

GORDON BÖLLING

The Gradual Instant: An Interview with Anne Michaels



(Author Photo: David Laurence)

The digital voice recorder is already turned off and Anne Michaels is just about to leave for her next interview as our conversation turns to the recent collapse of the Historical Archive of Cologne. Michaels is deeply affected as she learns the details of the destruction of Germany's largest municipal archive. That night she begins her sold-out reading in Cologne with a few words of consolation for the loss of the archive.

It is early March 2009 and the Canadian poet and novelist Anne Michaels is on a brief visit to Germany to promote the release of her new book. *The Winter Vault*, Michaels' second novel, will be published by McClelland & Stewart later this month.

Translated as *Wintergewölbe* the novel is scheduled for release in Germany in late April 2009. As Michaels explains at the reading, the novel takes its title from a type of building in which the bodies of the dead are stored in winter when the ground is frozen so hard that it is impossible to bury them.

Anne Michaels was born in Toronto in 1958. Prior to her success as a novelist, she had made a name for herself as a poet. Her first volume of poetry, *The Weight of Oranges* (1986), won the Commonwealth Prize for the Americas. Half a decade later, her second collection of verse, *Miner's Pond* (1991), received the Canadian Authors Association Award for Poetry and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award and the Trillium Award. These two volumes were reissued in a single-volume in 1997. *Skin Divers* (1999) is her most recent book of poetry. Michaels also received international critical acclaim for her first novel. *Fugitive Pieces*, published in 1996, won the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, The City of Toronto Book Award, the Martin and Beatrice Fischer Award, the Trillium Book Award, an Award of Merit from Heritage Toronto, the Guardian Fiction Award, the Jewish Quarterly Prize for Fiction, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, the Harold Ribalow Award, and the Giuseppe Acerbi Literary Award.

Her German publisher, Berlin Verlag, has organized a tight schedule for Michaels and as I meet her in the lobby of the Hotel im Wasserturm in central Cologne she has already done a day's worth of press work. Despite the strains of travel, a full day of interviews and that night's upcoming reading at the lit.Cologne 2009 Festival of Literature, she is happy to do an additional interview with an academic journal. When interviewed, Michaels often pauses for a moment before she answers a specific question in what is a reflective and calm voice.

Gordon Bölling: You began your career as a writer of poetry and only later moved on to fiction. A similar pattern can also be traced in the biographies of Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, and Michael Ondaatje. Is there a special reason why so many of Canada's major authors began their careers as poets?

Anne Michaels: I'm not sure one could generalize. I think that for me there came a point where I couldn't do what I needed to do in that form. My task was different and so I couldn't do what I needed to do in poetry. I can't speak for the others. But for me there are certain large questions which I knew, in order to be truthful to the complexity of the questions and because some of those questions were very difficult to look at or questions which we maybe desire not to look at too closely, that I would have to unfold them over many pages. Being with the reader over two hundred or four hundred pages, one can unfold things differently and lead both the writer and the reader into places, difficult or painful places, because you have the time to do it. A poem doesn't allow you that.

GB: Even though some of your poems might be read as long poems?

AM: Yes, but this notion of being in the company of a reader for days or weeks and to allow an exploration to take its time and to add level on level on level, that's a different relationship with the reader.

GB: When did you begin writing poetry?

AM: Childhood.

GB: And you've been doing so ever since?

AM: Yes. At a later stage I started novel writing, I'm just so interested in the form of it and what you can do and so that's mostly what I'm doing now.

GB: After you received your BA in English from the University of Toronto in 1980, you began teaching creative writing. Has this teaching experience had an influence on your writing?

AM: Being a student has, because I had a marvellous professor at university. He died a few years ago, he was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. He, only for a couple of years, taught a class on rhetoric and that was an incredible experience. It was reading the text in a certain way. It was really trying to understand the intent of the author. I think that taught me a great deal. I'm now a professor of the Graduate Department at the University of Toronto. A few years ago they started graduate studies in creative writing. So now I'm a mentor, I'm not in the classroom. It's like a thesis supervisor. I'm one-on-one with a student, one student a year. It's always a pleasure to work with someone who is just trying to find their way. The program is for creating the draft of a manuscript. So you have someone working on a book for the first time. By the end of the year they have to do an oral defense and present their book; fiction or poetry, whatever is their choice.

GB: Your home town Toronto plays a major role in your writings. This not only holds true for your novel *Fugitive Pieces* but can also be seen in your poetry. For example, your poem "There Is No City that Does Not Dream" [from *Skin Divers*] appeared as part of the popular Toronto Transit Commission's *Poetry on the Way* program and can be read as a tribute to your home town. What does Toronto mean to you as a writer?

