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READING GROUP GUIDE

# Paint It Black

a novel by

Janet Fitch



## A conversation with the author of *Paint It Black*

JANET FITCH TALKS WITH  
DEBORAH VANKIN FOR SWINK MAGAZINE

*After struggling in anonymity for so long, what was it like for you, with White Oleander, to meet such widespread commercial success right out of the gate?*

It was totally surreal. I thought, of course I'm sitting here talking to a horse and Abraham Lincoln is shimmying down the tree. Of course. I can cope. I can dig it. Of course, I'd been writing for years and years and years. I wrote for ten years before I sold my first short story.

*Did you go through those highs and lows — feeling on top of the world, invincible, then the inevitable crash, the imposter syndrome?*

That came when it was time to write the next book. First you think you can do anything. "Look, see, I'm such a success. I'm going to take on some massive historical novel. I can walk on water." Then you go and make a colossal mess. Three years' worth. I had such delusions that [commercial success] wasn't going to affect me in any way.

And I couldn't tell anyone about it because I was supposed to be this big novelist, I was supposed to know what I was doing! My publisher had sent a photographer to take a jacket photo. I couldn't

admit to anybody that I was in serious trouble. “How’s it goin’?” “Fine, fine.” Finally, my editor had his assistant call me to get the name of the book. And I just started crying. Then my editor called me himself and I copped to the whole thing: I’d been working for three years and had just made this big mess.

I’d also started something else that was set in the 1980s — a time I could actually *remember* — and it was a three-person book, so I thought I could finish it. [My editor] said: “Just box everything up and send it to me.” So I did, about 900 pages. He also said, “Keep working on what you’re working on.” That became *Paint It Black*. By that time, I probably had 150 pages. And I really felt the book, knew where it was going, what it was about.

*Which is what, exactly?*

Creative despair! [Laughs]

*Fitting . . .*

It’s a book about suicide. It’s about the suicide of a creative person who couldn’t meet his image of perfection.

*And all that came out of the “big mess” you’d been working on for three years?*

Yes, absolutely. It’s about that despair of not being able to meet your ideals. A lot of it is about my own struggle with perfectionism after that failed novel. You go from, like, *Godzilla* to this single-cell animal where you can’t do anything, you’re afraid to just exist, it’s all a lie, complete failure.

*That can be creatively debilitating, those thoughts. How’d you manage to push through and finish?*

The idea that it doesn’t have to be great, that it just has to come from you, be authentic, that you do it yourself and don’t need anyone’s

approval — that's what I hang on to and that's what enabled me to write the book.

*You conjure sadness and loss so vividly in Paint It Black. Did you lose someone, tragically, that you loved?*

I was in a relationship that was pretty intense at the time, and when it broke up, that certainly influenced the story, that intensity. But this has been the question with everyone I've lost — relatives, the loss of my grandmother, who really saw me, believed in me. What do you do when you lose someone who sees something in you? How do you keep that alive in yourself once they're gone, how do you take on their vision? Or can you?

*Josie did it by becoming Michael.*

Right, and I think that's how you do it. You become that person. When they're gone you keep them alive by becoming them in some way. It's an expansion of self — it's not that you're dumping who you are, you're adding something, you're adding *them*.

*Both of your two books have these accomplished, artistic women — a poet and a pianist — who also have violent, destructive tendencies and this negative, whirling-dervish effect on the central character, a younger, more vulnerable woman. I have to ask: Do you have mom issues?*

A good antagonist is hard to find! I always look for someone to wind up the plot, somebody who's able to drive a story. As to why difficult, artistic women: I have a conflict, you know. I'm a mother, I'm a daughter, I'm a person who wants to have loving relationships with other people. But I'm also an artist, I can be selfish. And I obviously feel some conflict between those two things.

The perfectionism of both of them (the mom characters) is the difficulty in parenting while also being an artist.

*So they're both kind of manifestations of you.*

A novel is like a dream in which everyone is you. They're all parts of myself.

