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A Conversation with Ann Pancake

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KM: Can you just talk a little bit about your family? As a girl, what books did you have growing up? And did you go to the library—did you go to the bookmobile, did your mother take you—I mean, how did you fall in love with writing books and stories? I'd like to know a little bit about your life with books growing up.

AP: Okay. Well, my parents were both big readers, which was fairly unusual where I grew up. They both went to college. Their parents were also readers, so we had books in the house from the very beginning and, yeah, my mother took us to the library from the time that we were really little. There were no bookstores, but the few times I got in a bookstore, that was really exciting. So I started telling myself stories when I was really little, and then, like I said, I did have a lot of access to books and not a lot else. We were pretty isolated and we had one channel on our TV. Reading voraciously, that's instrumental when you're becoming a writer. All my siblings, I'd say all of them, yeah, read a fair amount, certainly more than other kids we grew up with, again because it wasn't such a part of their household. And no one read as much as me.

KM: Who were some of your earliest influences as a kid?

AP: I liked the dog books, you know, like *Sounder* and *Where the Red Fern Grows,* and um, Old Yeller, so all the dramatic dog books… Anything I could find that was actually rural, because I don't know how that was for you, but most of the books that I found were set in urban areas, which I couldn't connect to. *Where the Lilies Bloom,* that was very important to me.

KM: And what town did you grow up in in West Virginia, where was that?

AP: I lived in Summersville until I was eight, which is in the central part of the state, a county with coal mining. Then when I was eight we moved back up to Romney, which is where my dad's people have been for a couple of hundred years. That county was more agricultural.

KM: Well, let's stay with childhood a minute. So did any teachers encourage you as a writer, growing up? Did you know that writing was a profession then?

AP: I don't recall much talk about me becoming a writer when I was little, but I did have some teachers, one in junior high and a couple in high school, who encouraged me. I knew that writing was a profession, but I didn't think it was something I could do. If I remember right, until I turned nine or ten, I believed that I could be a writer. Then I lost that faith in myself. Although I wanted to be a writer and I wrote all the time, I didn't think that I would ever have a book published. That was just an unlikely dream.

KM: So when you went off to college, how did you know what to major in? You know, even my friends said that I don't think you can major in writing, so you should just be a journalist. So I was just wondering what your experience was.

AP: I majored in pre-vet at first because I wanted to be a veterinarian, and I thought, I'd be like James Herriott and be able to write. Then it became clear that I just didn't have the math skills… So you know, it's a very familiar story. I switched over into English just because I loved reading, and that's what I was really good at, and in high school my verbal test scores were very high. I think I still wanted to be a writer but thought that I wasn't good enough to be one professionally. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. I intentionally did not get a teaching certificate because I knew I did not want to get stuck teaching high school in West Virginia.

KM: I hear you. So did either parent advise you to do that?

AP: No, they were really good about that. Partly because I think their

parents had pressured them a lot, especially my dad, about what he should major in. So they were relatively hands-off with us, which was pretty unusual. My brother, for example, majored in theater and my grandfather was pretty upset about that but my parents told him to go ahead and do it. He's been an actor in L.A. for almost thirty years now.

KM: So can we talk a little bit about voice? I just love the way you find voice in a character. So when did that start happening? When you sort of fell into the language? I mean, I'm just in awe how in a certain sense they could almost be monologues. And you capture that so beautifully. So could you talk a little bit about voice and how that comes to you in a story?

AP: Yeah, it's interesting that you ask that. There are a couple of stories I wrote in high school that already have the same voice. I find that kind of fascinating. I mean, not all of them, but there are at least two or three that have the same voice I've had ever since. It's very intuitive. I work from ear and I work from sound and cadence, and sometimes I just hear a rhythm and the rhythm propels me to figure out the words. Sometimes I hear the character speaking. Sometimes it's third person, but I still hear it as a voice speaking. It all begins aurally, and then I try to get as much of that down as I can capture intuitively. And when that flow stops coming spontaneously, I try to keep moving forward by copying what I heard and letting that launch me into more words. What comes later, through the copying and then launching forward, is not as raw, it's not as pure, but I can usually capture some sense of what gave itself to me intuitively and then make up more as I go along.

