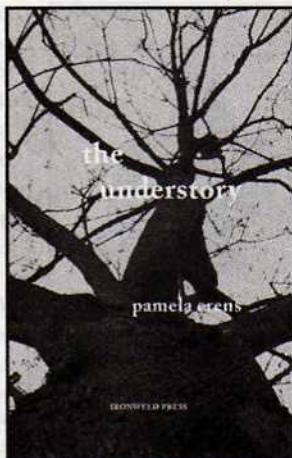


THE UNDERSTORY
Pamela Erens
Ironweed Press (\$11.95)

by Clifford Garstang

Survival of the trees in New York's Central Park depends on the health of the understory—the low growth that enriches the soil, keeps it moist, and protects the roots of the larger plants. "In the decades after the war, when the city turned its back on the park . . . it was not the big trees that began to disappear, it was the shrubs: the witch hazel and jetbead, blackhaw and sweet pepperbush. The park became like the city: skyscrapers, no texture." We learn in this short novel, winner of the Ironweed Fiction Prize, that human survival depends on a different understory, the ordinary men and women who "live at ground level"—and the health of this human undergrowth in turn depends on the nurturing relationships that give purpose to their lives.

The novel's narrator, Jack Gorse, has been deprived for years of these protective connections. His parents, inattentive at best, died in an automobile accident while Jack was in school; his uncle, whose inappropriateness is implied, has also died; and Jack has long since lost contact with a single childhood friend, an angrily severed tie that foreshadows this otherwise quiet book's plot. In his isolation—homeless, friendless, rootless—he is in danger of disappearing, like so many of the city's ordinary



people. Not only is Jack's survival threatened, but so is the survival of the city that depends on its understory. Jack even identifies with the shrubbery, the "gorse" that protects the trees. "What speaks to me most is close to the ground: the shrubs and vines, rather than the great elms, oaks and maples."

Since his uncle's death years earlier, Jack has been living illegally in the old man's rent-controlled apartment. When the building is sold, the new owner offers cash buyouts to the residents, but when Jack refuses to leave—he is perhaps a functional autistic, repulsed by human touch and resistant to any change in his routine—a suspicious fire erupts. Despite the damage, Jack stays put. The owner moves to evict him and also engages a young architect, Patrick, to oversee

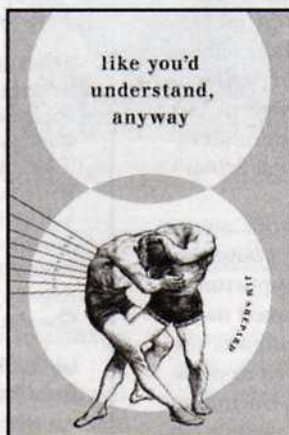
renovations. Patrick's kindness towards Jack, who must seem childlike to him, is mistaken for more. Jack develops a fondness for Patrick, arranging "chance" encounters, buying him gifts. His expectations grow to impossible heights.

Enhancing narrative tension, the novel alternates between chapters in the past tense (the story of Jack's illegal tenancy, his routines, his attachment to Patrick) and the present tense, in which Jack comes to live in a Buddhist monastery. To pay for his keep, he begins to care for the monastery's greenery, especially the bonsai trees, with their constricted roots and carefully managed scope in stunning contrast to the massive trees of Central Park. As time passes, the connection between the two threads is revealed and, in a thrilling last chapter that is half past tense and half present, they merge. By that time we have such a deep understanding of and sympathy for the engaging but troubled Jack that we willingly follow him into the dark corners of his wounded psyche. ♦

LIKE YOU'D UNDERSTAND, ANYWAY
Jim Shepard
Knopf (\$23)

by John Isaac Lingan

The title of Jim Shepard's newest book is the implied conclusion of all his stories' narrators: from Aeschylus to a contemporary high school lineman, and in situations as singular as the Roman conquest of Britannia or the most destructive shock wave in history, each of these men and women feel defined by their isolation. They pine for lost family members and offer meditative monologues in place of traditional story arcs. Taken as a whole, the eleven stories in *Like You'd Understand, Anyway* form a gallery of loneliness, an ironic image that illustrates Shepard's foremost concern: how lonely can people truly



be, he asks, if *everyone* feels lonely?

This is an intriguing notion, yet Shepard's vision may have been better honored by a less monochromatic collection of stories. I can accept that the concerns of the world's first female cosmonaut are, at root, identical to those of a German yeti hunter in 1939, but I doubt that they would both voice them in the same way. And yet from story to story, Shepard's narrators internalize their particular surroundings in a singularly underwhelmed style:

The same sun, morning to night. We might save ourselves the trouble of taking measurements. The ants at sundown swarm under our coverings. The flies intensify at dawn. All manner of crawling and flying insects fill our clothes. There never was a country such as this for stabbing, biting, or stinging things.

That's Capt. R.M. Beadle, the British officer leading a doomed caravan through the Australian outback in 1840. Strange, then, how his cadence is so similar to that of the young boy in "Courtesy for Beginners," who recounts a miserable summer camp experience: