

NICHOLAS ARNOLD & MICHAEL BACCAM

A Conversation with

Ann Pancake

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A native of West Virginia, Ann Pancake is the author of a short story collection, *Given Ground*, winner of the 2000 Bakeless Fiction Prize, and last year's novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, which, according to Rick Bass, "crackles with this century's great white background noise of loss, greed and dishonesty." Pinckney Benedict refers to Pancake as a writer "who sees with a lover's generous heart, with a prophet's steel-hard gaze." Pancake's rhythmic prose creates what she calls "background music" to her stories. Rooted in her Appalachian heritage, her fiction weaves precise language with vivid attention to place and complexity of character.

Ann Pancake graduated summa cum laude from West Virginia University, obtained her MA in English from the University of North Carolina, and earned a PhD in English from the University of Washington. She has taught in Japan, American Samoa, and Thailand, and her numerous publishing credits include *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Glimmer Train*, *Antietam Review*, *Quarterly West* and *New Stories From the South*. She's been awarded a Tennessee Williams Scholarship in Fiction, a Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writers' Fellowship Grant, the 2003 Whiting Award, the Glasgow Prize, and fellowships from the states of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

Ms. Pancake currently lives in Seattle and teaches creative writing at Pacific Lutheran University's low-residency MFA program. We met with her at Bluefish Restaurant in Spokane.

MICHAEL BACCAM

Would you say *Strange As This Weather Has Been* promotes an agenda?

ANN PANCAKE

It does promote an agenda, but I worked as hard as I possibly could to make it art, too. When I was writing my dissertation, I did research on political novels, especially those written in the 1930s, and I learned that many of them failed as art because their politics were their driving force, which made them polemical. When I went into this novel, I was really invested in the art. I knew for the novel to be successful politically, it would first have to be successful aesthetically. And it was difficult. The hardest thing was to get information about mining and mountaintop removal into the story organically. It was easier to capture the kids' lives, their fear and desire and guilt and shame. But some of the particular facts about mountaintop removal that are in the later Lace chapters—I still don't think those chapters are completely successful; I didn't incorporate the information organically. But, yeah, I guess it does have an agenda, although I think most books do.

BACCAM

Was it mostly the politics of the story that drove you?

PANCAKE

No, it was love of the land and the people's passion. Love of the land and my outrage over the way the people in my region are being treated. In *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, I needed to convey a sense of legacy to show what is being lost and why it's worth saving and what future generations are going to have when the land is destroyed. I guess what also drove me was my own grief over the loss of culture in Appalachia, the loss of the language, and the loss of civility and things like that. There are things West Virginians still have that have been lost to an extent in the rest of American culture—warmth and generosity and community spirit and respect and work ethic—and in Appalachia, these qualities are being preserved. I'm sure they're being preserved in other parts of the country, too, but in general, I believe they're in decline. So I think it's an expression of grief over the loss of some of these things.

I was raised on a farm, the seventh generation to have that land. My family had been there since the 1770s, and we were indoctrinated not to ever sell it. I think a lot of people in West Virginia are indoctrinated with the idea of holding onto land. Partly because a lot of it was taken in the past by crooks as part of this huge land grab. In the late 19th and early 20th century, coal companies would buy mineral rights to farmers' land and tell them they could go ahead and farm the land, that they'd just be working underneath them to get the coal, so the farmers would sell. Then strip-mining started later in the 20th century, and because the deed said the companies could get the coal by "any means possible," the companies would strip the land and the landowners were devastated. Natural resource companies swindled all kinds of people out of land in Appalachia. I think something like 75 percent or more of the land in West Virginia is now owned by private companies and that's partly why the industry has so much control in southern West Virginia, where they own an even higher percentage of the property. Anyway, that's one reason so many West Virginians value land and legacy—because they've heard again and again about the family farm that was lost.

NICHOLAS ARNOLD

Your work often mixes notions of God and land and nature so much that characters struggle to recognize the differences between all of these. Is this struggle representative of Appalachia?