KM: And you were talking about how it begins with voice, never plot. I have friends who just plot like crazy. So could you talk a little bit about that?

AP: There are a lot of students who kind of have the assumption that they've got to start with plot. I've never been that interested in plot. I think I always start with voice, but I guess I could start with character or image. Sometimes I do start with image, but plot always comes

for me later, and it's usually something I have to make up in retrospect. After I've got down the imagery and the voices, then I start looking at all the material I have and trying to see what's in there that could actually be turned into a plot. And sometimes the character's voice will provide that and they'll tell the story and it'll have an arc, but um, yeah, for me it's—I've really had to make myself care more about plot. Because readers, including me—I mean, I want to read some kind of narrative. All that became more of an issue when I started writing the novel. With the novel, I HAD to have decent plotting, and I think got a little bit better at plot by writing the novel.

KM: And how did you figure it out? Because plot is something I've struggled with. I mean, also –people have told me to use Scrivener, which just sounds awful to me. And so I just wonder, do you map it out on the wall or what do you do? I know this is the most basic, but I'm just curious… do your characters tell you?

AP: Like you, I kind of figure it out as I go, so I think part of it is characters telling me. And part of it, especially in the novel, is—well, I have a West Virginia friend, Kevin Stewart, who's good at plot. I asked him for advice and he said: give each character a destination. That was incredibly helpful. I made up a destination for each person in the novel. What did each character want? What obstacles did each one have to get over to get what they wanted? What happened when they got it, what happened if they failed? What happened if they got it or did not get what they wanted. I didn't map it out so much as just make a list: this needs to happen, and then this needs to happen. I constantly revised that list as I got into the material and worked with it. So the plot plan is always changing, but at least what I did gave me some kind of direction.

KM: And so, how, when you were first starting off, how did you manage time? I know that teaching full-time was probably—I mean, you were very protective of your writing time, and that's what I tell my students, that they've got to learn to say no and to be protective. So did you start off thinking that you could teach and write and then realize that was too much. How was the process?

AP: It's kind of complicated because I started teaching when I was twenty-two.

KM: And where did you teach at twenty-two?

AP: In Japan.

KM: Oh, so tell me about Japan. Let's talk a little bit about Japan. I taught English in China in 1987 with my husband, Kiffen. It was our first year of marriage. It was crazy. As much as I fit into England as an exchange student, I did not fit into China. I couldn't eavesdrop there, that's what I found so hard and what I missed. Did you experience culture shock or did you find your writing voice sort of going back? I found that when I was in China, the Tennessee part of me that I'd intended to leave behind was very present.

AP: Yeah. And I think that's exactly what happened for me. I taught in Japan and then American Samoa and then in Thailand, so I spent four or five years in non-Western countries. And that's the first time I realized that West Virginia had a culture that was interesting and that the language was interesting and that there were actually subjects I wanted to write about. I'd gone to those other countries in part because I wanted to find things to write about and have interesting experiences. So, Japan. It was an enormous culture shock. I'd never been—you know, I'd been on a plane once when we flew to the bowl game in Houston, Texas with marching band.

KM: So when you went to Japan it was your second time on a plane?

AP: Yeah, yeah. But the first time it was a charter plane, so I mean, I didn't know how to do anything. I didn't even know that you picked up your luggage at the other end—like I didn't know how you did that or where you did that. Anyway, Japan was completely mind-opening. There was of course no internet then—this was 30 years ago—so it wasn't like you could do a load of research about where you were going, and you also did not have constant communication with somebody back in the States, as an American would now.

