

Simpson's winning ways

Anne Simpson has won an award for almost all her books, poetry and fiction, and could be in line for another with her latest poetry collection, 'Is.' Story by Thomas Hodd

Anne Simpson never imagined she'd become a writer.

I've reached her by phone in Halifax. It's a Sunday afternoon, and Simpson is in the middle of clearing out her office at Dalhousie University, where she served as writer-in-residence this past winter.

This is familiar territory for Simpson. Last year she was writer-in-residence at UPEI, and before that at the Saskatoon Public Library. She's also been writer-in-residence at University of New Brunswick Fredericton.

Not bad for someone who spent her early years thinking she would become a painter.

One of the compelling aspects about Simpson's poetry is how much it reflects her sensibilities as an artist. Not only does she offer readers vivid, original images, she also experiments with the placement of words and lines so her poetry seldom appears in single spaces along the left-hand margin. For Simpson, the page is more like a canvas than a piece of paper.

Simpson grew up in Burlington, Ont., a small city about 40 minutes west of Toronto. It was during her formative years that Simpson discovered she had a gift for the visual arts.

"I couldn't do math," Simpson chuckles. "And I always thought I would be an artist. I lived and breathed in colours."

Simpson did mostly drawings when she was younger, but soon developed a passion for working with oils. It helped that her mother was a painter and art teacher.

"My mother is an amazing artist," Simpson says. "I remember asking why she hadn't followed her gift when she was younger. But at that time female artists couldn't flourish in Canada."

After high school, Simpson enrolled in a fine arts program at Queen's University. But having been raised in a household of readers, she found the program's lack of humanities courses difficult to accept. So Simpson switched programs, and graduated with a degree in English literature.

Simpson didn't give up on her aspiration to become an

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artist, though. In fact, Simpson spent the next three years at what was then the Ontario College of Art. But she didn't find the work as satisfying her creatively.

"I painted really large oil canvases, but I remember thinking that I couldn't do everything in it," Simpson confesses. "There was more I just couldn't get at with my art."

Simpson then returned to Queen's University to complete a BEd. There she met Bronwen Wallace, a local poet who held writing workshops at Wallace's home. Simpson, who had recently begun writing poetry, decided to bring some of her work to Wallace's workshops.

It was an enlightening experience for Simpson, and inspired her to continue writing.

After graduating, Simpson spent two years working for Canadian University Services Overseas, teaching English in different parts of Nigeria.

In 1984, Simpson returned to Canada and began to teach literacy full-time in Kingston, as well as pursuing her MA part-time at Queen's University. She also got married during this period, so there was little time left over for creative pursuits.

"Writing was a bit tentative for me those years," Simpson admits.

Simpson's husband landed a teaching position with the English department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, in 1988. The move prompted Simpson to find some kind of professional or creative outlet.

"There's something about being pushed up against an ocean that makes you think 'Oh, I should start doing something,'" Simpson jokes.

She decided to enrol in a creative-writing course at St. F.X. There Simpson began to explore her abilities as a poet as well as a fiction writer.

Simpson soon published her first poem in the prominent



Anne Simpson released 'Is,' at the end of March. PHOTO: KARIN COPE

West Coast literary journal, *The Malahat Review*. Her first short story was published in Fredericton's long-running journal, *The Fiddlehead*, which at the time was under the editorship of Don McKay, himself a Governor General's Literary Award winner for poetry.

"I always think of Antigonish as the place where I began to publish," Simpson says. "Don McKay sent me a little note on a piece of paper, with a few lines scrawled on it, and I think I still have that note. His words were generous, and they were an impetus to keep writing."

The rest, they say, is history.

Simpson's fourth collection of poetry, *Is*, has just been published by one of Canada's preeminent publishers, McClelland and Stewart. And rightfully so.

Simpson has won a major award for each of her previous books: her first collection, *Light Falls Through You*, published in 2000, won the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award for best first book of poetry; her second collection, *Loop*, won the country's highest honour, the Griffin Poetry Prize; her most recent collection, *Quick*, won the Pat Lowther Memorial Award for the best book of poetry by a woman.

Not only does Simpson have four books of poetry to her credit: she has also published two novels, *Canterbury Beach* in 2001 and *Falling* in 2008, which won the Dartmouth Book Award for Fiction. She also won the prestigious Journey Prize for emerging writers in 1997 for one of her short stories.

What's it like winning awards for almost every book you've written?

"It's a bit disconcerting," Simpson admits. "It's wonderful to win, because it gives you confidence. But after winning, you run the risk of not going back to what is most important – the writing. Whether it's praise or criticism – both need to be deflected."

In addition to her accomplishments as writer, teacher and ambassador for poetry, Simpson will be a panellist on the inaugural CBC Canada Reads Poetry event, which takes place this month online at CBC Books. Simpson is defending a book of poetry by one of Canada's major contemporary voices, Anne Carson.

Given Anne Simpson's own literary success, it won't be long before someone champions one of her collections in an upcoming broadcast. She's that good. ☐

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If you are you a fan of Anne Simpson, let us know what book of hers is your favourite and why. And if you've read 'Is' let us know what you think of it. Landry.michael@telegraphjournal.com; Salon, Telegraph-Journal, P.O. Box 2350, Saint John, N.B. E2L 3V8; or www.telegraphjournal.canadaeast.com/salon.

The Following is an excerpt from Anne Simpson's 'Is.' 'In the Night Cathedral, A Tree' from 'Is' by Anne Simpson © 2011. Published by McClelland & Stewart Ltd. Used with permission from the publisher.

'IN THE NIGHT CATHEDRAL, A TREE'

Once, before waking, I saw the tree. Its branches could have been made by a jeweller. Wild dark, coyote dark, and a tree, glowing. Northern lights, ice-thin

music. No woodcutter in this story. Only the tree, taller than any other, inside you.

Not the one outside the kitchen window, skirts high above the ground. The tamarack's dropped needles, pulling gold threads under snow.

Not the Wonderboom, ancient fig, surrounded by its ring of daughters. Not the Dragon Tree of Icod de los Vinos. Not the Arbre de Ténéré, last acacia of the desert.

Inside the night cathedral of your life

is a tree without name—carrying the names of other trees—a tree candled, on fire, but not burning.

Brushed with radiance, each branch, each tassel, the tip of each needle.