PANCAKE

I don't think for most people in Appalachia there's any confusion about the three. But I think there is a sense that the land is—I don't want to say sacred—but for us land isn't just land, it's also family and culture and tradition. So there's a deep, passionate investment in the land. Most people keep their God separate, though. They're good Christians, and I was raised the same way, although my dad is both a minister and somewhat pantheistic, so that influenced me. Some of the mixture of God, land, and nature in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* just arises from my own experience and feelings. It's not fair to extrapolate from that to the beliefs of other Appalachians, and I feel guilty when people use my work to make generalizations about all of Appalachia. However, in southern West Virginia there's now a Christian movement to save the land, an anti-mountaintop removal movement. They won't say that

the land is God, but they'll say that the land is God's body, and we have to take care of it that way. More churches are forming alliances with environmentalists, and in this way the movement is fusing conservative and progressive politics. I think this is extremely important, and I think it's the only way we can get mountaintop removal stopped.

ARNOLD

How much of what you know about mining and its environmental impact came from your experience growing up in Appalachia?

PANCAKE

I lived in a coal mining part of West Virginia until I was eight years old, so I was introduced to strip-mining as a little kid. My dad was a part of this introduction. He used to take us to this beautiful mountain called Buck Garden, and then one time when we were up there he told us that we couldn't go again because they were going to strip it. He also once preached a sermon against strip-mining on the radio when I was about six. I was more interested in him being on the radio than in strip-mining, but I remember it well because before I heard him on the radio, I hadn't realized we had an accent. I heard him and I thought, Oh my gosh, we talk like *that*? So that stuck with me from a pretty young age. Then I moved to Hampshire County, where I lived until I was eighteen, and there's no coal there at all. Coal mining wasn't an issue for me again until I got involved in Appalachian studies in graduate school. Then in 2000, my sister Catherine decided to make a documentary about mountaintop removal and asked me to help her, and we went down to southern West Virginia and started interviewing and researching.

BACCAM

Do you associate the voice-driven qualities of your work with the oral storytelling tradition you grew up in?

PANCAKE

To some extent, yeah—oral storytelling in a really general sense. Especially with the older generation, there's still a lot of storytelling, a lot of flood stories and wreck stories and hunting stories and basic

gossip stories. But I think the voice of my writing derives less from the storytelling tradition than from the cadence and rhythm of the language in Appalachia, which I'm afraid is dying out. Younger kids are speaking it less. When I was a kid, we only got one TV channel—there weren't any satellite dishes—and I didn't have much exposure to the outside world. But now they've got all this media exposure, and the language is being rinsed out, homogenized. Anyway, when I'm writing, the voice I hear is not usually a voice telling a specific story. It's more the rhythm and cadence that I hear. And the poetics and the lyricism of the voice. The story comes later.

I think the language in Appalachia is more elastic than Standard English. Maybe partly because people there aren't as formally educated as people tend to be outside, the grammar isn't as strict and there's more flexibility—to both make up words but also to change and play with syntax. There's a great freedom in joining words together, compounding words, so when I make up words in my novel like “speak-taste” and “leaf-wait,” it's not that I've heard those exact words used by somebody back home, but I grew up hearing people make up their own words, along with more commonly used compounds like “gray-headed lady,” or “pitiful-looking,” or “big-bellied,” words like that. Also nouns and adjectives are sometimes used as verbs, like “I'm doctoring with that Indian man over in Winchester,” or “They mounded up the dirt real high,” and in my work that pattern shows up in sentences like “They rumored that dam to bust every spring” in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and “his longjohn shirt whitening a space in the dark” in *Given Ground*. Syntax, too, is looser in Appalachian English than it is in Standard English, so you can play with the structure of the sentence in ways that I think are more poetic and fit rhythm and cadence the way that I hear them.