KM: We had *Lonely Planet China.*

AP: Right. So I was incredibly homesick, and it was an enormous culture shock. I was very moved by the culture of old Japan. My students, who were mostly adults, were very generous with me and took me all over the place on my days off and showed me—you know, they just showed me so much and taught me so much. They opened me up to how to see art, how to be present with art and with beauty. So, yes, going to Japan was completely transformative. It wasn't physically hard like I know China was, but it was psychologically hard. Very few white people lived in my city, and there I am, with my blonde hair, and as I imagine you were, I was pointed at, yelled at, touched…

KM: It felt kind of like being famous. I always vowed that if I ever saw someone famous, I would walk the other way. There was no sense of personal space. We were two of four foreigners. There was a Canadian and a Brit. I loved my students. I did plays; I had the students write plays that they performed, and they started an English-language newspaper. Called Venus. But because it was a brand-new university—I didn't really know what I was doing. The administration informed me that I was teaching 'Extensive English' and 'Intensive English.' I didn't really know what that meant. They gave us these bootleg copies of Kon-Tiki , so I was winging it.

AP: Yeah, me too!

KM: So what were the living conditions like?

AP: Oh, that's another story. I taught for a private language school, which, you know, it's like ballet lessons there. It's just this—you know, this fly-by-night little hobby. So at first they had me living with the secretary's friend who turned out to be a prostitute. And that's another story. High-class prostitute. And eventually I got into the school owner's parents' home—they had this little sort of guesthouse in the back of their house. It was really run down, but it was a very traditional old Japanese house with these enormous cockroaches and an inside outhouse and you know, the non-flush toilet. But I

loved being in that house, because I felt like I was in the nineteenth century or something.

KM: And did you write a lot of letters home? Did you write a lot?

AP: Oh yeah, I wrote a lot of letters, which I don't have anymore, which just really makes me mad at myself, but yeah…

KM: Have you ever written about Japan?

AP: I've written about Japan but not very well. I think that's when I realized I needed to be writing about West Virginia because the things I tried to write about being overseas were shallow and voyeuristic compared with what I wrote about West Virginia. I saw that then. I realized what I wrote about West Virginia was art and the other stuff really was not.

KM: So were you there about four or five years?

AP: No, I was only in Japan for one year. I was in American Samoa for two years and I was in Thailand for close to a year.

KM: Then how did you decide to get back? Did you think, I want to get back to West Virginia, or that I just want to get back to the States? What was the journey there?

AP: Well, I was back and forth. Because I lived in Albuquerque between Japan and American Samoa and then I realized after American Samoa that I needed to get a master's, so I went back and got a master's at Chapel Hill and then went to Thailand from there and then, you know, realized I didn't really want to teach ESL forever and also—I'd done about a year and a half of substitute teaching in the public schools and I knew that I probably couldn't teach fulltime in public school. I went to get the Ph. D. with the hopes of being able to teach at the college level.

KM: So what was your first job after your PhD?

AP: Oh, it was in Erie, Pennsylvania, at a branch campus of Penn State.

KM: And then where after that?

AP: I in Erie for four years and then many things happened, including a medical crisis and a divorce. I took a year's leave of absence. During the four years in Erie, I realized that I was going to have to do things very differently if I were going to write and teach. At Penn State, I didn't tell people no when I should have, so I felt completely overwhelmed trying to accommodate everyone from my colleagues who wanted me to read their memoirs to students with personal problems. I'd started writing *Strange As This Weather Has Been* by then. So I took a year's leave of absence and moved back down to Charleston, West Virginia to research the novel. After that year, I realized that I could probably limp by without a tenure-track job if I could go without healthcare and retirement. It's now been fourteen years, and I continue to get by by cobbling work together—and I get to write almost every morning. If I'm not writing—probably it's the same for you—I just get depressed and distressed.

KM: Absolutely.

AP: So it's not really an option. I can't do a heavy teaching load. I have to be writing, so it's not really negotiable.