*The relationship between Josie and Michael's mom, Meredith, is so tense and textured; as I said before, it's like an emotional thriller. How is it that Josie becomes Michael, and why is she so drawn to Meredith?*

In literature you always see relationships between women who are same-age friends. But the unequal power relationships between two women is something you don't see all that often. It's very interesting.

In the short story the book is based on, there's almost a persona-like transfer where Josie really *becomes* Michael *for* his mother. She takes his place. She's willing because she's so lost and she's drawn to Meredith and Michael's world. She's ambivalent because part of the deal between her and Michael was their bohemia; they weren't going to care about that stuff. But she's an intelligent, culturally deprived person who's attracted to who he is and where he came from. And so she does want to take that on.

*Why the title Paint It Black?*

I must have gone through ten, fifteen titles because the book changed so much over the course of writing it. The name of the short story was "Love in the Asylum." And there's a strong Dylan Thomas thread in it. I love Nico — I'd listened to a lot of Nico when writing it. So: "These Days" and also "Fairest of the Seasons." But I kept coming back to "Paint It Black." It's how the character feels. It's a grief, but a certain kind of grief. People always think of "she walks the hills with a long black veil" kind of grief. But with suicide, it's such a purposefully hurtful act to everyone around that there's a huge amount of anger as well as grief. And to me, "Paint It Black" so expressed that feeling of anger as well — paint *everything* black.

*It's appropriate — a song title. Music is so central to the book. Tell me about that. And what draws you to punk in particular?*

Music is super-important to me. *Veronica* by Mary Gaitskill — I wrote pieces of that in my journal, it was so right on. It was about how people live in the music they listen to. I live in the arts as much as I live in my regular life. Patti Smith is as much a part of my life as having to go to the gym or pick up my kid or anything else — it's another kind of literature. We do live in our music, especially when we're very young, and the characters in my novel are in their very early twenties.

Also, as kind of a perfectionist myself, I loved punk rock. Because it was the ultimate permission: you don't need anybody's seal of approval, just do it. You can't play the guitar but you want to? Just do it. Pick it up and play it. DIY. It was such an antidote to my own perfectionism. It's the power of anger, it's the musical equivalent of "I'm walking here." I so needed that expression at the time. But I love all music. Music, art, theater, film — it's as much a part of my consciousness as the outer things I do.

*The music you reference really helps define not just who these kids are, but the decade as well.*

Yeah, it expressed the time, the attitudes, the feelings. You know how it feels when you *have* to listen to something (and you can't) — it's like a vitamin deficiency or something. Got to listen to Iggy — *right now!*

*You paint Eighties-era punk rock L.A. really vividly. Where were you back then? Who were you?*

I was here. In 1980 I'd come back to L.A. from Oregon, where I'd gone to school, and I was setting type for the *LA Weekly* at night and I was going to these clubs. There was Hong Kong Café, which was punk rock, and Madame Wong's was New Wave, and then there

was the On Club on Sunset, which was ska. I had this punk haircut, a short crew cut with long, feathery sides. I went to the Denver airport once and asked directions of someone, and they sent me all the way back to the other end of the airport, purposefully, just because I had that haircut. It was a time when you took possession of yourself and your environment.

*Did any of your old haunts make it into the book?*

I changed the names of the places where actual scenes occur. Club Rat was a combination of Al's Bar, but also with a bit of Club Lingerie, which was on Melrose and Wilcox. And Sammy's Lotus Room was completely made up, but based on a steakhouse called Nicolas, where City Hall people went after work, and a place in Portland, Oregon, called Lotus Card Room.

*Was there a crash pad in your past like the house on Carondelet?*

I lived in a house like that in Oregon. That was a great house. But there were a lot of artists' houses around the old Otis, and the punk apartment house in Hollywood, the Canterbury.

