

# READER'S GUIDE

## *Underground* by June Hutton

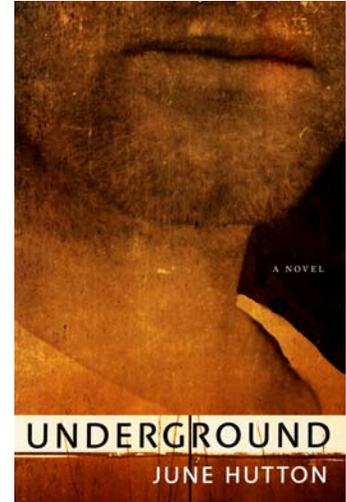


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### INTRODUCING *Underground*

Sixteen-year-old Albert Fraser believes that serving in the First World War will make him a man. What he doesn't realize is the type of man he will become, until a shell blast buries him alive in a trench at the Somme. Albert emerges from the war with a driving need to fill the empty spaces left by the shrapnel that continues to burrow beneath his skin. Back home in Vancouver, he works to keep busy and when the Great Depression hits, he rides the rails and takes jobs as they come, eventually finding his way to the Yukon. But with no real place to call home, he seems destined to wander aimlessly.

When the Spanish Civil War erupts, he seeks out Picasso's *Guernica* and sees in the painting a reflection of what his life has become. Now he travels to Spain, a soldier once more, to reclaim all he has lost — or to die trying.



### PRAISE FOR *Underground*

"June Hutton has found poetry in the underground worlds of wartime trenches, Chinatown tunnels, depression-era work camps, and the bomb craters of the Spanish Civil War. In this novel, Al Fraser's remarkable story has been given voice by a wise and generous writer."

— Jack Hodgins, author of *Broken Ground* and *Distance*

"Once finished, I returned to it in idle moments, not to begin the review but to read for pleasure; let the pages fall open, pick a sentence, a paragraph or a chapter to savour. It's that kind of story ... Hutton's prose is taut, lean, elegant and poetic ..."

— *The Globe and Mail*

### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### *Identity*

"He was born on the first day of the first month of the new century, and his mother assured him that meant he was destined for great things." Although Albert Fraser spends his whole life trying to find who he is and to become someone great as his mother had hoped, he never seems to find what he's looking for. Throughout the novel Albert is known by many names — Al, Michelangelo, Bertie, Alex, Alejandro — and is forced to change and adapt to any situation he encounters. At times, he accepts the changes willingly; other times he finds himself wanting more: "He wanted to breathe in the powder and lavender of normal life. Watch the hands of a woman kneading bread." Occasionally, Albert is given the option to settle down, yet his pursuit is relentless. Even when he recognizes a way out, he never takes it: "If only he could find a job, he used to think, then he could find a woman to marry, build a home. Now here he is ... Yet he doesn't want any of it."

#### *Haunted Memories*

The shrapnel that continually emerges from Albert's skin is a constant reminder of his past, of the hardships he's been forced to endure. Throughout the novel, everyday situations trigger memories of his wartime experiences: "A cigar has been ground out into a platter of oysters on the half shell, and again nausea creeps across Al's belly as he imagines the rank scent of embers burning the flesh." Right to the end of the book, it is clear that the First

World War and the Spanish Civil War have had such large impacts on his life that he couldn't hope to forget them. He spends his life haunted by wartime memories, including several he has attempted to suppress.

### *War and Survival*

Albert Fraser doesn't lead an easy life. At the age of sixteen he enters the First World War, thinking it will turn him into a man. He's essentially right, as he never recovers his lost youth. He is caught in a shell blast that changes his life forever. After the war, life doesn't get any easier. He has a hard time holding down a job, and when the Great Depression hits, he finds himself living in hobo camps, and then working in a relief camp. Albert continually trudges on, somehow surviving each encounter he faces, and outliving his peers. There's something about him that forces him to continue on, to never give up.

### *Art and Imagery*

Despite the war-torn landscapes that Albert Fraser finds himself in, he is able to appreciate art and beauty wherever he goes. From the purple bricks in the Chinese underground, to the wonders of the northern lights in the Yukon, to the orange trees of Spain – he just can't help himself. Albert is overwhelmed when he first sees Guernica: "The longer Al looks, the more he sees. The jagged edges, the jumble of shapes, chaotic and disturbing ... There seems to be no one solid thing in this painting, not man, woman, animal or building except the child, and it hangs from its mother's arms. No colour. It's about death, and yet somehow the images churn and pulse." Albert is an artist, no matter where his life takes him.

## Q&A WITH JUNE HUTTON

### 1. Where did you get the idea for this story?

I got the idea from two sources. According to family legend, my father's father was buried alive in a trench at the Somme. He clawed his way to the surface and punched a fist through, hoping someone would find him and dig him out. To me, the fist was a symbol of defiance. It said, I will not die. Then a co-worker told me her father fought with the Mackenzie-Papineau in Spain. I confessed I'd never heard of them, and went to the library to read up. I discovered that the salute in Republican Spain was a raised fist, a symbol of defiance against fascism. At once, a lightning bolt of ideas began crackling between those two raised fists. I sensed that in them, somehow, was a story. All I had to do was write it.

### 2. This is your first novel. What were some of the difficulties you faced while writing it?

At first, the difficulty was staying inside my character's head. Later, the difficulty became one of balance – the urge to create images against the need to keep the story moving. The worst part was throwing out scenes that didn't contribute to the greater themes. Overall, the sheer endurance required to finish a manuscript surprised me. At certain points, sixteen-hour days became the norm.

