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Interview with Anne Valente

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An Interview with Anne Valente

Anne Valente's debut novel, *Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down*, was released from William Morrow/HarperCollins in October 2016. Her second novel, *Utah*, is forthcoming from William Morrow in early 2019. Her first book and short story collection, *By Light We Knew Our Names*, won the Dzanc Books Short Story Prize (2014), and she is also the author of the fiction chapbook, *An Elegy for Mathematics*, which has been re-released by Bull City Press in 2017. Her fiction appears in *One Story*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*, among others, and won Copper Nickel's 2012 Fiction Prize. Her work was selected as notable in *Best American Non-Required Reading 2011* and her essays appear in *The Believer*, *The Rumpus*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *The Washington Post*. Originally from St. Louis, she currently lives in upstate New York where she teaches creative writing and literature at Hamilton College.

***Gandy Dancer*: In your short story collection *By Light We Knew Our Names* (Dzanc Books), there are so many memorable characters, like Francie and her father in "Terrible Angels," or the young women in the title story. Can you talk about how you create and develop such a range of compelling characters?**

Anne Valente: Thank you for these kind words. For each story, setting and conflict often come to me first; I imagine a particular landscape or place, or else a particular situation, i.e. "What would happen if *x* happened?" From there, I then imagine how someone might react to that situation, and characters tend to be born out of how a particular someone might act or react. I'm

also drawn to language and lyricism and how a particular character's voice might interpret the world. In this way, characters also come for me from the rhythm, diction and syntax of the language.

GD: A number of the stories here make use of the first-person plural. Can you talk a bit about what this point of view offers? Why don't more writers use first-person plural?

AV: I'm not sure why other writers don't use first-person plural more often—maybe it's considered off-putting, or even clunky as a central perspective—but I love its use and what it can do. Who's telling the story always matters, and the social implications of a collective perspective are fascinating to me. A writer can play quite a bit with where the borders between the collective and the individual might rest, depending on whether there's an individual situated within the collective or if the narration never identifies individual narrators. A writer can also explore how events, traumas, or everyday experiences affect an entire community. There is a great deal of tension in first-person plural between what everyone is experiencing and what only a few of the collective are experiencing, and for me, it's a wonderful tool to employ in fiction.

GD: Many of the stories in *By Light* are coming-of-age stories. Is it difficult to get into the headspace of a young child or adolescent?

AV: The distance between adulthood and adolescence seems at times like it would be a bridge too far in trying to remember what it was like to be that young, but I feel sometimes like I've maintained a child's sense of wonder as an adult. The same fascinations occupy my attention now as they did when I was small—how spiders build their webs, what it's like to live in the ocean, whether there are any edges to the universe or if space just keeps going and going. For these reasons, getting into the headspace of a child doesn't feel insurmountable, though I want to respect each individual character and not solely make them a reflection of who I was as a child, and in some ways still am.

GD: As a woman writer, do you find it difficult to write from a male perspective? Are there any tricks to this? Is there anything you keep in mind while writing from a perspective not your own?

AV: When I began writing, I actually wrote far more male characters than female characters. I feared an audience assuming that my characters were autobiographical, but more than this, I think I also internalized that readers were more receptive to male characters—in other words, that male stories were the ones that mattered. Because I'd absorbed so many masculine stories, it didn't feel particularly difficult to occupy a male perspective, though certainly not all male characters occupy masculinity in the same way. However, I've since become far more invested in what it means to write an identity that I

don't share. We are essentially required to do this as fiction writers, but this becomes tricky when we are writing from a position of power or privilege regarding another identity. While I don't have any fast and true tips for how to write outside of one's perspective, empathy is at the heart of all good writing. To understand another character is to understand that particular character and not what we assume their gender, sexuality, race, age or ability represents.

GD: Many stories feature the use of the fantastical or supernatural. One of our favorites was "Dear Amelia," which explored humans turning into black bears in the backwoods of Maine. Tell us the truth, were you a Sci-Fi fan growing up? How do you see the realistic and supernatural working together?

AV: I actually never watched or read much science fiction, but I devoured ghost stories and urban legends as a kid. I've found that many of the things I was most interested in during childhood—the supernatural, the world of science, the insects and trees in my backyard—continue to make their way into my writing and what I most love. I don't really see realism and the fantastic as diametrically opposed but instead a spectrum along a border, and for me that border has always been relatively permeable. Science fiction, the supernatural, and magic realism can all be incredibly subversive, and, for me, they've become a tool of exploring alternative narratives to dominant modes of history, culture and human thought.

GD: Were some stories in this collection harder to write emotionally than others? We're thinking of "Minivan" and the title story, in particular. Is there a certain headspace that you must be in to write these type of stories?

AV: Some were definitely harder than others. The title story felt especially difficult, given the world these young women must live in—and despite the extreme nature of it, how that world parallels our own. At the time of writing the story, I was noticing a lot of silence in my personal and professional life around sexism and sexual violence against women, and I wanted to create a world on the page where it could no longer be ignored.

GD: *By Light* came out in 2014, and then your first novel *Our Hearts Will Burn us Down* (William Morrow), was published in 2016. It started as a short story. Can you talk about the process of developing the story into a novel? What were the challenges in that?

AV: I never thought I would develop a short story into a novel, as every story that I've written has always felt done to me, or else written as its own, contained world. However, I wrote the short story version of "Our Hearts Will Burn Us Down" shortly after Sandy Hook, and as I watched the news cycle quickly forget yet another mass shooting—and one of the worst mass shootings we've seen—the story felt undone to me. Since the short story was centered on elementary school children, it was a challenge to modify that world

into a community of high schoolers for the novel. I'm also pretty invested in lyricism in short stories, and I wanted to maintain that kind of prose for a novel without overburdening the reader. A greater emphasis on plot had to factor into a longer work as well.

GD: Can you tell us a bit about *Utah*, your forthcoming novel? We can't wait to read it! Does it also meld the real and the fantastic?

AV: Thank you! The forthcoming novel does meld the real and the fantastic, to the extent of the kind of world the characters occupy. *Utah* takes place in a present-day world where planes are beginning to fall from the sky due to global warming and erratic weather patterns. As a result, two sisters must take a road trip to their mother's funeral. One sister is a former NASCAR driver, and the other has just been released from prison for having burned down a library. It's a strange narrative in pulling together so many strands of research that I knew nothing about before beginning to write: American racing, paleontology, falconry, geocaching, women's prisons. But it was an adventure to write.