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Reading Group Guide

Undergrowth by Nancy Burke

About *Undergrowth*

The Amazon rainforests. A remote tribe. The steady encroachment of “civilization.” In this luminous first novel, the all-too-human experiences of fear, love and loss become amplified with potentially disastrous consequences.

In 1960s Brazil, an indigenous group is on the brink of a tragedy, the dimensions of which they are only beginning to grasp. A small band of disaffected government agents, academics and visionaries is determined to fight for their cause. Among them is James Ardmore who, along with his nephew Larry, travels to Pahquel, a village in the crosshairs of an environmental showdown. When James dies en route, Larry is left to decide: Should he attempt to escape his own personal demons by immersing himself in a completely foreign culture? Or retreat and resume his disaffected life in the U.S.? What costs will he bear if he chooses to press forward?

Undergrowth by Nancy Burke is published by Gibson House Press, October 2017. 440 pages. Original trade paperback, \$18.95 ISBN-13: 978-0986154164. Also available in e-book formats, \$9.95

Reviews

“A compelling examination of family. . . . Readers will be mesmerized by Burke’s enigmatic prose and skillful character building. Fans of Isabel Allende and Gabriel Garcia Marquez will find much to enjoy here.”— *IndiePicks Magazine*

“This densely packed debut novel . . . demands that readers set aside their preconceptions about society and civilization and immerse themselves in the world of this small band of renegades, whose personal journeys are every bit as dark and dangerous as any voyage into Brazil’s wilderness.”— *Booklist*

“A titanic feat of imagination . . . dramatically powerful.”— *Terry Turner, award-winning anthropologist and human rights advocate*

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Conversation starters

1. Why does Larry agree to go to Pahquel with his Uncle James the first time? The second?
2. Why is Larry determined to continue on to Pahquel after James's death? Is he simply stubborn, or idealistic, or loyal to James's memory, or is it that he truly feels he has no other choice, and nowhere else he belongs?
3. Why do the residents of Pahquel make such an effort to refuse to acknowledge the existence of any exposure they have had to the world outside their domain? Why do they make an exception for James?
4. Why did the author alter the time frame of lives in Pahquel? Would you consider the descriptions of the accelerated aging of the residents of Pahquel to be instances of magical realism?
5. Why does Aran prefer Larry to Dabimi?
6. How would you characterize Aran's relationship to her mother?
7. Should Larry be blamed for the events that have led to the demise of Pahquel? What forces contribute to its dissolution, and do you see these as inevitable? Deliberate?
8. Do you believe it is in the interest of uncontacted groups to remain uncontacted? Do you believe it is in the interests of the developed world to leave them isolated and intact? Do you believe it is possible to do so?

About the author

Nancy Burke is a psychoanalyst. Her poetry has appeared in *After Hours*, *The American Poetry Journal*, and *Permafrost*. She lives in Evanston, Illinois.