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1997.
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- (With Yves Angelo) *Voleur de vie* (screenplay; based on the novel by Steinnun Sigurdardottir), 1998.

- *Nord perdu* (nonfiction), 1999, published as *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue, and Self*, McArthur (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2002.
- *Prodige: Polyphonie*, Actes Sud (Arles, France), 1999, translation published as *Prodigy: A Novella*, McArthur (Toronto, Canada), 2000.
- (With Léa Pool) *Emporte-moi* (screenplay; title means "Set Me Free"), 1999.
- *Limbes/Limbo: Un hommage à Samuel Beckett* (produced in Lyon, France, 2000), Actes Sud (Arles, France), 2000.
- (Translator) Goran Tunström, *Un Prosateur à New York*, Actes Sud (Arles, France), 2000.
- (Translator) *The Strong of Heart* (screenplay, based on the novel *Les ames fortes* by Jean Giono), 2001.
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- (With Raymond Bellour) *Scènes littéraires, scènes de ménage*, France-Culture, 1986.
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- *Terre du Berry: Mère et fille de George Sand*, France-Culture, 1988.
- *Vies à vif*, France-Culture, 1989.

- *Accords mortels*, France-Culture, 1990.
- *Ile en exil*, France-Culture, 1990.
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- *Romain Gary, L'Insaisi*, France-Culture, 1993.
- *Choses dites et défaites*, France-Culture, 1993.
- *Passions instrumentales*, France-Culture, 1993.
- *Tombeau de Romain Gary*, Radio Canada, 1995.
- *Créer, procréer: les voies de l'immortalité*, France-Culture, 1995.
- (With Mariana Loupan) *Tonino Guerra, milles poètes*, France-Culture, 1996.
- *Etranges Français*, France-Culture, 1997-1998.
- *In Deo*, SRC/CBC, 1999.

Also author of short stories and essays, published in various anthologies, including *Women and Men's Wars*, edited by Judith Hicks Stiehm, Pergamon Press (New York, NY), 1982; *Le Donne e i Signi, il lavoro editoriale*, edited by Patrizia Magli, Ancona (Italy), 1985; *The Female Body in Western Culture*, edited by Susan Suleiman, Harvard University Press, 1986; and *Far from Home: Writing and Exile*, edited by Susan Suleiman, Duke University Press, 1996. Contributor to journals and magazines, including *Les Temps Modernes*, *Histoires d'Elles*, *Le Genre Humain*, *Lettre internationale* (France), *Poetics Today*, *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, *Salmagundi*, *Harper's*, *Sun*, *Vancouver Review*, and *Descant* (Canada). Translator of short fiction and nonfiction works of writers such as Jacques Rey Charlier, Andrea Dworkin, Rosellen Brown, Pierette Fleutiaux, James Tate, Roland Barthes, Francois Flahault, Roman Jakobson, Raymond Bellour, Denis Hollier, Thierry Kuntzel, Mary MacCarthy, Richard Rodriguez, Tzvetan Todorov, Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, and Maurice Olender, from French to English or vice versa.

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.

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