ARNOLD

Repetition of words seems like a part of that voice—

PANCAKE

It's probably a poetic technique. If I was writing poems I would be able to use repetition and it would appear more conventional. For me, especially in the short stories, the primacy was how does it sound, does it sound right? And I'd read over and over again to get it to throb right

or thrum right, and I think the repetition helps with that. I want the story to feel like it has background music, and from that perspective, the repetition is kind of like a refrain in a song or a bass beat.

ARNOLD

You mentioned community and gossip earlier. How does a sense of community inform your work?

PANCAKE

I think community makes for good stories. I live in Seattle now and there's little unplanned community, so there aren't a lot of really good stories. Nobody knows what anybody else is doing, you know? If you have a tight community, everybody knows what everybody else is doing, and there are your stories. I'll hear stuff still. People call from Romney to tell me what so-and-so did. In a small community, you know what's going on all the time, people know everybody else's business. This is good if you have a problem, and it's good for stories. Of course, it's bad when you do something you don't want others to know about.

BACCAM

You've said you rewrite your stories completely instead of working mostly off of previous drafts. Is that something you do with all of your fiction?

PANCAKE

Well, I rewrite the stories completely, but as I do that, I am working off previous drafts. It's very inefficient. Usually the first drafts are just fragments, things that are most compelling from the voice I hear in my head. When I finish, I have to go back and do a lot of work to craft transitions, to pull everything together, to make the piece cohere. I rewrite the whole drafts longhand for the first four to eight drafts. I even did it with the novel, which is one reason it took me forever to finish it. I think I rewrite this way because it lets me sink back into the song of the piece, into the sound of the song, and it also helps keep the momentum going and holds the voice consistent. By the time I get to eight drafts, I'll usually go back and tinker with different parts. But when I'm rewriting, I'm not changing everything—I'm changing

a sentence here and a sentence there, a word here and a word there. So it's not always a total overhaul after the first three drafts.

BACCAM

Does your work help redefine how people look at Appalachia?

PANCAKE

I hope so. At least I hope it redefines the popular stereotypical understanding of Appalachia. Of course, the Appalachian writers who have influenced me most, the best of Appalachian writers, have already worked to redefine how people look at us. I'm thinking here of James Still, Harriet Arnow, Denise Giardina, Breece Pancake, Jayne Anne Phillips. These writers don't just reproduce the dominant paradigm of Appalachia and Appalachian people, and I resist that paradigm, too, but when you don't provide the familiar paradigm, it's harder to get published. Many people outside Appalachia, including editors and publishers, want to publish a conventional representation of the place because they feel it will sell better. And it probably does, but that doesn't make it good art or good politics.

I didn't know Breece [Pancake], but he's a distant cousin. He died when I was about sixteen, and I didn't know him, but he absolutely influenced me. He and Jayne Anne Phillips. When I was a kid, I didn't know any West Virginia writers at all. Maybe Pearl Buck, and she didn't really write about West Virginia. In college I realized, Here's Jayne Anne Phillips and Breece—see, we have a big inferiority complex in West Virginia because we're always being told how bad our schools are and how bad we are—and then here's Jayne Anne Phillips and Breece, who are about ten years older than me, and they went all the way through West Virginia public schools. They didn't go to Harvard or Princeton, they went to WVU and Marshall and they could write really well. This made me believe I could write well, too. The fact that Breece succeeded in publishing was an inspiration for me, but his language and sensibility affected me even more. Probably his sensibility has influenced me the most.

ARNOLD

Can you elaborate on the role of ghosts in your work?

PANCAKE

They come up a lot, don't they? They're not something I put in consciously. Especially in the short stories, I didn't work very consciously on anything. In retrospect, though, I think the ghosts represent loss. I've witnessed tragedies in my family, and the state of West Virginia has had more than its share of tragedy, and all that leads to an intimacy with loss. Then there is the loss of the culture, which I've already mentioned. There is the devastation of mountaintop removal, the cultural genocide there, but in the part of the state where my family's farm is, where I lived from eight to eighteen, there has been a huge influx of people moving in from outside, mostly from Washington and Baltimore. The economy has shifted from agriculture to second homes and retirement homes, and while the people moving in bring some good things with them, the indigenous culture is being lost. So I think the ghosts represent loss, change and death of culture, death of land and family members and tradition. But again, I don't really think about it in the writing.

