

Blake, Jason; Abdou, Angie

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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2021, vol. 16, iss. [1], pp. 5-12

ISBN 978-80-280-0035-6

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/CEJCS2021-16-1>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/144900>

Access Date: 20. 08. 2025

Version: 20220831

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“the wisdom of the body” An interview with Angie Abdou

« la sagesse du corps »
Entretien avec Angie Abdou

Interviewed by / Interrogée par Jason Blake

JB Angie, you were born in Moose Jaw, but you’ve lived all over Canada...

AA I haven’t thought of that much because I’ve been in Fernie a long time now, but I was born in Moose Jaw, went to the University of Regina, then went to graduate school at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, and then moved to Calgary where I eventually finished my PhD. But I’ve taught at Nipissing University in North Bay and I’ve taught in all sorts of places. I’ve covered most of the main regions of Canada

JB You’re out of the literary limelight, given the cliché that writers have to be in Toronto. Do you see any differences in writing scenes in terms of say, getting invited to events and such?

AA For a long time I felt like I’d made a real career sacrifice living in Fernie. I felt left out of various writers’ circles or events or cliques. Also, I do a fair amount of CBC work – reviewing books – and I thought, oh, if I lived in Toronto, I’d get to do more interviews on the CBC, but it’s always difficult because I’m so far from the studio. For sure, if I lived in Toronto, I’d be more in the loop, but here I am so remote. And sure, I think there is some truth to those thoughts that I do miss various opportunities. But one time a writer friend, Patricia Westerhof, said, “On the other hand, there’s something unique about you being the writer for the mountains.” At the time, she lived in Toronto on the same street as Dave Bidini and Paul Quarrington and Anne Michaels – she could name seven amazing writers just in her neighbourhood! So she said, “How do you stand out when that’s where you live?” There are challenges to that too. I try to think of it like that, in terms of the advantages of not being in Toronto:



I have something different to offer Canadian literature writing from the mountains and from a small town that's 300 kilometres from a major centre, and a very long ways from Toronto. I've also tried to build a book community here. I run a writing series called BOOKED! where five times a year I'll bring in a very well-established writer to the Fernie Heritage Library. We have a band and a bar and there's socializing, and then I'll interview the writer for an hour. Steven Heighten is coming next week, and we've had Esi Edugyan, and Sheila Rogers came once and we packed the place; Joseph Boyden came once. David Robertson is coming in February. He just won the Governor General's award for *The Trap Line*. BOOKED! is a bit of a who's who of Canadian Literature and it's always fun to announce the line-up each year.

JB That's super!

AA I also do a monthly CBC column on Daybreak Alberta, where I recommend Alberta books. Publishers are very grateful for that because it's hard for people outside of, well, it's hard for anybody to get book publicity right now. It's been cut so far back. And for people outside of Toronto, it's extra hard. So to bring attention to Alberta books, it feels like a nice way to give back to my more local writing community. It also makes me feel part of a larger writing community, even though I'm living over here in a small town in the mountains by myself. True.

JB Where I live, in a town in Slovenia, I always feel that you hang around with writers and the like on a weekly basis – even if I know it's not true.

AA And I feel that way when I think about Toronto, like I'm being left out of some massive social circle, that people are having these conversations about crafting creative writing and the industry and their work in progress. When we're in reality, they're all running around like me getting groceries and taking their kids to hockey practice, trying to fit in a workout and trying to do their day job and trying to find time to write and walk their dogs.

JB Life tends to follow you around wherever you are, whatever country or place you move to. Let's talk a bit about sports. There's lots of sports in your writing, from *The Bone Cage*, to *The Canterbury Trail*, to your two memoirs: *Home Ice: Reflections of a Reluctant Hockey Mom* and *This One Wild Life*.

AA And even before that, in *Anything Boys Can Do*, there's the title story about girls wrestling back when girls' wrestling was pretty new. Yeah. [JB waves his copy of *Anything Boys Can Do* at the computer screen] Wow. That's a rare copy. Those are pretty much gone.