AM: We live in a time when most people don't live in the same place where they were born. We don't often die in the same place where we were born. But in my case, this is the city where I was born and I live there. There has been phenomenal change as there would be in any city over time. For me, it's almost archeological to see how the city grows up. That really does embody my relationship to the city. It's many layers of experience and a certain kind of intimacy when you've gone through various kinds of loss in a place, even the loss of physical surroundings.

GB: In your poetry you repeatedly turn to historical persons and use these as speakers in a series of dramatic monologues. In "The Second Search," Polish physicist Marie Skłodowska Curie serves you as a lyrical I. In "Ice House," Kathleen Scott, sculptor and wife of Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott, mourns the death of her husband. Other poems focus on the lives of such diverse characters as Johannes

Kepler, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), and Osip Mandelstam. What are the difficulties in writing about historical persons?

AM: The inherent difficulty is that one can never know enough. You can research for years and never know enough. There has to be an absolute respect for one's own ignorance and also for the person whose voice you are attempting to speak from.

GB: How much research goes into such poems as "The Second Search" and "Ice House"?

AM: Years. The ratio of product to amount of time spent is ridiculous. For me, if there's an inner connection or I feel that that life embodies a way of looking at certain ideas then I just read as much as I can and think about it. A fact in itself is not productive but the meaning of a fact is. That takes time and I would rather feel I'm getting it right than rush. Patience is very important. In those poems, now looking back I can see very much this being drawn towards character that is so part of novel writing and the desire to have certain ideas embodied in a character and to be allowed to explore certain ideas through a character.

GB: When do you reach a point at which you feel that you know enough to re-imagine your historical characters' lives?

AM: I think there is an intuition maybe. Sometimes you read and there is a tiny reference to a gesture, to the tiniest thing, and suddenly you feel a great understanding for the person. With Marie Curie, there were photographs of Marie with her husband or her children. Or, this image where she stirred this brew of pitch blend like a witch at her cauldron for months and months and months no matter what the weather. She had this determination, like a mad cook, to stir until she could reduce and reduce to get to that essential. I think there was something about that image and that determination. Both the domesticity of the image, a very domestic almost cooking kind of image, and yet a very acute scientific mind. The two things together made me feel I captured something about her.

GB: Do you feel an obligation to stay true to the historical record as far as it is established?

AM: Yes, I feel a great responsibility to that. I don't mess around with the facts. If there is a truth there then it's a truth that comes from the facts and not a manipulation of the facts.

GB: As a German I was, of course, particularly interested in your poems on Alfred Doeblin, Johannes Kepler, and Paula Modersohn-Becker ["Sublimation," "A Lesson from the Earth," and "Modersohn-Becker," respectively. All of which are collected in the second section of *Miner's Pond*]. What made the biographies of these historical figures so compelling for you?

AM: In the case of Modersohn-Becker there is this struggle in her life, a moment of decision. With Kepler, too. We are led to moments of great inner resolve where we have to make a choice and this was very interesting to me. With Kepler, he had a tremendously profound vision of how he felt the universe worked. Many things came together in his notion of how the universe worked. His numbers didn't actu-

ally always work out. And then there has to come an inner decision how one proceeds from there. This is fascinating to me. With Paula Modersohn-Becker, it was a personal decision and it had to do with a reconciliation between her personal life, her emotional life, and her work. For her that reconciliation was extremely difficult. She could not figure out how to put the two together and she had to make a choice. She ended up making more than one choice. But these moments of choosing interested me very much in trying to take them apart and to figure out how they arrived there.

GB: Did you ever get the chance to visit Worpswede?

AM: No, though I would very much like to visit. Is it still an artists' colony?

GB: Yes, I think so. They still have artists in residence and there are also numerous exhibitions open to the public. What is your understanding of the genre of the dramatic monologue? And in how far do your poems differ from the genre conventions as established by someone like Robert Browning?

AM: That's a big question. I'm not sure how much I strayed from the conventions. When I wrote them I felt very much that they were poems to be read aloud perhaps more than any others.

GB: The Holocaust and life after the Holocaust are at the center of your first novel *Fugitive Pieces*. The Holocaust is probably one of the, if not *the* most difficult historical event to write about. What made you want to write about the Holocaust and how did the novel originate?

AM: I think that for my generation it's almost impossible not to find your relationship to that event. It's like the brick wall two inches from your face that goes up to heaven. It's an unavoidable topic. The novel began, as these things always do for me, with a cluster of questions which would just not go away. That first image of the boy burying himself in order to survive, that was a very haunting image to me. An image of the depth of grief involved in a child being in this circumstance of digging a grave in order to live and with that image the whole story came.