I did hear a lot of ghost stories growing up, from babysitters, even from church. In the novel, some of the ghosts represent people who were forced to leave the land, and people from Appalachia never really leave, so there's a part of them that's left behind when they go out.

ARNOLD

Do you think the sense of anger toward the government is justified in your characters and the people of West Virginia?

PANCAKE

Oh my God, yes. West Virginia has been exploited since its establishment in 1863 when industrialists made it a state without even putting it up for a referendum—some local people didn't even know it was a state until later. The coal counties in particular have been horribly exploited. The coal companies have always been in bed with the government, and Appalachia has always been treated as a sacrifice zone by the rest of the nation. Appalachia has provided the natural resources for industrialization, the soldiers for wars, the workers for factories, and the nation has given almost nothing back.

BACCAM

You use many different narrators in *Strange As This Weather Has Been*. Did you know that you were going to structure the novel this way?

The novel started as a short story. I started writing because my sister was making *Black Diamonds*, a documentary about mountaintop removal. I went down to southern West Virginia with her—at the time I was living in Pennsylvania—and we interviewed a lot of people, and it completely blew me away, both the devastation and also local people’s reaction to it, the way they were dealing with it. One afternoon we interviewed a family that had three little boys—actually their cousins were there too, so five little kids and I ended up in the back of a pickup truck. They lived at the foot of a valley fill like the one I described in the novel and they kept telling me how they wanted to get up on the top of the valley fill so they could see what was behind it. They were scared it was a coal slurry impoundment, one of the big wastewater lakes that they have all over central Appalachia now. The road to the valley fill was behind a locked gate, and they told me how they got a blowtorch, and “Daddy did this” and “Daddy did that,” and Daddy busted through the gate and then they got through. Once we got up to the foot of the valley fill, of course we couldn’t see what was behind it, and one of the kids said to me, “I’m gonna take my four-wheeler up there,” but I knew he could never do that, and another one, a ten-year-old, kept saying, “This is dangerous. This is dangerous.” All these little kids crawling around on big rocks off the mine with blue and green and purple oily water around them. I’ll never forget that day.

A few weeks later, I started writing what I thought was a short story based on that experience, from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old boy. I’d never considered myself a novelist—I’m voice-driven and language-driven, and I’m not good at plot. I started writing the story from the fourteen-year-old boy, who eventually morphed into Bant, a fifteen-year-old girl, and after I wrote that story, Dane started talking, the fearful one, and then Corey came into the picture. None of the kids in the novel are based directly on the kids I rode with in the pickup that day, but that day moved me deeply and triggered the stories. I started with those three characters and the stories kept getting bigger. I realized the subject of mountaintop removal couldn’t be contained in a short story.

But, to be honest, because I was a short story writer who didn’t know how to write a novel, writing the novel from different perspectives came easier to me. It felt more like writing a series of short stories or novellas. At the same time, I wanted a lot of different perspectives because the experience of living with mountaintop removal is too huge to be told effectively by one person. I wanted Dane’s fear, I wanted Corey’s

love of machinery, I wanted Bant's desperation to find out, and also her love/hate relationship with the miner boy, and also her love of the land—the younger kids don't have that love of the land; they were in North Carolina when they were little, and by the time they got back to West Virginia, so much had been destroyed. So I wrote them. I wrote Avery because I needed the perspective of a local person who also knew what it was to live outside and who knew the history of the region. And I wanted to include the Buffalo Creek disaster because so many people you talk to in southern West Virginia will say, "This is gonna be another Buffalo Creek." They're terrified that the slurry impoundments are going to break and cause another disaster, another Buffalo Creek.

