Things are not easy for Jared Austin, but with hard work and indomitable perseverance, he turns his life into something beautiful, just like the walls that he stencils. This historical fiction novel features fascinating character development, an engaging and unpredictable plot, and wonderful insights into life in New England during the early 1800s, including the “frozen year” of 1816. Elizabeth Yates has woven in moving messages of kindness, gratitude to God, faith, appreciation of nature, hard work, love of learning, self-improvement, optimism, humility, long-suffering, and patience.

“The best books are ones that not only entertain, but also teach you and inspire you. This book does just those things! You won’t view your trials or your enemies the same after reading PATTERNS ON THE WALL!” — Jenny Phillips
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CHAPTER 1

Jared lay on his back by the brook, watching the tracery of budded boughs sway against the spring sky. They made a pattern of green upon blue, repeating itself down the brook, through the woods, along the roadside, everywhere—everywhere in the world. Jared sat up at the wonder of the thought, the same pattern repeating itself wherever there were trees to move against the sky. It was beauty, Jared thought, here in this New Hampshire pasture; it was beauty everywhere.

Searching around in the grass, Jared found a large soft leaf, one of last year’s leaves which had lain under grasses all winter and kept from drying. He laid it on a stone and with a sharp piece of iron which he kept in his pocket cut out on the leaf something roughly resembling the tracery he had been looking at overhead. Then finding a flat stone in the brook, he pressed the leaf on it and in the openings where his design had been cut smeared thin streaks of red clay. He let the clay dry before he lifted the leaf carefully—oh, so very carefully—then he smiled in delight at the stencil on the stone.

He was so interested in what he was doing that he had not noticed a girl coming across the pasture on the other side of the brook, a girl with bare feet and dark brown hair that lay on her shoulders. Jennet Thaxter stood and watched for a moment, her homespun dress whipped against her sturdy legs by the spring wind.

“Jared Austin, are you making pictures again?” she asked.

Jared gave no answer. He did not seem surprised at the sound of a voice across the brook when he might have thought himself alone in the pasture. He smiled at the design on the stone and then, without
looking up, spoke dreamily.

“I’m not making pictures, Jennet, I’m making beauty. See?” He held up the stone, and Jennet leaned across the brook to look at it.

She screwed up her eyes but could make nothing out of the streaky red lines across the surface of the stone, so she shook her head vigorously, and her dark hair swirled in the wind.

“It’s nothing at all that I can see,” she said.

Jared looked up at the boughs overhead. “It’s beauty, isn’t it, up there—those leaves against the sky? I want to make that same kind of beauty.”

Jennet laughed. “I’d rather look up at the trees.”

“But you can’t always look up at the trees,” Jared replied quickly. “Winter comes when there are no leaves. Night comes when there is no light. Perhaps some day the trees will be cut down, and then there will be nothing at all. But if I could make a design like the design the boughs make on the sky, it could be repeated anywhere, and you could always have beauty.”

Jennet shook her head. “We’re farming folk, Jared, and have no time for things like that. Something dreadful happens to people who waste time; something dreadful will happen to you. I’ve heard my father and mother talk about you. They say they don’t know what you’ll come to.”

“Neither do I,” Jared said, and smiled.

Jennet sat on a rock by the brook and edged her bare feet into the moving water.

“It’s cold!” she exclaimed, drawing her feet back and tucking them under her rough blue dress.

“There’s snow on the mountains still.”

“I mustn’t stay,” Jennet said, but she made no move to go. “I was sent to fetch the cows home. It’s near milking time.”

Jared looked across the brook and into Jennet’s eyes. “Jennet, when I’m a grown man will you marry me?”
Jennet surveyed him appraisingly—earnest gray eyes, pale face and sandy hair, lean small body which was no bigger than hers, though he was twelve and she was only eleven; then her gaze shifted to his hands as he trailed them through the water of the brook. The water slipping around his fingers made them look longer than ever and very thin.

“No,” she said deliberately, thinking that the man she would marry would be a strong young farmer with a hundred acres in his own name and every one of them under tillage.

She waited before saying more. She had found with the boys in the village who asked that question that if she waited long enough they would answer back, “All right, I’ll find someone else,” and then she could say, “So shall I,” and that was the beginning of such a toss-about of words as might end any way the more-witted cared to have them end.

Jared made no reply, giving her no chance to taunt or tempt. Finally Jennet looked up from watching his hand in the water and looked at him. His eyes were straight on her. At their clear glance, Jennet felt ashamed for a moment, ashamed of trying to banter with him as she would with other boys. Jared was not like other boys. Something made him different.

