

John D'Agata

A _____ WITH ANNE CARSON

Near a river one Sunday morning, Anne Carson shrugged. I asked her for her thoughts about her family life, about where she grew up in Canada, about the effects of winter on her writing. She curled herself into a black ball of skirt and told me: “Fondly”; “Same town as the Cowboy Junkies”; “I like snow and I like white and I like pain-freezing cold and the way voices sound in hockey rinks.”

Anne Carson is a professor of classics at McGill University in Montreal. Long a distinguished scholar of Greek, she has only recently received acclaim for her “creative” work as well—we write “creative” because Anne Carson’s scholarship is as lucid as her poetry and essays, her essays and poetry as sharp as her scholarship. Indeed, the two are, for many readers, indistinguishable, although Carson often acknowledges using two different desks in two separate rooms of her house for her two kinds of writing—“scholarship” and “poetry.”

The recipient of fellowships from the Lannan and Rockefeller Foundations, two Residency Fellowships to the Banff School of Fine Arts, and two McGill International Travel Awards, Carson has also served as a consultant to “The Nobel Legacy,” a series of Public Broadcasting programs on the conflicting values of science and humanism. In 1986, Princeton published her groundbreaking work of Greek scholarship titled *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. Then came the book-length essay *Short Talks* (Brick Books, 1992), and most recently have come *Plainwater* (Knopf, 1995) and *Glass, Irony and God* (New Directions, 1995). A new work, *Greed: Simonides*, will appear in 1998.

In print for over a decade now, Anne Carson has given only one other interview: “The interview to end all interviews—almost four hours we talked! More of a conversation, really. I don’t think anything could top it. Do you want to start?” Anne Carson and I met on the steps outside of The University of Iowa’s Museum of Art in Iowa City, beside the Iowa River. She was on campus to give a reading at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her eighth. Ever.

I: Have you avoided interviews?

AC: I think I would avoid them if possible.

I: Why?

AC: It's like finding a good conversation—how often does that happen? No, I don't like them. I don't like thinking about myself, I don't like thinking about who I am. It's like watching yourself walk. You inevitably stumble.

I: It would interfere with your writing process?

AC: I don't think about writing theoretically. Always when I do it stops that line of exploration. I don't know. It stops something of the energy of the process, of the not knowing what you're doing, whatever it is you're exploring.

I: Is that the form itself? Is that the form of the essay?

AC: Well, it leads to the form, I think, by searching around what's not known. It informs what you want to say. It sort of has to circulate because if you knew what you wanted to do then that would be that.

I: Then what form would that be if you knew what you were going to do?

AC: If one were to just do it? I guess then it would be a treatise.

I: Okay. Back in time. Let's start with education.

AC: Education? Yes, I was educated.

I: Well, I mean, what happened after high school? For example.

AC: I went to the same place for all of university. The University of Toronto.

I: What was your major study?

AC: Classics. I went to Scotland for one year for my Masters, and then to graduate school.

I: Did you first start classics in high school?

AC: I did, oddly. Because my Latin teacher in grade thirteen (we have an extra grade that you don't) knew Greek and offered to teach me Greek during the lunch hour. So we did that for a year.

I: Wow.

AC: It was a little amazing. Her name was Alice Cowan. She subsequently went to Africa—and disappeared. I mean from my scan.

I: Why classics in high school? Why did you study it? Did you choose it or was it mandatory?

AC: No, we had an option. We could take Latin or typing. And I took Latin, and then I regretted it and did typing the second year, but then went back to Latin.

I: So you're who you are because you didn't want to take typing?

AC: No, I wouldn't say it that baldly. I like Latin. And it seemed the article of an educated gentleman. You know, you're really searching for your own roots here, John.

I: What?

AC: You're trying to decide whether you should go back to classics because you dropped it in college.

I: How do you know?

AC: I can just tell.

I: I am not.

AC: Okay. I guess you'd know.

I: Anyway. Would you have gone on to study classics in college if you had only studied Latin in high school and not Greek as well?

AC: I probably would have. I like Latin, and you can start Greek in university easily.

I: Is that entirely what you focused on in college, or did you have other majors and interests?