KM: Right, I know, I'm exactly the same. I was freelance until 2009 and then took this tenure-track job, so it's, you know, it was getting two kids through college and now the younger one's coming up. And that's what I'm kind of writing about in this essay now, just sort of figuring out about having a life in two states. I think readers always just want to know how do you do it. I have students about to graduate and you know, they're scared and they're just figuring out, you know, how do you do it? And you do just figure it out, so…

AP: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, there's a million ways to do it.

KM: So you're the oldest of six. So what did your siblings end up doing? Did they go into the arts?

AP: Catherine's a filmmaker and she teaches film at Temple. Sam is an actor in LA. Yeah, so the three of us went into the arts. Laura

was never really interested in the arts. She's the fourth one; she's a social worker in LA, which is what my dad was—a social worker. Catherine used to be a social worker. And my youngest brother is a geologist in Pittsburgh who does hydro-fracking, which is a little twist in the family. Yeah and then my um, number five, he's the one who's a drug addict and he's still back in Romney.

KM: Is he the baby?

AP: No, he's the next to youngest. He is a baby, but he's not the baby.

KM: Do you want to talk about addiction at all? And also, do you ever write about the family and have they ever gotten upset? That's another question that comes up. I just got back from Pat Conroy's funeral. He wrote about everybody and was kind of fearless and so, that's something I struggle with. I've written about my son in essays even before the drugs and he was okay for a while, but then of course—when I've written about his addiction, he just hits the roof.

AP: Yeah. You know, I'm writing about them more now. My newest book has more autobiography than any of the other books.

KM: In the one you're working on now?

AP: No, in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley.* "Sugar's Up" is basically about my dad and "Me and My Daddy" is about my brother Michael, and his son. *In Such Light,* the first novella, is about my uncle and me. My dad can't really even read anymore because of his dementia, but when he could, he's so eccentric that he thought what I wrote about him was flattering no matter what. My mother, on the other hand, is very invested in propriety and keeping the family secrets, well, secret. You know this stuff.

KM: Yes, yes…

AP: My mother is very upset about the story "Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley." It took me a long time to decide whether to include that story in my collection. I'd already published it in a journal that

I knew my family would never see. For a couple years, I struggled over whether to publish it in the book, but everyone I knew was very insistent that I did include it. Eventually things got to such a destructive state with my parents and my brother that I no longer cared what they thought about my publishing it and I did not ask their permission. You know, I've published an essay about Sam growing up gay in West Virginia. Before I published that, of course, I got his permission and had him read it and approve it. But I just went ahead and published "Me and My Daddy." My mom is very upset about it. My nephew, Mikey, I told him the story would be in the book, and he was all excited and he loves a story. He's 14 now. My brother Michael doesn't seem to care, but Michael's about to die. He doesn't seem to really care that much about anything.

KM: Oh, that's sad. That's so hard. So did you go to Al-Anon or things like that just to help you cope, or did you just sort of go into your writing?

AP: I didn't just go into my writing. I've done a lot of therapy; I've done Al-Anon. I have a strong spiritual practice. All those things have helped me. I'm not really angry at my brother anymore. But his addiction has destroyed him, destroyed my parents, and has now destroyed our family farm. And then there's Mikey. My main concern now is my nephew, Michael's son, and he's not in good shape. So it's just a huge mess, and um, yeah. You know.

KM: I know, we do know. And my husband, we've been really united, so it's really so far as just keeping our son out of the house.

AP: Good.

KM: Because we have to.

AP: Good.

KM: But it's been years and years and we think Jesus Christ, can't we be beyond this, but we can't be, because he's still in his addiction.

AP: That's right.

KM: And so we just…the more I focus on me and what I have to do and the girls; Lucy's 25 and Norah's 17. In the old days, I used to tell them, "Well you know, come on, he's your brother, we've got to pull together." But that's, the worst, that's like death, I can't do that anymore. So the girls are doing really well and they're strong. Lucy has a lot of anger because she's just two years younger.

AP: Oh God. Yeah.

