

Fragile connections

An elegant, understated study of physical and psychic dislocations

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The Understory

By Pam Erens

Ironweed, 143 pages, \$11.95 paper

The "understory," narrator Jack Gorse explains early on, as he wanders the hidden Ramble in New York's Central Park, is made up of "the shrubs and vines, rather than the elms, oaks, and maples. ... The things that live at ground level are what hold the earth fast."

This observation in Pam Erens' debut novel, "The Understory," might serve as a gentle metaphor for Jack, an obsessive, 40-year-old loner and creature of habit who is as overlooked as the smaller details he takes into account. He tends to his narrative with the same ascetic precision that characterizes a daily regimen of waking at daybreak and beginning his stroll through the city.

"In my schedule," he muses, "there is no time for interruptions, deviations." Later he observes, "Being out-of-kilter with my routine made me unhappy, as if my own skin did not fit quite right." An avid, lifelong reader, he finds solace browsing at Egret Books, noting with proprietary relief as he peruses the shelves that his favorites have not yet been sold. "I would go down each row, scanning the familiar spines, stopping if I spied a gap." The book he describes as a particular favorite is a volume of 19th Century nature sonnets that disturb him and leave him with knots in his stomach, but that he can't stay away from.

In the same way, this push and pull of desire arises at the Stardust diner, where he has his daily lunch. Coming across graphic personal ads in the Village Voice, he finds himself drawn to and repelled by his desires. He leaves an extravagant tip for his favorite waitress, Marion, noting it as his one indulgence.

Jack is startled one day to learn that his landlord is evicting him from the Upper West Side brownstone once inhabited by Jack's now-dead uncle, the sort of disruption Jack fears most. Thrown into the mix is a handsome young architect, Patrick Allegra, who will

help the landlord renovate the building. As Patrick photographs the building he turns his camera on Jack because he finds him "interesting." Jack mistakes Patrick's kindnesses, assumes an intimacy is building and develops a full-blown crush that harks back to a similar, unrequited crush on a childhood playmate. Later, when Patrick presents Jack with the photo, Jack is shocked by what he sees: a pathetic, middle-age man with thinning hair and slumped shoulders. Soon to be homeless, despite his efforts to fight the eviction, Jack heads to a Buddhist retreat in Vermont where, we learn, Patrick has connections.

The novel alternates between Jack's life in Manhattan and his stay in Vermont, where he tends bonsais. After a while, it becomes obvious to the monks that Jack's form of brooding interiority is not the sort that lends itself to meditation and enlightenment, and at one point he's informed that the center is not simply a boardinghouse. The literal eviction from the Manhattan brownstone and his eventual arrival at the Calliope hotel, where transients are housed, speak also to his psychic dislocation. It is only a matter of time before his physical worlds will collide, and his romantic obsession with Patrick will culminate in high dramatic style.

Erens has, for the most part, avoided an overtly plotted book. Instead she has allowed this to be, first and foremost, an elegant and understated character study of the mind of a lonely, fragile man whose inability to connect with others or to recognize himself keep him as subterranean in the world as the undergrowth in the gardens he describes with such care.

But this brings up a larger, nagging question about the novel's vision. Though artfully detailed and beautifully rendered, the torment of Jack's repressed homosexuality and self-loathing seems like an artifact of another time. At 40 years of age in present-day Manhattan, he lives inexplicably in a cloud of shame. The resulting conflation of sexual orientation and obsessive-compulsive impulses that lead to violence cast a shadow over an otherwise beautifully written novel.

Alyce Miller's most recent book of fiction is the story collection "Water." She is a professor in the English department at Indiana University.

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