JB It's a fine book. How do sports and writing connect for you? And keeping in mind that I'm in Europe, where there's a real snobbery. You have sports on this side and ...

AA I think here, too, there's a snobbery, so you're right. There's wrestling in *Anything Boys Can Do*. There's wrestling and swimming in *The Bone Cage*. There's skiing in *The Canterbury Trail*, and in *In Between*, the novel about Filipino nannies, there's a bit of triathlon and hot yoga. Then there's *Home Ice*, about hockey, and *This One Wild Life* is about hiking. So much sports! I think that the same snobbery of that mind-body dichotomy exists here, as if it follows the jocks-versus-bookworms divide right back from high school. I started writing about sports with *The Bone Cage* just because I felt there was a story there that nobody had told: when we look at sports, we look at the gold medal story that ends on the podium and I thought, wow, that's a rare story. What about the more common story? All those people who don't end on the podium and what they make of all those years of commitment afterwards and how they transition to life after sport and what that says about the relationship between our bodies and our identity?

JB Sports are of course a big part of your life ...

AA That's true! I've only recently started noticing how much sports is a big part of my life. Of course it filters into my work. I feel like being less apologetic for that. In the past, I did have moments where I thought, oh, I'm outgrowing this little sport thing. And then of course I'm not. Sports are such a big part of my life and my children's lives and the way I think about our relationship to our bodies and our relationship to finding meaning in life and how important goals are in terms of giving life a direction and momentum and, well, almost everything that's important to me in life. I can understand most of my preoccupations in life, most places I find meaning in life, by relating them back to the sport discipline work ethic.

JB I agree with you on that! By the way, you spent loads of time in the pool as a swimmer. Do you have any regrets for those hours spent looking at the bottom of a pool?

AA No. In fact, I've rediscovered swimming lately. I'd stopped for a while. After I had my second child, I just didn't swim as much. And then my shoulders were really bothering me and I thought, this is it, they're finally done. But I think actually my shoulders were sore and objecting to not swimming. Now that I've gotten back into it, my shoulders feel awesome. Also, when I'm doing something active, my imagination, my mind is less busy, and my imagination is free to wander. And it grabs onto all kinds of stories and characters and themes and things I want to explore. I may have never been a writer if I hadn't spent all those years looking at the bottom of the pool.



JB In your works, you look at the good and the bad in sports, especially for young people. In the hockey book you mention that many players take not making the team, take being "cut, as a permanent label of 'YOU SUCK.'" *The Bone Cage*, meanwhile, begins in a sauna, with wrestlers sweating off weight, which is totally unhealthy.

AA Yes. People were dying for a while in the States one year. They put on plastics and then they sweat as much body weight as they can so that they can make a lower weight and then they drink a bunch of water so that they're heavier. And then they wrestle. Some people thought the deaths were connected to a popular supplement that stopped them from sweating as well as they should, impacted their natural cooling systems to an extent that their hearts simply overheated in their chests.

JB And then in *The Canterbury Trail* you have the dropout hippies and one character says, "This forest will be gone in a year [...], all condos" – that is, the trees are cut down for sports and recreation travellers. Do you consciously balance the good and the bad when it comes to sports?

AA If someone read my books, they might think that I'm really depressed or critical or something. Actually, I think that I'm a pretty joyful person who gets along well with people and likes others. I have wondered why my books always have this dark side. I suppose, though, when I think about the books that I like to read, the literature I like to read, it's always questioning and troubling and pointing out weaknesses of fallible human beings. I guess if you're not doing that, you're kind of writing a Hallmark card.

JB In *This One Wild Life*, you write, "My favourite writers whose books focus on the places in which they lived — Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Sharon Butala — all experienced shunning at home."

AA It's quite painful to hear about the way Margaret Laurence felt in her community. My mom and I were at a festival once and Sharon Boutella was reading from her stories set in East End, Saskatchewan. My mom said, "There must've been some people who didn't like you in this town after those books were published." And she said, "Oh, nobody likes me there!" Perhaps that kind of ostracization is an inevitable part of being a certain kind of writer.

