

The Music of Language

Celebrated novelist Jane Urquhart returns with *A Map of Glass*



Is there a particular landscape that you hold more dear than any other place? What effect has this setting had upon you, and the person you have become? This idea of how people interact with landscapes has always intrigued Jane Urquhart and led her to her most recent novel, *A Map Of Glass*.

The novel weaves together two stories, generations apart. Jerome, a modern-day Torontonion, has done everything possible to deny his own past. Sylvia, a small-town middle-aged woman, is consumed with the past of

her old lover, Andrew, and his family. Andrew's death brings the two together as they explore stories from Andrew's 19th century ancestors. "It is really a meditation on . . . mutability and change," Urquhart says of *Glass*. "How things disappear and vanish . . . and [how people deal] with it in their own lives."

A Map Of Glass is an interesting blend of the settler communities of the 1800s and contemporary urban life. Urquhart wanted to explore the old pioneer families of Ontario that stayed in their rural landscapes while the rest of Canada evolved around them.

"Things had started to decay and change around them," Urquhart explains, "and they weren't coping with that in any way."

With *Glass*, she looks at how these settlers remember landscape, and how they deal with the disappearance or destruction of places and people they love; Urquhart contrasts them

with modern-day city folk who don't have the same access to their past or sense of history—people who live almost entirely in the present, who are affected by their landscapes in a much less obvious way. "It was important to me to have the present in the book as well as the past," she explains—thus the choice of Andrew, a historical geographer, as the connection between the past and present. "[He is] someone whose life's work was to look at the traces that people had left behind on the surface of the earth."

Now a celebrated novelist—not only is she a Governor-General's and Trillium Award winner, but she's also been nominated for the Giller Prize—Urquhart actually started out writing lyric poems. "I'm fascinated by language, and by music within language," she says, explaining that it's this attention to language that first drew her to writing poetry. Eventually though, she found the form limiting in terms of content and began playing with the form—using different points of view, writing in persona, adding narrative—until she ended up with her first novel, *The Whirlpool*. "[It] was, to my mind, a very long prose poem," Urquhart laughs. "If I had admitted to myself that I was writing a novel, I probably wouldn't have done it because it would have been so intimidating."

While there's no doubt *A Map Of Glass* is a novel, there is definitely a poetic feel to the narrative. It is a slow-paced, meandering and lovingly told tale. It's like wandering through your grandmother's house, where every object has a story. And if you can spare the time, she is more than willing to share the memory, to give you the landscape of her past.

—Sarah Gignac

Jane Urquhart
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720 Douglas • Tickets \$5
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