

## *The Understory* by Pamela Erens

Reviewed by Pedro Ponce

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by Pamela Erens

143pp

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\$11.95

Jack Gorse, the bookish, obsessive protagonist of Pamela Erens' debut novel, is part of a long line of literary wanderers. Like Binx Bolling, from Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, Jack is an astute observer, a metaphysician of the ordinary, but a faltering amateur at living the life he so skillfully dissects. Centering a novel on such passive types is arguably one of the most challenging tasks writers can give themselves; plot development takes a backseat to the main character's musings and memories which, in the wrong hands, can start to sound like solipsism. Those expecting *The Da Vinci Code* would do well to look for entertainment elsewhere.

*The Understory's* minimal plot involves Jack's attempt to keep his New York City apartment after his landlord initiates eviction proceedings. Eager to kick out his remaining tenants and renovate his property, the landlord sends an architect, Patrick Allegra, to photograph Jack's building. For much of the novel, Jack narrates his growing obsession with Patrick in retrospect, from the relative comfort of the Zen center where he currently resides. Erens has the elements of a much more action-packed plot. Jack, for instance, could be less shy in his pursuit of Patrick. Or maybe Jack, a former lawyer, can get back into legal practice and eventually advocate for wronged tenants across the city such as

himself. Many a first-time novelist would have been seduced by the conventional wisdom that events alone can keep the pages turning.

Erens' narrative, however, is not your typical debut. The soul of this novel is its meditative lyricism, rendered in language that is as exquisite as it is penetrating. Erens' suggestive title is a botanical term for the low-lying plants that Jack studies on his frequent trips to Central Park. It is the dwindling understory—of “witch hazel and jetbead, blackhaw and sweet pepperbush” that Jack believes is missing:

The park became like the city: skyscrapers, no texture. And that meant it was dying. The things that live at ground level are what hold the earth fast, buffering the grander plants from flooding, salt, and erosion. Central Park was built on rocky, inhospitable land, and its secret is the shallowness of its soil, its only tenuous ability to sustain life. It is the shrubs that allow the park to survive.

Jack's fascination is the novel's—the overlooked yet essential. Readers may grow frustrated with his propensity to brood, but they are rewarded when Erens explores the different facets of Jack's inner life—and the life of the city where he lives.

If anything, Erens' novel is less compelling when it tries to insinuate more plot. While the author avoids easy answers to Jack's problems, there is the strong suggestion later in the novel that all he really needs is love. His fascination with Patrick provides comic relief from an otherwise stark life wandering the streets; Jack seems to act out fragments from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* when he agonizes over how to best approach Patrick. When Patrick leaves a brief note for Jack at the apartment, Jack subjects it to the kind of scrutiny that could only come from the romantically obsessed: “*I'd hoped to find you in*. I read this brief note, scrawled in hurried, uneven, rather childish handwriting, several times over, parsing the implications of *Please forgive*. Did those words, placed first, rob *I'd hoped to find you in* of any intimacy?” Yet Jack is ultimately more interesting as an eccentric seeker than as a lovelorn stalker.

On the whole, however, *The Understory* is successful at the most difficult of fictional forms—the novel of ideas distilled through the ordinary life of its protagonist. It is a worthy Northern counterpart to Percy's metaphysical exploration of the everyday South, and a reminder that originality and depth can be found in a fiction's language, not just in the breadth of the experience it represents.