Mogey came three years after I started the novel, after I interviewed a guy in Raleigh County. Part of the reason I included Mogey is because I didn't want the males in the novel—I didn't want it to be like "Women love nature and men are against it." Jimmy Make is based on a lot of guys I grew up with, and I love Jimmy Make, but he's not a good representative of some of the men in Appalachia who are very powerfully fighting mountaintop removal.

In the original full draft of the novel, I just had one Lace chapter—I wanted Lace to give some regional context and to give the background of this family. I had an agent who tried to sell the novel, and at that point I only had one Lace chapter, and the agent couldn't sell it. After a frustrating year of revising for the agent and for an editor who hadn't given me a contract yet, I gave the manuscript to a poet friend, and he said, "This is a great novel, but you've got to expand Lace, you've got to tell her whole story." Then I spent a year doing that. I took the thirty page Lace chapter I wrote originally and stretched it into the eighty or hundred pages Lace has now. I pulled the chapter out, broke it up, drastically expanded it, and then threaded it back through the novel.

BACCAM

So you had different strands you cut together in revision?

PANCAKE

I wrote the kids' stories first, and I wrote them more or less in a linear fashion, sometimes writing one character's chapters consecutively, sometimes taking a break and working on another character instead, if I got bored. The kids' stories were more or less interwoven from the get-go. But originally, I wanted each adult to have just one chapter—at

that point, Lace had one chapter, Jimmy Make had one, Avery had his, and Moge had his—and then I had to figure out the best placement of their stories within the kids’ stories. And then when I expanded Lace, which was the last part I wrote, I had to thread it through the whole thing that was already present. That caused organization problems.

Many people have asked me why Jimmy Make doesn’t have a chapter. In the first full draft, Jimmy Make had the final chapter in the book, an epilogue. However, several readers thought the epilogue was anticlimactic, thought ending with the Bant chapter was best, so I dropped the Jimmy Make chapter.

ARNOLD

Lace and Bant are the only characters who speak in both first-person and past tense. Why did you develop that kind of voice for them?

PANCAKE

I write tense and point of view intuitively at first, then I’ll go back and change them if it seems the piece will be stronger in another tense or point of view. But I think I needed Lace and Bant in first person to capture their language and the idiosyncrasies of their perspectives. Corey and Tommy aren’t as self-conscious as Bant and Lace, so to have written their perspectives in first person would’ve been too limiting. Lace has to be in past tense because she’s telling everything that happened from the time she was eleven up to the present. With present tense you gain immediacy, but you sacrifice the ability to give a whole lot of context. And I wanted Bant to have a sense of history, too; even though she’s fifteen, she’s got this pretty long history with the grandmother that’s important to the story. Corey and Dane also tend to experience things very immediately. There’s not a lot of reflection; they’re just living their lives. So that’s one reason I wanted them in present.

BACCAM

In some of those perspectives, specifically Moge’s and Avery’s, you enter their consciousness rather late in the novel. Was that a risk?

PANCAKE

Yeah. But I needed to tell Mrs. Taylor and Dane’s story before I could tell Avery’s story. Also, I had to build up everybody’s fear about

the present circumstances before I brought in Avery with the regional history. Otherwise, I don't think a non-Appalachian reader would care as much. Avery's chapter is sort of a watershed. It's kind of a hinge. In my imagination, the novel builds to that chapter, and then after that everything happens a bit more quickly and finally resolves. I tried Moge in a couple of different places; I switched him around a lot. Ultimately, I decided he needed to be in the middle, too, after I'd firmly established the kids' stories and a sense of the destruction of the place. Moge and his spiritual connection to the land follow naturally as a counterbalance to Bant and Corey's first full-on look at the mining site.

BACCAM

You make a point to portray the men in *Strange As This Weather Has Been* as "babified," compared to the stronger female characters. Do you think that's a general Appalachian issue?