JB You know, I'd forgotten how many genres you've worked in. You've have a PhD in medieval studies, then you have the short stories and a quartet of novels, and the two recent memoirs. Is there one genre you feel most at home in?

AA I miss writing fiction. Short stories I find hard. When I get a fiction idea, it seems to grow into a novel. I love the idea of short stories. They're just so concise and per-



fect. A good short story is perfect – when you read one and you come to the ending and the whole thing is more resonant in retrospect, and you kind of hold it all in your head. I love that feeling of reading a really good short story. It’s an art form I admire a lot. I miss the magic of fiction, I miss characters and scenes coming out of nowhere and feeling “Where did that come from?!”

JB Does any genre come more easily?

AA Nonfiction comes quite easily to me. I found *Home Ice* and *This One Wild Life* to be a very natural form for me because I didn’t have to make anything up. I got to use my background of being an academic to research and blend in quotations and little tidbits of wisdom and knowledge throughout the more personal stories of *Home Ice* and *This One Wild Life*. I found those two easiest to write but harder to publish. When fiction comes out, I do feel a bit exposed and nervous and anxious, like I’ve just released my innermost thoughts out into the world for everybody to judge. But with nonfiction, it’s much more so because it’s my private life. It’s actually me on the page. I can’t hide behind fiction at all. I’ve also made my family vulnerable. That’s frightening.

JB I have *This One Wild Life* most in my mind – about climbing a peak a week with your daughter. How do you decide how much to let the research show without looking academic or losing control of your book?

AA I tried to think of that book as if it was a conversation with a really close smart friend who was very interested in what I’ve been reading. During editing there were chapters that either had too much or too little research, and I addressed that balance in the editing process. For me, the research is important in that kind of book, because when I’m reading a memoir, without research it feels kind of like navel-gazing. “Why should I care this much about your personal life? Boy, do you think you’re important!” So I wanted to use the personal story to pull the reader in and to have that feeling of an intimate conversation. It’s like saying, “Here’s a hard time I’ve been having, here’s a weakness, here’s a struggle in my life. Here’s a place I don’t know what to do anymore.” When the writer lets the reader in with that vulnerability, but then says, “Oh, and here’s something I read and here’s something you might want to read, and here’s an idea I found...” The secondary research kind of bolsters the personal by adding the credibility and advice of experts.

JB Several times I stopped reading *This One Wild Life* to check out the articles you refer to. You’re brutally honest in your two memoirs – both about yourself and your family. For example, you say you should have called *This One Wild Life* “What I talk about when I talk about dragging my two whining kids up the Juan de Fuca Trail in the pouring



rain." You talk about slipping out of social events to go to the bathroom and check social media. Yet you're writing a whole bunch about yourself without seeming egotistical or falling into the confessional mode – "Oh, look at me, I'm so bad!" – the way some celebrities do. But how do you know what to leave out?

AA I listen to my body. If I write something and it makes me feel queasy when I read it over and I think no, that's gross or that's too narcissistic or that's too confessional, it gets cut. But you can't think of a reader too much when you're writing because you'll end up posturing or you'll end up pulling back, being phoney.

JB Do you find it hard to be honest while writing?

AA I don't find it hard to be honest because I don't think so much of the reader in those early drafts. And then when I go back through, I listen to my instinct.

JB Some writer go too far when listening to their instinct. How do you keep this in check?

AA I think this comes back to the original question about the connection between sport and writing. A lot of time in society, maybe particularly in academic communities, we underplay the wisdom of the body. I'm learning to really listen to my body as I get older. If I'm rereading a passage in a book draft, and I get a shrinking feeling or an anxious feeling or, on the other hand, an excited feeling, I listen to those bodily reactions. There's a certain sensation I get when I read a passage of writing and I think, this is working – whether it's my writing or a student writing or a writer I'm editing. I've learned to pay attention to that feeling.

JB I'd like to finish off with the spiritual or natural side of things. *In Case I Go* begins "We quit the city to save our lives" – with moving to less urban surroundings. But more specifically, you have *This One Wild Life* and the encounter with the "old-growth cottonwood" whose branches reached out to you: "While I remained in a semi-dream state, the massive tree embraced me with unconditional love. A warm calm flooded through my body."