KM: But they just get to feel how they need to feel. Otherwise the disease is—like well, you know, it just takes you. It will take you. It will take everybody down.

AP: That's exactly right. It does take everybody and it's not, you know—it takes you all the way to death. It's not just some psychological problem. I really admire you and Kiffen for handling it that way because I know it's excruciatingly difficult, but yeah, you have to look out for the people who are healthy, including yourself.

KM: So how did it start for your brother?

AP: Oh, I think it started with pot when he was 14 or 15. There were a lot of drugs available in Romney back as far as the 70's because of our proximity to Baltimore and Washington. Michael was born in 70 and using by the mid-80's. He's always had a lot of anxiety, he was shy, so he self-medicated, and then it turned out he had the addict gene. What about your son?

KM: That's the thing—he was not shy. He was the performer. He was in like Battle of the Bands in high school and was an actor growing up, and very charming. I'm sure it was self-mediating too. I don't know. My brother-in-law died of it, my aunt—I mean we have it on all sides. We come by it honestly.

AP: We do too.

KM: But I thought if you raised them in an environment where we really celebrated them—I mean, we really celebrated our kids and tried to see them and encourage who they were growing up. Their art was

on the wall, you know, their paintings and poems… I've got a sponsor tells who me, "Quit talking about the art table because it doesn't matter about the art table"… So I mean, yeah, and you just go back and keep thinking, what did I do wrong? And I think if there was a door I could go into or if I could just see him. He really—he did plays, he graduated from UCSB, he started working at Disney, he did a movie with Allison Anders, he went on a tour with a band for four months. He's done many, many things. And he's obsessed with Jean Harlow, obsessed. He was a huge reader as a kid. This is the one we thought would be giving all of us jobs, because he was a very gifted kid with a lot of sweetness and kindness.

AP: Wow.

KM: The disease just—it stole it. It just stole it. And you know, we finally had an intervention three years ago. My parents were there—I mean, Kiffen and my mom and dad and I all went to Betty Ford Family Clinic. That's a story.

AP: Wow.

KM: Well, he didn't go. Our son didn't go. So I was in these group therapy sessions having to, you know, talk to the empty chair.

AP: Oh God.

KM: It was crazy. But you know, the thing is—well, I used to try to write him letters, but it's like the words, the words meant nothing. And now I just send, I send a lot of pictures. I sent a batch from South Carolina while I was at the funeral because it's so pretty, the Low Country, you know… And he'll write back sometimes. So we do have communication with him.

AP: Interesting. And that's a really wise way to do it, yeah… Do you know what state he's in? He's in California?

KM: Well, he's in LA, and Kiffen—actually Kiffen and Lucy are both in LA at the moment. Lucy is an athlete, and she was playing basket-

ball in Chicago where she lives and blew out her knee badly. And she had to go back to LA because she's covered there under our insurance until she's 26 and she's got to have surgery, but she's—anyway, she was home and they saw each other and it wasn't good.

AP: So is Lucy—how much younger is Lucy than him?

KM: She's two years younger. She's a wonderful artist. Norah's ten years younger. Norah's a writer. She wrote an essay called "Qualify Me" and it's really heartbreaking, about being the little sister. I know that it made her—well, she's an easy teenager. I actually say "you can be wild before you go to college," but she doesn't. And that's a relief. I don't think I could do it again. She doesn't push it. She says, "I know, it's okay, Mom." It's only the two of us here so she has a lot of freedom. She's got great friends and it's just—I don't think she has the gene.

AP: Yeah.

KM: And I know Lucy doesn't because she's just very matter-of-fact and she surrounds herself by really good and strong people who care about her. She also doesn't stand for any bullshit. She's very protective of Norah and of us. It just makes her so mad. She's got a great loving heart too. I didn't understand addiction really until we'd been in it. It's not just about behavior and making stupid choices or what I think are stupid choices. They're really sick.

