

“Straddling Two Worlds”: An Interview with Ann Pancake

ROBERT GIPE

Ann Pancake grew up in Romney and Summersville, West Virginia. Her first novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* (Counterpoint 2007), features a southern West Virginia family devastated by mountaintop removal mining. Based on interviews and real events, the novel was one of *Kirkus Reviews*' Top Ten Fiction Books of 2007. It won the 2007 Weatherford Award and was a finalist for the 2008 Orion Book Award.

Pancake's short story collection, *Given Ground*, won the 2000 Bakeless Award, and she has also received a Whiting Award, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Pushcart Prize, and creative writing fellowships from the states of Washington, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Her fiction and essays have appeared in such journals as *Glimmer Train*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The Georgia Review*, and such anthologies as *New Stories from the South*. [For a more complete bibliography of her work, see pp. 194–97, this issue]. She earned a B.A. in English at West Virginia University and Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington. Currently, she teaches in the low-residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University.

Robert Gipe interviewed her on 13 September 2009 in Burnsville, North Carolina.

Robert Gipe: What brings you to Burnsville?

Ann Pancake: I was invited to the Carolina Mountains Literary Festival to give the keynote last night.

Gipe: What did you speak on?

Pancake: My novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*, mountaintop removal, a history of Appalachia, exploitation, insiders versus outsiders. The theme of the festival was “Mountain Mosaic: We all come from someplace else.” I talked about the contributions of those who have been here for several generations versus those who have just come in. And I described things newcomers can do towards fighting mountaintop removal, but also more generally to help Appalachia move forward into a more sustainable future. Appalachians have

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Ann Pancake

qualities that other Americans need. If dominant America would adapt certain Appalachian characteristics, the culture at large would have more life-sustaining qualities. I talked about the history of insiders and outsiders in the region. I talked about the phobia some insiders have about outsiders and the reasons for that, also my own experience with outsiders' condescension.

In the last 20 years, the eastern panhandle of West Virginia where I grew up has turned into a retirement, second-home community for a lot of people. There's been a transition from agriculture to second homes for people out of Washington and Baltimore. So I've had direct experience with a lot of the attitudes, including not just condescension, but a self-segregation where many newcomers choose to live parallel lives. Many people who moved there seem committed to replicating their suburb in West Virginia without having a lot of contact with local people except for doing business with them. So I talked about what people from outside could bring us if they were willing to be models of empowerment and offer ways to renew our confidence in ourselves, which I think Appalachia has problems with, not because we're fatalistic genetically but because of the historical trauma of the region, which makes it hard to not be resigned. If we have more confidence in ourselves and feel empowered, we'd be better able to move forward. So that was the argument I made about the insiders and outsiders.

Gipe: So tell me about where you lived as a child, and I was interested in

something you said about hearing your father preach.

Pancake: I was actually born in Richmond, Virginia, because my dad was in seminary. Both my parents were from West Virginia—five, six, seven generations back, depending on who you trace. We came back to West Virginia when I had just turned three, to Summersville, which is in the coal area of West Virginia. My dad took a Presbyterian church down there. When I was little, I was always on the periphery of coal. We didn't live in a coal camp. We lived in the county seat. So I had the experience of seeing miners in the grocery store covered in black after their shifts and being kind of frightened by that and also interested.

I went to first and second grade with some really poor kids from the coal fields. And I was around for the Hominy Falls mine disaster. I was five. It was [May 6] 1968. But I do remember hearing the sirens go off all day in our town, which was very unusual because we weren't a coal camp, and it was a bad enough disaster that they did. I asked my mom what was going on, and I remember her telling me that some men were trapped in an air bubble, which I was trying to figure out, you know, what was that? How could that be?

My dad used to take us out to a mountain called Buck Garden, a beautiful place. Then one day he said, "This is the last time we can come out here." I said, "How come?" I was about five or six. He said, "'Cause they're going to strip mine it." I said, "Well, what's that?" And he told me what that was.

Around that same time, he preached a sermon against strip-mining in the Presbyterian church, which took some guts because it was a middle-class church, and there were a number of people who were coal owners or operators in the church. If I had just heard it in church, I probably wouldn't have paid any attention to it because I wasn't very attentive in church. But they picked it up and put it on the radio. Then I paid attention to it 'cause my dad was on the radio. That was the first time I realized we had accents—when I heard him on the radio. So my dad taught me to have a pretty early consciousness about strip-mining. I was about six.

When I was eight, we moved out of coal country up to Hampshire County, which is agricultural, where my dad's people were all from. And I stayed there. That's where my parents still are, and a lot of my relatives are there still.

Gipe: Did your mom grow up in Hampshire County too?

Pancake: My mom grew up in Huntington. All of her people were from Cabell County, Lincoln County, Wayne County—they were all from down in there.

Gipe: What caused you all to move?

Pancake: My dad kept the whole time wanting to get back up there, and then at that time, in 1971, finally West Virginia got community mental health centers, and he moved out of being a preacher into being a social worker. He started working for community mental health. Then he got a job up in Hampshire County for that, so he took us back up home.

Gipe: Tell me about your siblings.

Pancake: I've got five younger siblings. I have a brother who's an actor in Los Angeles. And a sister who's a filmmaker in Baltimore, who made the movie *Black*

Diamonds, which was how I started writing this novel. A sister who's a social worker in Los Angeles. A brother who's still in Romney, West Virginia, and my youngest brother is a geologist in Pittsburgh. I'm the oldest.

Gipe: So what else about your childhood and how you grew up would give some understanding of you and your work?

Pancake: That's a pretty big question. I was raised on a farm that we'd had in our family since the late 1700s. So it was drilled into me how important it was and how we weren't supposed to sell it or develop it. That was a really

important influence in terms of my connection to the environment and to the land. We were walked around, shown where the boundaries were. My family talked about how we would not sell this land and how the land would always be there, although we had the big '85 flood when some of the land got torn out.

So there was that influence and the influence of being in the woods all the time. We lived in a house where a creek and a river came together below a big mountain. I was in the woods a lot when I was a kid, just played all the time in the creeks, the river, and on the mountain.

My parents were both readers, which was a big deal. That was not real common in my county. We had books all over the house, and that was an enormous influence.

We only got one channel on our TV because we didn't have any cable. At the time us kids were all angry about it constantly, but in the long run, it definitely helped make me a writer.

Gipe: Which channel did you get?

Pancake: Channel 3 WSAZ out of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Lots of James Madison basketball, which was always very disappointing.

Gipe: Did you grow up around your grandparents?

Pancake: Yes, I did. My paternal grandfather died when I was five, so I wasn't around him much, but my grandmother lived in town. I was around her all the time, and I was very close to my grandparents in Huntington. So, yes, my grandparents were a big influence on me. And I had a lot of interaction with aunts and uncles and cousins. Yes, a lot of extended family.



Ann Pancake (in cowboy outfit) on her 5th birthday, with brother Sam and sister Catherine.