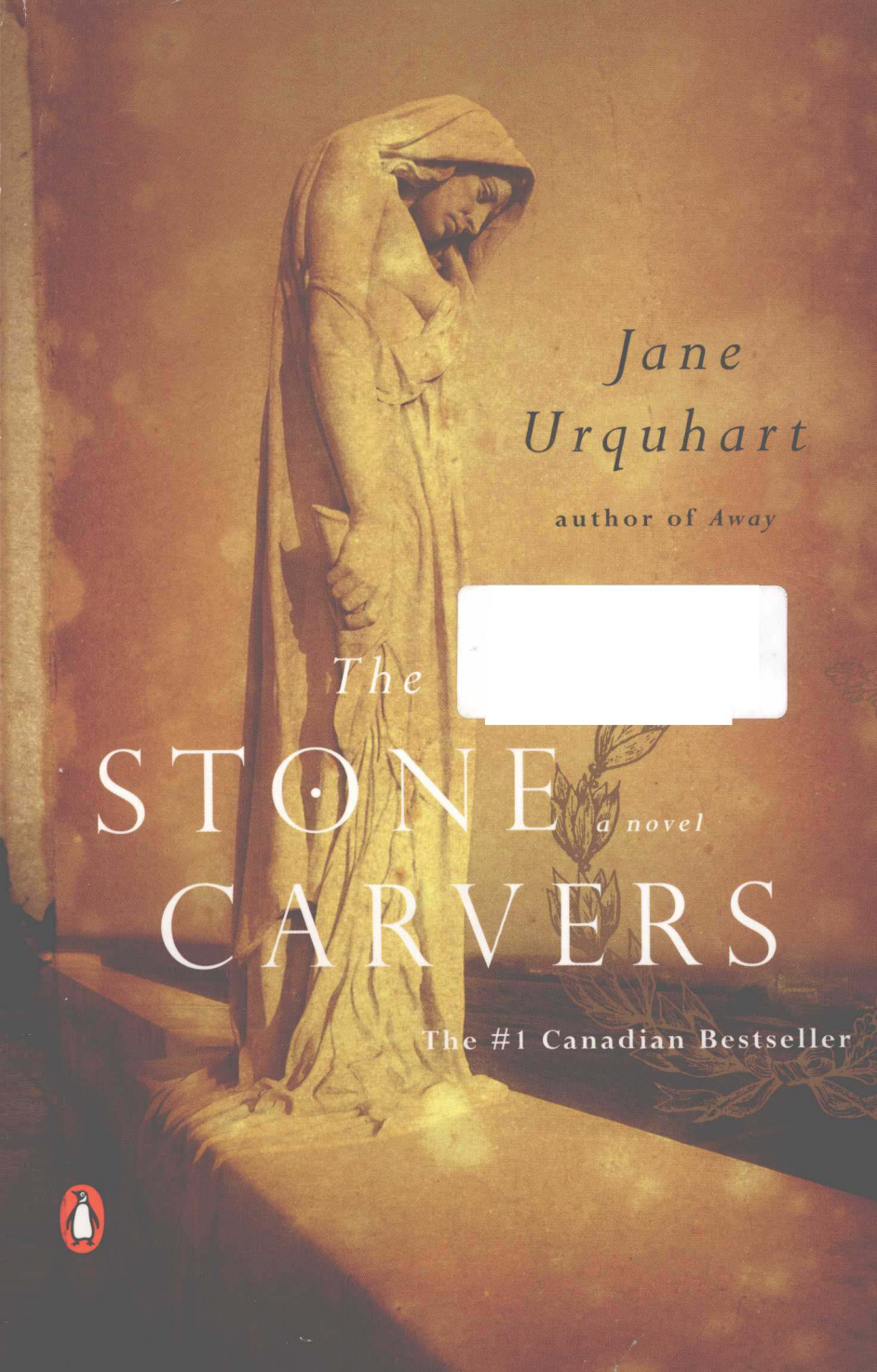
Jane
Urquhart
author of Away
The
STONE
CARVERS
a novel
The #1 Canadian Bestseller

THE STONE CARVERS

JANE URQUHART

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THE STONE CARVERS

Jane Urquhart is the author of *The Underpainter*, winner of the Governor General's Award for Fiction; *Away*, winner of the Trillium Award; *Changing Heaven*; and *The Whirlpool*, winner of Le Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger in France. She lives in Ontario, Canada.