### 3. Can you describe the SPiN writing group and how it came to be?

SPiN ([www.spinwrites.com](http://www.spinwrites.com)) is Jen Sookfong Lee (*The End of East*), Mary Novik (*Conceit*), and me. We met at UBC's Booming Ground summer workshop, and made a commitment to stay together until our novels were completed. Each of us had some previous writing experience and knew how hard it was to work on our own. We felt we needed encouragement to finish something as large as a novel, so we formed the group. Now that we have succeeded, and seen those novels published, too, we find the group is stronger than ever. We still gather for monthly meetings and often get together for literary events about town.



### ABOUT JUNE

June Hutton is a published poet and short-fiction author whose work has appeared in a number of literary magazines. June has worked as a northern reporter and has lived all over Canada, from Toronto to Whitehorse. She currently resides in Vancouver and is a member of the SPiN Writing Group.

#### **4. Where did you get the idea for Albert Fraser? Were any of your characters based on people you know in real life?**

Al is completely fictional. I didn't want to write a novel about a real person, because that person would likely be someone of importance whose experiences had been recorded. I wanted my protagonist to be an ordinary guy, a member of the working class, and a foot soldier. They were the cannon fodder. I was tired of reading about war stories from the perspective of a more privileged station, such as that of an officer. Writing from the male perspective was a challenge at first. Whenever I wondered how Al might react to something, I would think of my son, stepsons, nephews, and students. And when that didn't work, I would ask myself how I would feel about it. None of the other characters are based on real people, either. I felt there was enough factual detail in the novel already, given the historical events. It was in the characters and their reactions where I was free to create.

#### **5. How much research went into this novel?**

I would stop every now and then to check facts and dates, but mostly I wrote the story first and then went looking to see if I had it right. I didn't want research to dictate which way the story moved, or the story would die. But I also didn't want to get things wrong, i.e. men zipping up their trousers before zippers were invented. Yes, that was one of my early missteps. Research included everything from talking to people and hearing their stories, to physical journeys: crawling around underground areaways in Vancouver's downtown east side, riding a two-man boat down the Teslin and Yukon rivers, exploring civil war ruins in Spain.

#### **6. The novel largely deals with issues of identity. What made you want to write about that?**

It was only after I'd written several drafts of the manuscript that I realized that identity was a key theme. Al Fraser is no different than most of us. We find our identity through work. When we are out at social functions, what is the first thing we are asked? "What do you do?" I began to wonder what it must have been like for men in the 1930s to have no answer to that question. It made me realize all the more the answer to another question: "Why do men go to war?" In the case of this war it was because the fight against fascism gave these men something to fight for, something to live for. At last, they had a reason to keep going, and it was provided to them by a people who were worse off than they were. It seems to be a part of the human condition, a wonderful part, that even when in miserable circumstances, or perhaps especially when, we reach out to help each other. This willingness to help occurs in several scenes throughout the novel. The decision to volunteer in Spain seemed, to me, to be a natural extension of that condition.

#### **7. Why did you choose to write the novel from the third-person perspective?**

I like the term "third-person intimate" as opposed to limited or central, because it better describes how deeply I had to step into the skin of my character to write from his perspective. It is very much like first person, but slightly more distant, and I felt I needed the perspective of distance to examine and understand him. I needed to be able to feel what Al was feeling, think what he was thinking, and convey that to readers, but I also needed to be able to describe what was going on around him and to him.

#### **8. Why did you choose the title *Underground*?**

It came to me as soon as I heard the story of being buried alive. But as I wrote, that physical state of being underground – in the mines, and then in the trenches – quickly grew to also include the political. It was some time before I discovered the many other states of being underground: emotionally, psychologically, artistically, economically. It was a title that gained layers of meaning as the story developed.

#### **9. Did you have the ending in mind when you started?**

My beginning and ending changed many times over the course of writing this novel. What remained constant was the core of the novel, the two wars and the Great Depression that linked them, though each of those sections were trimmed and edited many times over.

## 10. What do you hope your readers will take from your book?

I hope, of course, that readers will enjoy the story and the writing, and encourage others to read *Underground*. Whether or not readers agree with the Canadian government's decision to oppose the fight against fascism in Spain, I hope they agree it is a subject that should be discussed in schools. I hope that each Remembrance Day readers will be moved to include in their thoughts the Canadian veterans of the Spanish Civil War. They remain Canada's forgotten soldiers during official November 11<sup>th</sup> ceremonies.

## 11. Have you started working on your next project?

I have begun scribbling ideas in a notebook, but I haven't anything solid, yet. I think that this time the protagonist will be a woman, and she will be as outward as Al is inward, as gruff as he is gentle.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is Albert always on the move?
2. Was there ever a time when you thought Albert would give up? Why?
3. What was the most memorable image for you? Why?
4. What truly drives Albert throughout the novel?
5. Who was the most memorable secondary character for you?
6. Discuss the various women Albert meets throughout the novel. How does he feel about each of them?
7. Discuss Albert's relationship with Delgado.
8. Discuss Albert Fraser as an artist.
9. Compare the Moor in the prison with Albert and his own life.
10. Food plays an important role throughout the novel. Discuss some of these instances that stuck out in your mind.
11. The novel spans several years. Discuss Albert as he matures. Does he change much?