PANCAKE

Moge and Avery *aren't* babified. That's one reason I put them in the novel. I didn't want the reader to assume that Appalachian men are in general "babified" just because Lace perceives Jimmy Make that way. However, through Jimmy Make and some other characters, I wanted to show how shifts in economics in Appalachia cause a kind of emasculation in some of the men. Now a lot of wives are the breadwinners because they do the white-collar jobs and the service industry jobs, whereas the men, who traditionally worked in mining and logging and manufacturing and farming, are now more temporarily and seasonally employed. So men have lost some power, control, status, because they've lost work, and I wanted to illustrate this through Jimmy Make. He lost his job and he wants to work, but he won't take a minimum wage job because that would hurt his dignity, and Lace won't let them move back to North Carolina.

ARNOLD

Your characters in general, especially in *Given Ground*, seem to share a need to leave the land, even if they feel there's nowhere else to go. Do you think this constant struggle is needed for them to fully develop?

PANCAKE

The struggle to leave the land that arises in them is probably more from my subconscious than anywhere else. The characters both love their places and hate them, need to leave and need to stay; there's a kind of cultural dissonance or biculturalism that they either are trying to negotiate or have failed to negotiate. I didn't do that deliberately for character development. I think it's more a testament to my own struggle, first growing up in West Virginia and wanting desperately to leave, but also being scared about leaving. Then there was the actual leaving. I didn't realize that Appalachia had its own culture until I left it. I just thought we were like the rest of America. Yeah, I knew our state was poorer than other places and I knew that people always made fun of us, but until I lived in Japan and then in other parts of the U.S., I didn't recognize the distinct culture we had in West Virginia. During the years I wrote the stories in *Given Ground*, I lived in Albuquerque and American Samoa and Thailand and Chapel Hill and Seattle and Pennsylvania. I was all over the place. And the moving in and out, in and out of Appalachian culture, and the learning how to negotiate all those other cultures, including dominant middle-class white American culture, was really hard for me. I think that's where the struggle in the characters comes from. But I also believe my struggle is one a lot of Appalachian out-migrants share.

BACCAM

Do you feel the need to return?

PANCAKE

I went back for a year to work on the novel and lived in Charleston. I love being back there; I hope to move back to West Virginia eventually. I have a lot of family and friends there, and I do go back to visit twice a year or so. But it's difficult to find good-paying work in West Virginia. To be honest, the colleges there, they have really heavy teaching loads, and I can't do that and write, even if they'd hire me. Then there are the politics. West Virginia has a lot of progressive subcultures, but overall, it's a conservative state, and the way industries treat the people and land is really outrageous and depressing. But I miss West Virginia. I feel guilty about not being back there and doing more to help.

BACCAM

Is it difficult to write from the point of view of characters in hopeless situations?

PANCAKE

There were times when I was writing *Strange As This Weather Has Been* when I had to stop because it was too painful, but usually that was because there was something else going on in my life that rubbed up against my writing. But I don't see, can't see, the characters in the novel as completely without hope. It is true that their situations are desperate and painful, but generally writing from such points of view makes me feel alive and passionate. To write about such characters fires me because they make me feel like my writing matters, that it isn't superficial or trivial. In addition to that, almost all of these characters are based on a part of me, so maybe that's one reason why it's not as difficult to write from their points of view. And in terms of narrative momentum, loss and desperation are what drive my plots much of the time.

ARNOLD

How does alienation figure into your work?

PANCAKE

Part of it is feeling like an outsider because of West Virginia being considered lower by the rest of the country. And you have to keep in mind that I was middle-class—I wasn't poor—but I still had this idea of inferiority because I was a West Virginian. When I first went to grad school out of state, I always had the feeling that I was the dumbest person in the room because of where I came from. I've always felt alienated, even when I was a little kid. I read all the time, I was really nerdy, you know, and bookish, so I felt like an outsider even within the community. And then I leave and I'm an outsider everywhere else for a different reason. [Laughs.] So I think that's part of my fascination with alienation, but there's also the fact that alienated characters carry a lot of narrative tension—they contain conflict, generate conflict, find themselves in charged situations—and it's interesting to see what those characters will do in response to their alienation. Hopefully interesting for the reader, yes, but also for me—for me, I want to know what Jolo's going to do, where he'll take me next.