AC: No, I never studied anything else at all.

I: Really?

AC: Greek is so good, after you discover it there's no point doing anything else. It's really the best language in the world. It's better than Latin. Latin is good, but Latin is sort of a mathematics of thought whereas Greek is an art. It's just amazing. The day I finally come to the end of Greek I guess I won't go on doing it. But it hasn't ended yet.

I: You never had English literature courses in college?

AC: Well, I think I took a survey of English literature. Our first year we had to do a survey, which was really awful. I couldn't see any point to that. We did some Milton, and I remember I didn't like him. And I didn't see any point in studying a language as a subject.

I: You mean other than Greek.

AC: Well, yes. Something with some depth, you know? [pause] Well, I guess that's not fair. English is probably a very reasonable thing to study, but it seemed to me I could do that without special expertise. I could just take my mind and study Milton if I wanted to, whereas Greek I couldn't.

I: So all of these English writers whom you seem to know so much about, that knowledge just comes out of—

AC: It's fake. Totally fake. I note down the odd quote when I happen upon it, but I don't know much about English. Really shockingly little about English.

I: Is everything you want to read in English with a critical or theoretical mind automatically filtered through what you know about Greek?

AC: No, I think it's more parallel. Although the English side of it is just anecdotal information. It gives me a way of reading without focusing on anything. And sometimes I go and look up stuff.

I: So even when you were in Scotland you weren't studying English?

AC: Nope. Greek.

I: And because that's where all the best Greek scholars are?

AC: One of them was, actually. At the time, believe it or not. When I graduated from college I felt incompetent in Greek to do anything significant, so I thought the way to get competent was to study with a hard person. The hardest person in Greek was in Scotland at the time. I wrote to him and asked if I could study with him. They had this program at St. Andrew's for one year. He invited me and so I went to study Greek metrics with him.

I: He?

AC: Kenneth Dover. He was truly terrifying.

I: And this was when?

AC: 1975-76.

I: Right after college?

AC: Well, I dropped out of college after the first year, partly because of that Milton stuff and other things that seemed of little importance. I went to work, and then I went back to university for a second year, and dropped out again. Then I went to art school.

I: Oh!

AC: Which was even more boring, but not because of art. It was “advertising” art. I thought I wanted to get into the work force expeditiously, so I went for a year to get a certificate. We spent a year designing cereal boxes. It was horrible. So I went back to university and stayed in for the last two years. Then Scotland. Then back to Toronto for the Ph.D. And then I got some jobs.

I: Princeton, right?

AC: Calgary first, then Princeton.

I: Is *Eros the Bittersweet* a version of your dissertation?

AC: Yes.

I: That’s amazing.

AC: It’s juicy, yes. I still sometimes look at it with wonder. It was like following a path through the woods. I still enjoy reading it. I think partly because I had done so much work on the whole subject, the dissertation just made the book that much easier. The dissertation was this big [fingers inches apart] and when you think about anything for that long you get a whole lot of patterns and thoughts set that you haven’t articulated but are ready to travel along. So that was nice. I really enjoyed doing that.

I: What keeps you interested in classics?

AC: It’s just intrinsically interesting. It just seems to me the best thing in the world.

I: Suppose I haven't the foggiest. Explain to me what's intrinsic about it.

AC: When you're traveling around in Greek words, you have a sense that you're among the roots of meanings, not up in the branches.

I: Why?

AC: I don't know. Because they're pure, they're older, they're original.

I: Even though there are older languages?

AC: But they're not older in a continuous line. Well, maybe. Who knows? But as far as we can take any language back there is always a thing called Greek. And you can feel that sense of beginning from these people who were stumbling around in the world saying, "The name for this is blank and it's just the right name for it." More reality in the words. They just shine right out at you.

I: That's interesting.

AC: It's insatiable! Once you experience it it's addictive. Germans know this. That's why all those German guys keep going back and inventing philosophical terms out of Greek. It's qualitative, there's more life there.

I: Others would call it being closer to the garden. Smack under the tree, even.

AC: I'm not interested in using vegetable metaphors. It's more like mining to me. Mining metaphors work like the texture of the experience, like the ore of language.