She opened her lips to speak, and then from the hill in back of them came the sharp impatient sound of a man’s voice calling Jared. The boy stood up quickly. Suddenly he had lost his noble, dreamy look, and his eyes were those of a hunted creature.

“I must go—it’s my father.” Jared shivered.

“Are you cold, Jared? It’s so warm today, the first really warm day of the year.”

“No.” He smiled, a tight smile drawn across his lips. “It’s like an icy wind, his voice; it always makes me shiver.” Then he laughed at himself. “I’m not very brave, am I? No wonder you don’t want to marry me.”

Jennet held out her hand to him across the brook. Jared reached for it, but the brook was too wide, and even their fingertips would
not touch.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to marry me, Jennet,” Jared said gently. “You’re worth someone fine and fearless. I’m not that, am I?”

Then the voice boomed over the hillside again, and this time Jared turned and darted up the steep slope. Jennet stood still, watching him and wondering what would ever make him warm, remembering how even on the hottest days he had felt that icy wind blowing and had shivered under it.

Lying where he had left it was the stencil on the stone. Jennet stepped into the water and crossed over to it. She picked it up and looked at it, then at the small leaves interlacing overhead.

“It is beautiful,” she said to herself and waded back to the other side, half wondering why the water no longer felt cold to her.

Jared stood before his father, thin and white and obedient. The man, towering above the boy, said nothing. His lips were set in a hard line, his eyes had narrowed with anger. The boy stood firmly, waiting for one brave moment before his father’s arm was raised, knowing that at the first blow, he would crumple under it. He had learned long ago not to cry out, but he had not learned how to keep his body taut or how to stem the flood of tears from his eyes. But the blow did not fall. Then Jared saw, standing behind his father, a stranger with a horse.

“Take the horse to the barn and bed him for the night,” Eben Austin said, turning abruptly.

Jared approached the horse and put his hand on the bridle, then stole one brief glance up at the man whose presence had saved him a beating. He was a tall man, journey-stained, and a smile crossed his face at the boy’s swift glance. Then the two men started toward the house, and Jared led the horse to the barn.

There was always a stall for a traveler’s horse, and it was always bedded and waiting. Jared slipped the bridle off and patted the heavy-boned head. He brought an armful of hay, and the horse had soon sunk her soft muzzle into the sweet-smelling fodder. The boy turned to remove the saddle, then stood still to examine it, for it was
like no saddle he had ever seen before.

Attached to it, where saddlebags usually hung, was a leather apron consisting of many pockets, and in each pocket was a brush. The brushes were of varying sizes and thicknesses, and near the handle of each one were small rims of color where the paint had not come away. Below the brush pockets were flat packets. Jared looked in one and found an envelope of blue powder, in another green, in another ocher—dried pigments waiting to be made into paint. There were other small notions that proclaimed the stranger's trade as that of a journeyman painter, and Jared sighed with bliss as he lifted the saddle carefully from the horse's back and set it over against the wall. Then, making sure that the horse had all it needed for comfort, and that the other animals were well settled for the night, Jared turned and went toward the house.

A traveler was a welcome person in the remote countryside. He was housed for as long as he would stay, his horse was stabled or turned out to pasture, and no payment was thought of save the tales he had gleaned in his journeying. The hard work of farming the boulder-strewn fields always slackened a pace at the arrival of a traveler, an extra big backlog blazed on the hearth in his honor, and extra food—as well as the added place—was laid at the table. The homely fare of beans and bread and milk and corn was enlivened, and talk flowed like cider from a flagon.

This stranger was no exception. Seated on the settle with Eben Austin beside him, the two men were filling the room with sound—the exchange of words and even laughter now and then—to the accompanying flavor of stew simmering in an iron pot on the hob.

Jared's stepmother was standing by the wide fireplace, one arm stirring the pot, the other rocking the cradle of the baby. The two older children, girls four and five years old, were playing in a corner of the room, and when the sound of their laughter would break out, Eben Austin would frown.

Nancy Austin beckoned to Jared as he came into the room. “Hurry, boy, and do somewhat to keep your sisters quiet. Can't you
see how it angers your father when they laugh?”

Jared nodded and waved a finger at Thankful, the elder of the two. She came across the room swiftly and threw herself against her half-brother, eager to prattle to him. Jared put his hand to his lips, and her babble ceased as she looked at himquestioningly. Mary Austin came more slowly. Jared drew them both down beside him at one end of the long hearth, then he brushed a tile clean and took a cinder from the fire.

“‘Tis a special kind of cinder,” he whispered.

“Can it make pictures?” Thankful whispered back.

“Yes, but only if everyone is quiet. If we say a word, the cinder will stop making pictures and jump back into the fire. It fears easily and likes the warm ash.”