BOOKS BY JANE URQUHART

FICTION

The Whirlpool (1986)
Storm Glass (short stories) (1987)
Changing Heaven (1990)
Away (1993)
The Underpainter (1997)
The Stone Carvers (2001)

POETRY

I Am Walking in the Garden of His Imaginary Palace (1981)
False Shuffles (1982)
The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan (1985)
Some Other Garden (2009)

For G. P.
and in memory of Sandra Gwyn

"I have been eating and sleeping stone for so long it has become an obsession with me. And, incidentally, a nightmare."

– Walter Allward

In June of 1934, two men stand talking in the shadow of the great unfinished monument. Behind them rises a massive marble base flanked by classically sculpted groups of figures and surmounted by an enormous stone woman who is hooded and draped in the manner of a medieval mourner. At her back, a shedlike building occupies the space between twin obelisk-shaped pylons, each with their own wooden rooms attached to it at a great height.

The taller man wears a dark overcoat and hat and carries a pole, about the size of a walking stick, that he swings out in front of him now and then as if to make a point. The other man, less formally clad in an oilskin jacket buttoned tightly over his round belly, appears to be more involved in the conversation, looking intently at his companion and rising on his toes and opening his arms while he is speaking. All around them, all around the monument is a sea of men and mud, except in the far distance where the dark mountains of the coal fields of Lens can be seen to the northeast, and the white slabs

of graveyards, some only partially sodded, can be seen to the south and to the west.

Despite the fact that the ground the men stand on is French, and the month is June, it is not a warm day; there is no sun, and the wind howls across the coal fields toward the monument in increasingly strong gusts so that the taller man is forced to place a hand on his hat. At one point both men stop talking and look up at a large wooden shed that stands on a forest of scaffolding and is secured by thick ropes to the larger of the two pylons. They listen to the strange noise these ropes make as they rub together, a noise the taller man knows to be remarkably similar to the sound of two pines scraping against each other in a wind-filled Canadian forest. Along with the wind and the sound of the ropes there is the staccato noise of several stonecutters' tools as men in overalls carve words onto the extensive stone wall. The taller man walks across broken marble and rutted mud to see how this work is going. He says a few words to one of the stone carvers, then returns to his companion.

It begins to rain.

The Needle and the Chisel

There was a story, a true if slightly embellished story, about how the Ontario village was given its name, its church, its brewery, its tavern, its gardens, its grottoes, its splendid indoor and outdoor altars. How it acquired its hotel, its blacksmith's shop, its streets and roads, its tannery, its cemetery, its general store. This was a legend that appealed to fewer and fewer people in the depression of the early 1930s. Times being what they were, not many villagers had the energy for the present, never mind the past – the tattered rail fences and sagging porches of the previous century seemed to them to be just two more things in need of repair. The tannery and blacksmith's shop had disappeared years ago, and though the general store was still a fixture, its counter was so warped and scarred it looked as if it might have once served as a butcher's block.

It was difficult to believe, in those days, with the older parts of the village in a state of decay usually associated with the decline of a complete civilization and the newer sections consisting of sloppy, half-finished attempts at twentieth-century

industry, that one hundred years ago there was no sign of western European culture in the region. Difficult also to believe that it took only one hundred years for this culture to break down under the weight of economic failure.

Still the tale continued to be dear to one thirty-eight-year-old spinster who lived half a mile away from the village at a spot known as Becker's Corners and all of the good Sisters at the small Convent of the Immaculate Conception near the top of the village's only hill. These women believed the story connected them, through ancestry, through work and worship, and through vocation to the village's inception. They believed it also connected them to the great church, under whose shadow, in the seldom-visited cemetery, their forebears slept beneath iron crosses that leaned at odd angles to one another, as if trying to establish contact after a long season of isolation and neglect.

The nuns and the one spinster clung to the story, as if by telling the tale they became witnesses, perhaps even participants in the awkward fabrication of matter, the difficult architecture of a new world.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, in the small village of Inzell, Bavaria, the wonderfully named Pater Archangel Gstir had no opinions about difficult architecture. In fact, Father Gstir was such a contented young man, a young man filled with such happy certainties, that beyond his faith and his fierce desire for a suitable bell to adorn the Romanesque belfry of the little parish church of St. Michael where he was pastor, he