I: The first human impulse to name. Is Greek the closest we can get to things?

AC: I think so. Though I'm not sure that linear time is more than a metaphor. It's really the quality of those words that's exciting. They are

early. We value earliness, we call it original.

I: Hmm.

AC: You're hesitating because you don't want to admit that you should go back to relearn Greek.

I: No. Get off that. I'm thinking about this really beautiful argument in *Eros the Bittersweet* about Sappho and friends being so close to their own origins. You say in there that it's no wonder so much of this early writing is love poetry, and no wonder so many of these love poems are so great. You say it's because there's perhaps no true lover suggested—no guy or gal that's literally intended in the poems—but instead that the real lover and recipient of this desire is language itself. At least I think that's what you say.

AC: Isn't that profound? See, you can have those kinds of ideas when you're young. So, yes, okay. That's good. I think I still believe that. Sappho is the best example, in my experience, of that original thing coming into the world. It's precious. It's like if you had a world of people who couldn't see colors and that world were just a black and white TV to them. Then someone came into the world and clicked on color. It's that much different reading the words we have in English compared to those in Greek. They're turned around, the Greeks. Homer talks about how people are situated in time. He says they have their backs to the future, facing the past. If you have your face to the past, you just look at the stuff that's already there and take what you need. It's not the same as us, facing the future, where we have to think about that [points behind] then turn around and get it and bring it here, bring it in front of us. So I think for someone like Sappho it's not a question, it's just original. It's what's there. It's a part of being.

I: When did you start writing?

AC: Second grade.

I:

AC: Second grade.

I: So is any of that in *Plainwater*?

AC: Not as such. I just remember writing in second grade every Friday afternoon. It was such a pleasure. We'd draw a picture then write on it and tell what it was.

I: Why was that pleasurable?

AC: How could it not be pleasurable?

I: Okay. When did you turn professional, then?

AC: I always wrote in little notebooks. I don't know. I'm not really interested in finding my beginnings.

I: You told me once that you keep two desks in your office. One for classical scholarship, one for creative writing. So obviously you're very conscious of having one part of your life be academic and one artistic. When did this start?

AC: That method?

I: Well no, not the method but the writing. There's a big difference between having a desk for one thing and a desk for another, and just having a notebook that you occasionally dip into.

AC: True. I guess after—. Well maybe I don't know that. I guess after *Eros*, after I wrote the *Eros* book. It was possibly the last time I got those two impulses to move in the same stream—the academic and the other. After that, I think I realized I couldn't do that again.

I: You could?

AC: No. Couldn't. Because I had developed a more mature method.

I: By separating them out on two desks?

AC: Yes.

I: Some people would say you're still doing it, though, that you're still working with both in the same stream. That there's no suggestion of two desks at work.

AC: No.

I: No?

AC:

I: How does the dissertation compare to *Eros*? Is it as lyrical?

AC: No. It follows a much more rigorous academic framework. All of the imaginative sections had to be forced into an appendix. There was an appendix on the brain, for example, wherein I argued that the acquisition of literacy had an effect on the formation of the frontal lobes of the brain in ontogenetic development in human beings. I read medical textbooks on neural pathologies and I ended up with a preposterous theory, but worked out in standard academic ways. When my dissertation director read it, he said, "Maybe this should go in an appendix." So we chiseled it out of the middle of my argument and relegated it safely to the end. This was before I had two tables. The two tables helped avoid those bonsai-shaped appendices.

I: But between the bonsai and the two tables was *Eros the Bittersweet*. You did manage it.

AC: It was my last flailing at holiness, so to speak, trying to make the psyche come together into one stream. It's what's called an essay also.

I: And it worked. I mean, it worked. That's what I'm trying to point out.

AC: But in the way that if you're not any good at doing high jumps and you decide you're just going to try it until you go up there and do one

perfect high jump, it worked, yes. But I couldn't go back and do another such jump. It was a one-time thing.

I: All right.

AC: I'm sure of this. Intuitively. It may not make any sense. But—

I: It's just fascinating to hear you say this because there are readers who would swear that you're absolutely still doing it.

AC: It feels different to me. For example?