GB: *Fugitive Pieces* relies on a remarkable narrative design. Consisting of two autobiographical narratives, the novel in its first part chronicles the life of Jacob Beer, who as a young child survives the Holocaust in Poland. The second part tells the life story of Ben, who did not witness the Holocaust himself but is the son of Holocaust survivors. Why did you decide to approach the experience of the Holocaust from the perspective of two generations?

AM: It was very important to me that, in a sense, the first story haunts the second story. We all inherit the past, whether it's a very personal past, whether it's the larger historical past, both those things. So it seemed essential to have both parts to the book; both the generation that experiences and the generation that inherits. It's the beginning of thinking about how we remember, how we commemorate. The question that sometimes the very way in which we commemorate an event is also the way in which we forget it is also very much part of the new book. This notion that we all, whether we're conscious of it or not, inherit what has come before is impor-

tant to me. I wanted very much for the narratives to be separated so that, in a way, it's a haunting. We find out right at the beginning that Jacob dies. So Jacob haunts the book.

GB: Despite the fact that Jacob Beer and Ben belong to different generations their life stories show a number of parallels. For example, both their narratives begin with a flooded city, Biskupin in Poland in Jacob's case and Toronto in Ben's case. In addition, both narrators finally move towards a place of love and achieve a kind of reconciliation with their personal histories. Why is it that their vastly different experiences of history and the Holocaust lead Jacob and Ben in similar directions?

AM: The whole book is woven together with many layers and echoes and repeating metaphors and many levels of connective tissue, which is very important to me because these things are complexities. I try to get into a question in as many ways as possible to allow the reader many doors into the same questions.

GB: Would you say that their experiences are similar?

AM: I think some of their questions are similar.

GB: *Fugitive Pieces* can also be read as an extended meditation on time and history. For example, you make use of imagery and metaphors taken from such fields as archeology and geography to approach the past. Could you explain your understanding of history and how it informs the present?

AM: It's a moral question. In moral terms, there is no before and after, then and now. How we live determines how we will act at any given moment. Our ability to do the right thing is not going to just suddenly spring from us out of nowhere. Our doing the right thing is like a muscle. Morality is a muscle and has to be used. Our doing the right thing depends on how we have lived before that moment comes to us. History is the gradual instant, the gradual present. ["The Gradual Instant" is also the title of a chapter in *Fugitive Pieces*.] In other words, there is a responsibility in daily life, in that daily life is what becomes history. It is the source of the formation of the huge event. It's not separate from how we live every day. People always ask "How could it have happened?", "How did this happen?" when, in fact, it's not so hard to see how it happened. History erupts from the present moment.

GB: In their focus on history *Fugitive Pieces* and a number of your poems are representative of contemporary Canadian literature. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s to the present Canadian writers have shown an abiding interest in history; from such classics as Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* and Robert Kroetsch's *The Ledger* to more recent works such as Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*. What, in your opinion, is the attraction of the past for contemporary Canadian novelists and poets?

AM: I'm going to make a sweeping generalization which one could respond to with as many exceptions. But I think there is a kernel of truth in this, that it has something to do with the fact that so much of the population has come from elsewhere. As soon as one goes from one place to another there is a history to be told, there is a before, there is a where one came from, there is a life divided in half, in two

pieces, and so it's a national characteristic. It's a country of immigrants. Joseph Boyden, of course, is a good example of people writing from the need to express an indigenous history. It's set up from the very nature of the fact that it's a largely immigrant country. That immediately sets up a relationship to history.

GB: In the acknowledgements to *Fugitive Pieces*, you mention British novelist, essayist, and art critic John Berger as an inspiration. What is it that you admire in Berger's work?

AM: Most of all, I admire a kind of essential gut humanism. There is an absolute humanist view that pervades his books. And there is a certain courage in his way of storytelling. Some of his books, he himself says so, are hard to put into categories, but the form is perfect for what has to be said. You can't imagine any other form for it. This is the courage of the storyteller to tell the story as truthfully as possible in whatever form it takes. And I admire his precision. There is never an imprecise word or an imprecise thought. The precision of his thinking is fantastic.

GB: It's interesting to see that John Berger has also been a great influence on Michael Ondaatje. In fact, Ondaatje's latest novel, *Divisadero*, is dedicated to Berger and his wife. Who else would you feel a certain kinship with? From whom did you learn?