AP: Yeah. Wow, that's huge, Kerry, you guys have done so much work with this. Man, it's so hard.

KM: Those older Al-Anon ladies are so…I mean, I haven't worked all the steps or anything but I go and I just listen a lot. I see a lot of serenity there. And I told this one guy, I said, "But I write books for kids. Our boy was an editor and inspiration for so many stories and such a generous spirit. So how can he be an addict?" And the counselor said, "What's that got to do with anything? The disease doesn't give a shit." So did you ever think maybe you'd want to try writing for a younger audience at some point in addition to, kind of like *Where the Red Fern Grows* or something like that?

AP: Yeah, I have thought about that and I've played with it a little bit but I've had a hard time getting really deeply engaged in it. Although I still have that kind of a - I still have some ideas jotted down and stuff like that.

KM: The adult voice in your stories is so amazing. They're from so many places and have so many experiences, but I just thought, I could definitely see you writing an eleven-year-old girl or something like that.

AP: Well, that's encouraging. I definitely will hold onto that.

KM: I've started writing, because I have to teach it, picture books. It's like writing a 32-page poem because it's so mathematical, and the discipline of that has been—I thought, oh, you know, a picture book. That's so easy, that's a thousand words. And it's so hard. So, what are your writing routines each day? How do you carve out the time? Just to give students a sense of that.

AP: I get up and get some caffeine in and write immediately, because if I postpone it I usually don't do it. I'll find ways to distract myself or I'll start thinking in such a way that I can't get back to that more dreamlike state. So yes, I do it right away and I make myself do it for a couple of hours. And you know, if I'm lucky I'll do it for three or four hours, but I can't go much beyond that.

KM: Yeah. Have any kinds of conferences or writing retreats been beneficial to you? Do you find those helpful, or do you prefer to stay in your space?

AP: I think I'm different from a lot of writers. I'm pretty solo so I really don't do any of those things unless I'm teaching. I did go to Sewanee maybe fifteen years ago and I loved that.

KM: Who are some of your influences now as an adult? Who do you turn to for comfort, like, oh, God, I just need a dose of this? Is there a writer that feeds you?

AP: It's the same ones who have fed me for decades, Faulkner and Jayne Ann Phillips, and Breece D'J Pancake and Jean Rhys. Those are probably the four that I go back to over and over again. Jean Toomer, too.

KM: And can you talk a little bit about what you're working on now?

AP: I can talk a little bit about it. I'm in the very early stages of a nonfiction book about environmental devastation in West Virginia and the demise of my family. I see the destruction of West Virginia, as a kind of a microcosm and a forerunner of what is happening environmentally and economically on a national and global level. And then I see my family and their demise as a microcosm of Appalachia and the ruin of our culture. In addition to those two strands, I have a third strand which is about reimagining relationships with the natural world; developing new relationships with the natural world that will be more sustainable—physically, psychically—than the relationships we have with the natural world now. So I'm trying to do that and we'll see if I can pull it off.

KM: Have you read *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood?*

AP: Yeah, I need to reread it. That's a great suggestion.

KM: Are you involved with Silas House and that group of writers involved with mountaintop removal? I just wondered if you were part of that, because I know he's published a lot about it.

AP: Well, I know those guys and I've done stuff with them, and I've taught with them in places and read with them in places and I really admire them and really love them. I've written some journalism about mountaintop removal but I don't do it regularly. I prefer to work with the slower forms, fiction and creative nonfiction. You know, one of the great things about Silas is that he likes to be public and I'm pretty private so yeah, it's kind of hard.

KM: I'd like to link some of your other pieces here too. This is all so wonderful, Ann, thank you so much.

AP: You're welcome. And thank you.

More Ann Pancake links:

http://garev.uga.edu/fall13/pancake.html

https://orionmagazine.org/article/ann-pancakes-reading-list/

http://thebarking.com/2015/06/our-own-kind-by-ann-pancake/

https://grist.org/article/2009-11-13-jacklighting-appalachia/