

THE UNFINISHED NOVEL

Reader's Guide

1. "His Blue Period"

- Anspach is ruthlessly unsentimental about his career, about the business of art, and, most crushingly, about his mistress Maria. Does he ever feel genuine passion for anything? How does his attitude contrast with John's? What might Martin be implying about the relationship between feeling and artistry, and between artistry and success?
- What keeps John from expressing his love for Maria? Is Anspach right when he implies that he bears some responsibility for her suicide? How much are we supposed to believe John's claims about his feelings and motives, and what subtle means does the author use to undermine them?
- At the end of the story John's wife, having told him that Maria was in love with him, exasperatedly asks, "How could you not have known that?" [p. 27]. To what extent is this a story about not knowing, and how does the theme of not knowing—of willed ignorance—occur elsewhere in it?

2. "The Bower"

- Early on we learn that Carter Sorensen is an actor of genius. What does this genius consist of, and what is its effect on Sandra? On other characters? What is the relationship between the young man's preternatural talent and his otherwise rather bland personality?
- After Carter starts seeing a young freshman, Sandra thinks, "He would be successful. . . . He had already shown a survivor's instinct by choosing only totally inappropriate women who could easily be left behind" [p. 51]. Does this turn out to be true? Are we meant to believe that Carter's behavior is calculated—that he acts offstage as well as on? Or does Carter's kind of acting have nothing to do with dissembling?
- Carter's career comes to a premature end because of a bizarre accident that takes the life of his future sister-in-law. Is this accident foreshadowed earlier in the story? Think in particular of the way Sandra cuts her leg before she and her student become lovers, and of the remark of the onlooker who sees his effect on the actress playing Gertrude: "He's killing her" [p. 31]. What is the significance of the fact that Carter and Sandra meet during a production of *Hamlet*? What is the nature of the part she envisions waiting for him [p. 62]?

3. "Beethoven"

- Why is the narrator drawn to Philip, and how does this attraction fit into her general expectations of life? Is she deluded about what Philip is really like, or does she already sense his desperation and impending failure? What about failure might be attractive to her?
- "You should never fake it," Philip cautions the narrator. "If you can't be authentic doing whatever you're doing, you should do something else" [p. 76]. How do we reconcile this

with the fact that Philip is making his (indifferent) living painting portraits of Beethoven, whose face he likes because “It’s easy to draw” [p. 75]? How do we reconcile this with the fact that he’s still infatuated with Ingrid, an unabashedly commercial painter? Why does Martin, or her narrator, describe Ingrid in such precise detail while leaving Philip a visual blank?

4. “The Unfinished Novel”

- Maxwell makes a great deal of how ugly Rita has become since he last saw her. What is the effect of this? Are his descriptions marked by pity, or by gloating? Are we meant to see Rita’s physical decay as a corollary to her moral ruin? How might this story be different if she were still beautiful?

- In their college writing workshop, Rita once justified Maxwell’s shallow portrayals of women on grounds that “It mirrors forth the myopia of the narrator” [p. 101]. How does this observation resonate through the story? In what ways is Maxwell himself a myopic narrator? Which of his statements and observations may be untrustworthy?

- Rita tries to enlist Maxwell in a deal involving some ostensibly priceless Zuni pottery, which she claims has been entrusted to her by the tribe. Does Maxwell believe her? Ought the reader? In what ways is the pottery like Rita’s legendary manuscript?

- How do you feel about what Maxwell ultimately does with Rita’s novel? Regardless of any obligation he might have to carry out her last wishes, is he betraying a writer’s responsibility to his art? Do you think the author believes that such a responsibility exists?

5. “The Open Door”

- Discuss the significance of Edith’s exchange with an Italian reader concerning the English word choke, meaning the matted, inedible part of an artichoke. Edith’s translator has misrendered the word as *cuore*, or “heart,” and Edith, clarifying, cites the English homonym “choke,” meaning to strangle. In what ways do both the heart and strangulation—not to mention a tough, indigestible residue—figure in this story?

- Although Edith is the more successful partner, Isabel has the advantages of youth and sexual attractiveness. Which of them has the greater power in their relationship, and how does their balance of power shift during the course of the story? Are you left feeling that they will stay together? Is Edith dismissing Isabel’s proposition that they stay in Italy because she knows she could never function there, or does she do so simply out of fear, especially the fear that she would now be dependent on her lover?

6. “The Change”

- Are Gina’s symptoms—“sleep disturbances, hot flashes, irritability, weight gain, loss of libido” [p. 187]—simply those of menopause, as Evan thinks, or is she undergoing a deeper transformation? What other misperceptions may he have about her? Evan’s chief unhappiness seems to be that his wife has become strange to him, but doesn’t this mirror

the estrangement and defamiliarization wrought by the work of art—for example, the vertigo he feels upon viewing her latest print?

- How literally are we meant to take the story's ending? How is it foreshadowed? Judging from Evan's feelings, do you feel that Gina will come back or that her transformation is now complete? Is Evan too limited—as an artist, as a human being—to bring her back or follow her?

7. For discussion of *The Unfinished Novel*

- Many of these stories concern relationships between uninhibited, sexually rapacious geniuses (Anspach in “His Blue Period,” Carter in “The Bower,” Rita in the title story) and their more scrupulous (or repressed) friends, lovers, or rivals, who also happen to be less gifted. Does Martin always equate genius with ruthlessness and predation? Is the subliminal message of these stories that nice artists finish last? Why do you think the author always portrays these brilliant bastards at secondhand, through the eyes of a fascinated or repelled observer?

- In her acclaimed previous novel, *Property*, Martin asks the reader to identify with Manon, a character who “behaves as though she has no heart at all” [Alan Cheuse, *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 16, 2003]. While none of the characters in *The Unfinished Novel* is quite heartless, some of them are severely flawed. How does the author manage to keep the reader engaged? Does she herself appear to judge her characters, and if so, for what failings?

- Many of these stories feature an iconic animal—for example, John's rabbits or Maxwell's beloved cat, Joey. What role do these animals play? Does their appearance signal that Martin is not entirely a realistic writer? Might these stories be described as fables?

- Can *The Unfinished Novel* be read as a primer on artistic creation? On the basis of these stories, what generalizations can we make about where art comes from, what it requires from its makers, or what makes it good or bad?

SUGGESTED READING

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Complete Hans Christian Anderson Fairy Tales*; A. S. Byatt, *The Matisse Stories and Angels and Insects*; Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Stories*; John Cheever, *The Stories of John Cheever*; Isak Dinesen, *Seven Gothic Tales*; Siri Hustvedt, *What I Loved*; Henry James, *Henry James: Collected Stories*; Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore*; John Updike, *The Early Stories, 1953—1975* and *Just Looking: Essays on Art*.