AM: That is such a hard question to answer. *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, Thomas Hardy, Rilke, Dostoevsky, Akhmatova. [Here, Michaels hesitates for a moment.] It's a huge list and I could go on and on. People ask that question and it's a good question. And in some cases a writer might say "Absolutely, this was a turning point in my career, in my thinking" but for me it's a matter of small gradations.

GB: Your first novel quickly became a great success. *Fugitive Pieces* won a series of literary prizes, was a national bestseller in your native Canada for more than two years, and also gained you a large international readership. How has this success changed your life as a writer?

AM: This question of a readership is the most important. For a writer what could be more important than feeling a readership? I received hundreds and hundreds of letters from readers and still receive them for that book. When you're writing a book you're carrying the burden of that story. In my case, because I'm dealing with historical events, there is maybe an added burden for someone doing that and yet you feel you must carry these things. When you have a reader, someone who really has deeply read the book, then, in a way, you can put that burden down. You might say "Now the story is in someone else's mind. These questions are now being considered by someone else." Thus, you can put that burden down and move on to the next one. I feel a responsibility to people who've read that book and I would like them to come with me into this new book.

GB: Do you have an ideal reader in mind when writing a book? I'm asking because your books place huge demands on readers. They are certainly not what one would call an easy read.

AM: I am very conscious of writing in a way that allows the reader a place in the book. I want the reader to come into the book. The whole way the book is structured is for the reader to come into the book. It's like an actor on stage who knows that the best way to get the audience's attention is not to shout at them; the best way is to whisper. Then the audience comes forward to see what's happening. In a similar way, I want the reader to move closer and go into the book. Looking at large ideas, large questions, there always has to be a feeling attached to it. It can't be an abstract notion, so the combination of thinking and feeling is really important to me.

GB: Your second novel, *The Winter Vault*, will come out later this month. When did you begin work on this book and how did it originate?

AM: I started working on this one even before the other book was published. It originated, again, from a number of questions and a very powerful image. If you haven't read the book, it's hard to explain. The opening scene takes place at the site of a temple which is being dismantled because a huge dam is being built, the Aswan Dam, which will flood the entire area. And so they're saving the temple by taking it apart and they are going to reerect it higher up. But in taking it apart and in putting it together, something crucial is being lost. So there is a scene between two characters at the site of that temple and that opening image is what brought everything together.

GB: Like *Fugitive Pieces*, *The Winter Vault* takes its readers to a number of very different countries. Your new novel covers a time span of several decades and is set in Canada as well as in England, Egypt, and Poland. How difficult is it to capture all of these times and places in a single book?

AM: It's difficult. Also because I'm not interested in comparison, I'm interested in connection. It's easy to compare things, it's not so easy to understand what really connects things. For me, it's a great challenge and a pleasure to begin to understand the connections between things that might seem superficially not to be connected.

GB: In your novels as well as in your poetry you easily transcend an exclusive focus on Canadian subject matters and themes and instead move on to larger international or even universal narratives. This, of course, holds true for a number of contemporary Canadian writers. The works of Anne Carson, Michael Ondaatje, and Rohinton Mistry come to mind. How important is this transgression of national boundaries for you?

AM: It's essential. Certainly we live in a time when our consciousness of the world is inseparable from our everyday life. So it would seem very unnatural to me to ghettoize experience that way. Even the most intimately nationalistic event, for example the Cypress Hills Massacre, I think, has larger connections. [The Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 is at the center of Guy Vanderhaeghe's award-winning novel *The Englishman's Boy* (1996).]

GB: Now that your second novel is about to be published, do you have any new projects that you are currently working on?

AM: I'm already a good ways into another novel.

GB: Which books are you currently reading? Is there anything you'd like to recommend?

AM: For some reason my mind always goes numb when I'm asked that question. Other writers have told me that happens to them too and I'm not sure why. I do a lot of reading for research and I'm great reader of non-fiction. In terms of novels ... [Searching for names, Michaels pauses for a brief moment], I love W. G. Sebald. *Austerlitz* is my favourite of his. He is a wonderful, wonderful writer.

GB: What do you like about *Austerlitz*?

AM: It's the precision about things for which it is very hard to be precise. Ineffable things, and yet they are expressed with an acute precision. And what he does with time in all of his books is very clever and very masterful because he almost recreates a sense of time. Or, he recreates one's experience of time which is very difficult to do because it's more than memory, it's a present imbued with past. He is a master. And also, of course, the way in which the intimate life is connected to the larger historical circumstance. That's a relationship that fascinates me.

GB: Thank you for the interview. I look forward to the reading tonight.