had few strong feelings about anything at all. He was troubled by neither women, nor fashion, nor financial insecurities – the usual afflictions of young men. In his church he was surrounded by a devout and devoted flock of parishioners, and once he stepped outside he was presented with a view of some of the finest mountain scenery in Bavaria, a region not now, and certainly not then, impoverished when it came to ravishing landscape. He spent his weekdays after morning mass cheerfully encouraging German-speaking boys in the study of classical languages, history, natural science, and liturgy. He ate well, enjoying Bavarian beer and his choice of European wines with his meals, and after these meals he took long walks along the edges of the gorgeously scenic Knappensteig, where he was able to admire the peaks of the Watzmann, the Hochkalter, the Hocheisspitze, and the Reiter Alpe. It was his habit on these promenades to pray to the Creator of all this beauty at the charming outdoor shrines and crosses scattered liberally across the hills and mountains. During one of these periods of reflection, just as he was beginning to be distracted by a rare wildflower – blue with black markings, quite unlike anything he had pressed in his album so far – he was startled by an announcement from God Himself with whom he often carried on conversations in his mind. "Go to Canada," He told him now. "There is much work for you to do there."

Father Gstir was astonished. As far as he knew he had not, until that very moment, even *thought* about Canada. Snow, he mused vaguely, and savages. "The English," he whispered aloud, "and, I believe, some French." He plucked the wildflower from the grass, placed it inside his breviary, and tucked the small

book firmly under his elbow. "There must be some mistake," he said to the Creator and continued along the mountain path, forgetting about Canada altogether.

The spinster was particularly fond of this moment in the story because it always brought to mind an increased awareness of the serendipitous quality of one's presence here on earth. Where would she be had Father Gstir resolutely decided to ignore God's call? Indeed, where would anyone be had the slightest incident not occurred in the chaos of details that led to their birth. The past need do no more than shrug its shoulders or lift its eyebrows for us to cease to exist. But the wonderful thing about saints, the spinster had been known to remark to the nuns – for she was confident that Father Gstir, recognized or not, was a saint – is that saints have no choice.

God forgot neither Father Gstir nor Canada and was moved to remind the Bavarian priest of His wishes in a direct and ultimately fateful way. In the middle of a spring week, while Father Gstir was removing his vestments after morning mass and silently preparing his Sunday sermon in which he would compare each of the virtues to a mountain wildflower, the postmaster knocked at the door of the vestry.

Father Gstir pulled back the bolt and invited the man in. "You were not here at mass, Johann," he said.

This was a joke between them. Johann Heipel, postmaster of Inzell and a very devout man, could never attend weekday morning mass because of his letter-carrying duties. He felt this very deeply and often confessed it – much to Father Gstir's amusement.

But on this day, the postmaster did not respond with the

customary explanation. Instead he reported excitedly that there was a letter from the bishop.

Father Gstir had never received a letter from the bishop, despite his writing regularly to this venerable person petitioning for funds to replace the bell and, in his braver moments, for a limewood altar for a side chapel in the church. A wonderful ringing was in his mind as he tore open the envelope.

The message, which made mention of neither bell nor altarpiece but which nevertheless made quite clear that the bishop had received Father Gstir's petitions, read as follows:

> May 30, 1866
>
> Our esteemed King Ludwig, benefactor of the Ludwig Missions, has lately interested himself in a small group of our people who have established themselves in the wilds of Canada where they have no priest to minister to them or to instruct their children in the ways of the Blessed Church of Rome. I have noted from your many letters that you reside in an alpine district where the air is necessarily much colder and fresher and therefore more like the air of Canada. Because of this, and because of your rumoured great good humour, you have therefore been chosen by me to complete this Holy Task & etc. . . .

The Sisters at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception knew the contents of this letter by heart, as did the spinster, who had memorized it in her youth. They also knew that Father Gstir would have been moved by the letter to recall his

inner conversation on the Knappensteig and at the same time the authority of his holy vows. Some of the nuns wondered why the spinster had not taken holy vows herself, since she had no husband, and it was unlikely at this late date that one would appear. But most of the Sisters suspected that the spinster was completely unsuited for convent life, and were content to appreciate the way she dusted and polished the church pews, washed and sewed the altar cloths and linens, and decorated the altar with flowers in the summer.

They were also very grateful for the small Madonnas she carved for their rooms, and the complete crèche she had made, down to the last animal in the manger, to be assembled outside the church in the Christmas season, though all of them believed that carving was men's work. They knew the spinster was unsuitable for convent life because of her fondness for men's work – carving, farming, tailoring – her fondness, and her skill.

Like every other man, woman, and child in Bavaria, Father Gstir was well aware that King Ludwig was mad, and he knew that an interest in Canada was precisely the kind of course the King's mad mind was likely to take. Was the bishop mad as well? Were the alleged Bavarian settlers also suffering from diseases of the brain? Instead of being ministered to in that wild place, should they not instead be encouraged to return to civilization? He put the last of these questions as delicately as possible to the bishop in an eloquent letter that also included