*L.A. changes so drastically, so quickly — it's totally different now than it was twenty-some years ago. And yet you describe the 1980s neighborhoods in such detail — everything from the houses and hillsides to the little bakeries and rickety signs. How did you conjure those visuals? Were you working strictly from memory, or did you have to reference photos and do research? Or did you just make things up?*

Strictly from memory. To me, the present is so transparent. I can see where things used to be, and that's as real to me as what is there now. I had a friend who lived in the house that Michael and Josie lived in on Lemoyne. And I remember it. I see through the past; it's just a veil. Time is so permeable.



*The book gets pretty dark, and the question of incest arises. But it's very ambiguous — you're not sure how much of it really happened versus how much is Josie's jealousy and imagination. What's the real back story?*

I think that there can be a relationship between a mother and a son that, whether or not they're rolling around in a hotel room, prevents the son from really growing up and moving away from the mother and attaching to a woman his own age. I don't think Michael really screwed his mother; but I do believe something really upsetting happened between them that was the final propulsion to get him out of her world. Something that really scared him. Then he started to feel that he could never get free of the relationship with his mother. And that was really frightening.

*Is that why he killed himself?*

It contributed. But I think his perfectionism killed him. If you've studied so much and you're so aware of the achievements of other artists, how do you find a place for yourself in a world where genius has had its stamp?

I think every artist has to come to terms with that. At some point you have to realize that you might not be Shakespeare, but that you have something to say. Whereas somebody who's raised to think that if you're not Shakespeare, forget it, they never give themselves permission, they never value what they do have, they're always comparing themselves. And it stifles voices that should be heard.

*You're speaking from personal experience, your own struggles with perfectionism, as you described earlier. How did you break free of it?*

You know, you read such wonderful writers and think: I'd never be able to write like that. For me, it was reading Henry Miller. He lets all the seams show. I was reading him and thinking: "I could do that." He didn't worry, "Is this perfect in every way?" He just threw

it in. And that gave me more permission. But I still struggle with it constantly. “This isn’t good enough.” Then at some point you have to say, “You know, I have to write it the way I *can* write it, and for all its blemishes, there might be something there worthwhile.”

*In the book, Josie and Michael talk about this sacred space, the “true world.” What is that, exactly?*

There are two schools of thought about the place of divine in life. There are the people who believe in transcendence — that there’s an ideal world and this is sort of a lesser reflection of the ideal world. And then there’s the concept of immanence, the idea that *this is* the divine, right here, right now, if we have eyes to see it. And Michael believes in the true world, the world behind the world, the immanence of the divine, that it’s present at all times, but you have to get into a place where you’re able to perceive it. Josie had never thought about it until she met him, it never occurred to her. So, suddenly to be thinking about the nature of the divine, that certainly brought her to a level of consciousness that she’d never had before.

But what happens with a depressed person, like Michael, is that you lose the ability to see it. He knew that the true world was here, that the divine was present everywhere, but he lost his ability to see it. So it’s like being cast out of paradise. And the only thing you can see is the dark. The only thing that’s left is chaos and dread.

*What did you mean when you referred to Paint It Black, in the press material, as being like “The Fall of the House of Usher”?*

Meredith’s father, the grandfather, comes to Los Angeles from Vienna — he’s a composer in Vienna after the Nazis take power in Germany, and he can see the writing on the wall. He comes to L.A., as many of the exiled Jews in Europe did in the Thirties, the artists; but the legacy of the Holocaust, the guilt — that you got away and other people didn’t — is a poison that was cast down in the family. And you can say that Michael’s death is a sort of delayed reaction. The grandfather managed to come to L.A., managed to marry,

managed to have a child and have a life before he committed suicide; he passed down the despair to his daughter, who threw all of herself into her music; but she passed down that despair to the next generation. And Michael — he was the end of the line. So in a way, it is the fall of a great house.