“Shall we tell Father and the stranger to cease their talk?” Thankful asked.

“No, no, it only minds talk close by.”

Charmed into silence, the sisters watched Jared draw one picture after another on the tile, his way of telling a story. There was quiet in the room save for the voices of the men and the light steps of Nancy Austin on the bare floor as she laid the wooden plates on the table, filled the mugs with fresh milk from the evening’s milking, and took down from her store cupboard a jar of spiced apples in honor of the guest.

“I tell you, sir,” the stranger was saying emphatically, “more and more people are coming to realize that walls of wood or plaster won’t do. They’re to be painted with scenes like those costly French wallpapers that are being imported, or with designs as we stencilers are doing. It’s the modern trend to bring beauty into our dwellings.”

“We farming folk haven’t time for such fol-de-rols, Mr. Toppan, or money either.”

“That’s where you make a mistake, sir. In the first place, it’s hardly a matter of money, since our custom is to do walls for our board and a little over; and in the second, ever since the war, people have had
time to think about bringing beauty into their homes.”

“The war is a long time past now,” Eben Austin commented.

“Exactly,” Mr. Toppan went on, “and we don’t have to think any longer about defending ourselves or asserting our independence; we’ve proved one and achieved the other, so now we can give some time to the arts. Right down the ages the story is the same, that when people are truly free, they begin to express themselves in ways of art.”

Nancy Austin was ladling the stew from the big kettle on to the plates and calling them all to supper. They drew up to the table, and Eben gave a brief grace. Then, as if uninterrupted, the two men went on with their talk. It was like a pendulum swinging between politics and art. They matched wits like flint and steel, and even when the conversation swung to discussion of crops and stock, the journeyman painter was as able to strike sparks as the farmer. Jared and the two little girls ate in silence, eyes wide on the guest, ears hearkening to the talk that was more wondrous than any tale in a book. Nancy Austin listened, too, though it was not for her to comment.

When the babe in its cradle gave a fretful cry, she went back to the hearth, and drawing up a low rocker, nursed it quietly while the others ate. Then, as the men still lingered in their talk, Nancy motioned to the children to go upstairs to bed. The little girls were sleepy and ready enough to be shepherded up to the loft, but Jared, his eyes bright and a new intensity in his face, was loathe to leave Mr. Toppan’s presence.

Thankful and Mary were soon asleep under their gaily patterned quilt, but there was no sleep for Jared. He pulled his quilt up to his shoulders, shivering with excitement at the murmur of voices in the room below. Jared’s bed was near the chimney, and there was a crack between the floor and the bricks of the chimney. If only his father and the stranger would draw nearer to the fire, he might be able to follow the wonderful meanderings of their talk.

Jared smiled to himself, for something about Mr. Toppan’s
presence in the house had touched his father so that the heavy
frown across his brow had eased, and the tones of his voice were
less grim as they mingled with the almost jaunty tones of the
stranger’s. Jared thought he might even learn not to fear his father
if Mr. Toppan stayed with them awhile. It was the first time Jared
had ever had the courage to think such a thought, for as long as he
could remember, he had lived in terror of his father. To tremble at
the sound of Eben Austin’s voice was as natural an action as to start
at an unexpected clap of thunder. Jared knew that his father hated
him, and he knew why, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Eben Austin had come up to the New Hampshire land fifteen
years ago from his father’s farm in Massachusetts. He had bought a
parcel of rolling woodland, cleared the field, and laid the foundation
for his house. Then, with timber from his woods, his own strong
arms, and the help of his neighbors, he had built his house, and it
was as true and sturdy a house as ever watched dawn come over
the hills. In the cleared land before it, he had set out apple trees
that would tide him through a season of small harvests, fill his own
cellar and give him enough to sell; for apples could be counted on
to fetch a good price at all times. Two years more he had worked
until his acres were fine and clean, yielding good harvests. The apple
trees growing sturdily had started to bear. Then he had gone back to
his father’s farm, and for one whole summer—while his neighbors
cared for his land—he had courted lovely Lucy Lakin, daughter of a
Boston merchant.

They were married in September and journeyed back to New
Hampshire together, over the rough roads, through the rich farming
country of Massachusetts, and into the timbered wilderness of New
Hampshire where the farms were green clearings in a dense green
land. Lucy’s friends waved her farewell with mingled feelings when
she rode off, pillion, behind tall dark Eben Austin, for Lucy knew
the grace of city ways, the charm of gentleness, and she seemed a
strange one to brave the pioneer life. But Eben was strong, strong
enough for them both perhaps, and he was said to be a rich farmer
in his own way, and they loved each other.