AA *In Case I Go* moves in a spiritual direction, by saying "There's more to life than we can understand." There's a spiritual dimension. How do we all carry the past, things that happened to our ancestors long before we were born? How do we relate to our ancestors who are no longer here? All of that's very spiritual. You're right: I hadn't thought of that connection to *This One Wild Life*. When I published *This One Wild Life*, a friend from Fernie interviewed me for my local launch, and he said it was my first book that had a spiritual dimension to it. In it, I tell the story of my relationship with



a tree that saved me from a crisis in my life. That was easy to write about because it was so unusual and amazing and expanding in the way I thought about things. For a writer to have something like that happen ... of course I want to write it down and think about it. Writing it down is easy, but that was one that was hard to share because it made me think "Wow, people are gonna think I'm cracked or they're going to think I'm super flaky." But in fact, I haven't gotten that response. I've gotten really lovely responses about it. When I'm having a hard time, people tell me "Go look at your tree!" That's nice.

JB Another line from *This One Wild Life*: "Among these trees, I can now achieve a facsimile of the feeling I experienced with my cottonwood: cared for, a part of something much bigger than I am."

AA I was recently in Banff during a hard personal time, and, looking up at the mountains, I had that same feeling. I love that sense of awe that I get when I look at the mountains and the sense of being small in comparison and aware of how short my life is in comparison. That sense of proportion makes me realize that, if I'm that small and my life is that short, just imagine how small this problem I'm having this week is. It's infinitesimal ... The massive, ancient grandeur of the natural world helps me with a sense of proportion, but also that sense of awe helps, just pulls me out of myself. That's what Iris Murdoch calls "unselfing" – that feeling you have in nature where the beauty pulls you out of yourself, your worries, your unproductive thought loops.

JB Even people we work with ... we have no idea about spiritual beliefs or anything like that. Nobody talks about it. It's the great big taboo.

AA And that's the funny thing about writing. That's a funny thing about writing a book like this. I write about that encounter and the spiritual experience I had with the tree, but I have never told my parents about it. They live with me half of the year. I had never told my best friends about it. My closest, closest friends would have learned about my spiritual encounter with the tree by reading – it's not the kind of thing you talk about without people thinking you've lost your mind. Yeah. But as I say, nobody had that response on reading or at least they didn't tell me that response. That's the funny thing about memoir is you share things that are so personal that I wouldn't even tell my own mother or my own best friend. And then suddenly they're in the world for anyone to read. But in a sense, it's easier for strangers to read that, because for a stranger I'm just a character in the book, but for, you know, my mom or my best friend, they're like, "Whoa, Angie's flipping out!" For them, I'm not a character in a book. I'm a real person. It's easier to have strangers read my memoirs.



JB A memoir is two different things, I guess. When you're writing, do you ever surprise yourself? Do you ever think Oh, that's me. I just wrote that.

AA Yeah, especially in fiction. In *In Case I Go*, the most powerful scenes came out of nowhere and I was very surprised at them. That's a feeling I miss – that magic. A character or whole scene comes from somewhere else, and the writing itself seems like a spiritual act, like I've accessed some other world. To a lesser extent in non-fiction, I have noticed that sometimes when I go back and read something I've written, I can find parts that strike me as having come from ... well, not from me. It might be a sentence that carries wisdom that I don't currently have and don't remember having, but I obviously had when I wrote the book and I'm like, “Wow, that's good advice! I think I'll take my own advice.”

ANGIE ABDOU / has published seven books – the short story collection *Anything Boys Can Do* (This-tledown Press, 2006), the novels *The Bone Cage* (NeWest Press, 2007), *The Canterbury Trail* (Brindle and Glass, 2011), *Between* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014) and *In Case I Go* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017), as well as a pair of memoirs: *Home Ice: Reflections of a Reluctant Hockey Mom* (ECW Press, 2018) and *This One Wild Life: A Mother-Daughter Wilderness Memoir* (ECW Press, 2021). Her website: <https://abdou.ca/>