*Do you worry about the commercial success of this book after what happened with White Oleander?*

What the commercial thing is about is: Does this book speak to people? I hope it does. I don't want to write books that speak only to professors of literature. What I'm really interested in doing is going down into the difficult experiences, the collective experience, and opening it up so that people can get a grip on things that happened to them. It's nice to have commercial success and have a career and all; but above and beyond that, have I moved someone, have I spoken to their experience, have I made them understand life differently? That's what I want to do.

I'm hoping that people will read my books and see that life bears some thinking about — that it's not about what you own, and how good your life looks, or what's on your résumé that makes you a human being. It's how deeply you think about your experiences.

Adapted from *Swink*, Issue 3 (early 2007). Reprinted with permission. Deborah Vankin is the editor of *LA Metromix*, a Tribune web magazine for 20-somethings covering food and drink, nightlife, pop culture, and style.

## Questions and topics for discussion

1. Janet Fitch has said that one of the central questions of *Paint It Black* is: “What happens to a dream when the dreamer is gone?” What do you think the author meant by this? Do you think the question is ultimately answered in the novel?
2. Although Michael and Josie come from very different backgrounds, their attraction to each other is almost immediate. What does Michael see in Josie, and what does she see in him? If it were not for Michael’s depression, do you think their relationship would have endured? Or were they bound to go their separate ways eventually?
3. In their grief over Michael’s death, both Josie and Meredith experience a range of other emotions: guilt, anger, and self-destructive impulses. Do you think grief over a suicide is different from other kinds of grief? If so, how, and why?
4. At one point in the novel Josie ponders the reason for Meredith’s despising her: “Josie’s crime — loving her son, loving him, but not enough to save him” (page 90). To what extent does Josie blame herself for not being able to prevent Michael’s death? Is she responsible? Should love be enough for one per-

son to save another? Under what circumstances might it not be? Are there experiences that one must live through alone?

5. “[Josie] had always believed that knowledge helped you do things, but Michael’s knowing just took away his courage, his freedom” (page 67). In what way does Michael’s education in art and culture hamper him in his own artistic development? How do Michael, Meredith, and Josie individually deal with the conflict between perfectionism and giving rein to creative instinct? Is this challenge different for a performing artist and a creative artist? Do you think there is any solution to this dilemma?
6. Michael introduces Josie to what he calls “the true world.” What is the true world? What is its significance for Michael and for Josie? Does she still believe in its existence after Michael is gone?
7. Josie finds out that a number of details Michael told her about himself — for example, his inability to drive, his lack of prowess at sports — were untrue. Why is she so upset by these revelations? How do they make her reevaluate their relationship? Does anyone truly reveal his or her entire self to another person, no matter how close?
8. Despite their animosity toward each other, Meredith and Josie keep seeking each other out. What is it that draws them together? How do their feelings about each other change over time — or do they? What do you think would happen if Josie took Meredith up on her offer toward the end of the book? What is tempting to Josie about this proposal? What is frightening about it?
9. Why does Josie feel so compelled to go to Twentynine Palms? How does what she learns there change her perspective on Michael’s death? On their relationship?
10. What do you think lies in store for Josie as the novel closes? What role might the young Austrian girl, Wilma, play in her life?

Also by Janet Fitch

## White Oleander

“A ferocious, risk-loving novel . . . intimate and epic.”

— Mark Rozzo, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“A stunning debut novel . . . startlingly original. . . . The reader enters an imaginative world as deep as a forest. . . . Ingrid and Astrid are two of the freshest, most engrossing characters to appear in recent memory.”

— John Perry, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Fitch’s startlingly apt language relates a story that is both intelligent and gripping.”

— Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina, *New York Times Book Review*

“Quite simply, *White Oleander* is amazing. It’s the kind of book you don’t want to put down. It’s full-blooded, alive, breathtaking, frightening. . . . This incredible novel is the story of what it is to be extraordinary women.”

— Rohana Chomick, *Tampa Tribune-Times*

“A truly gifted writer. . . . Astrid’s journey is much, much more than the gripping, page-turning adventure of a young hero tripping through life. It *is* life.”

— Warwick Downing, *Denver Post*