I: For example, a tiny essay of yours appeared in *VLS* called "Economy," about Simonides and Cèlan. Just as an example. They're a lot of "ideas" in there, even if you don't think they're legitimate. On the popular front, though, like for the *Village Voice*, it's a sophisticated one-page argument. Plus it's gorgeous prose.

AC: I guess I'm thinking about the academic part of those frameworks. I know what went into *Eros the Bittersweet*—all the footnotes and bibliographies and research—even if it was only in the dissertation and never made it into the book. That's not what went into the "Economy" essay. Probably the same amount of mental energy went into it but not through those same channels. So perhaps it's a good thing that it doesn't show up in the final product. But I can't go back, that's what I'm saying. I can't come back together to replicate *Eros*.

I: Why? Why can't you come back together?

AC: I just can't. It's partly a function of age. You can do things when you're young that you can't do when you're older. You can't get simple again. Simple in a good sense, I mean. If you were to get out the essays you wrote in high school, some of them would strike you as profound and you'd wish you could do that now, but you can't do that now. Stuff goes down river and it gets dirty. You can't do clean things when you're old.

I: People still call “The Glass Essay,” for example, brilliant literary criticism and a brilliant poem, together in one form, in one consistent voice. I’m just saying that you might be the only one who thinks otherwise. Just let me say that. Just take it.

AC: Well. Then, it must be true.

I: You know what I mean.

AC: But, you see, this is another aspect of not knowing what you’re doing when you’re doing it. Here we are theorizing about something. Watching ourselves walk. So maybe these are the limits of that process. Maybe this is where it breaks down. Where it ends. Of course it would be encouraging if what you say is true. I’m just not sure it is.

I: Have you ever studied writing with anyone?

AC: No.

I: Do you have readers?

AC: No. I used to, but I don’t know what to do with their comments. I thought about keeping them and making a separate work out of them so that they wouldn’t go to waste.

I: A lot of your work, when I read it, feels very formal to me.

AC: Hmm. Okay, sounds good.

I: But I’m not sure what that form is. I mean, I can’t tell where it comes from, either in the essays or your poetry.

AC: Well, that’s because it arises out of the thing itself. They aren’t forms that are from somewhere, they’re just in there. You have to mess around until you find your form at the beginning, and once you find it you just follow it.

I: Does that also include facts in form? You told me earlier that you're more interested in an intriguing set of facts rather than a story, and that what you create when you write is more of a nexus for the facts, some kind of narrative, some kind of anecdote or scenario to fit them into. Does your form then originate out of those facts that you discover and become fascinated with?

AC: I think it does. I think if we take facts to mean stuff in the world, like the way a lake is is a fact, yes.

I: Is that what the form is trying to do?

AC: Yes, I think so. I think that that is a pure moment, when you see that a fact has a form, and you try to make that happen again in language. Form is a rough approximation of what the facts are doing. Their activity more than their surface appearance. I mean, when we say that form imitates reality or something like that it sounds like an image. I'm saying it's more like a tempo being covered, like a movement within an event or a thing.

I: Looking at most of your collected essays, just structurally or typographically, I see a lot of fragmented narratives. Especially those in *Plainwater*. Is that the effect of lots of facts at work?

AC: Facts are a substitute for story. Facts are useful to me because I don't have any stories in my head, so in the absence of story you can always talk about facts to fill the time. Right? I don't know what it has to do with fragmentation, though. What do you mean by a "fragment"?

I: Well, I don't mean that the narrative is fragmented, I mean the essays, with all their sections, work like . . . collage, maybe.

AC: Oh, I see. Okay. Well that's a true insight, I've always thought of it as painting. Painting with thoughts and facts.

I: Which is something that a straight narrative can't do?

AC: I would think not. Because in a straight narrative you'd have too many other words, too many other words that aren't just the facts. You're too busy trying to get from one fact to another by standard methods: *and; but; oh, no; then I was in this room; because; that's Patti*. These aren't facts; they're hard to paint.

I: That's interesting. Because if your passion is coming out of Greek and the rootedness of Greek, fragmentation seems like it'd be closer to the thing than a straight narrative, which as you say imposes too much of Writer onto the facts.

AC: Right. The meaning is all padded, costumed in normalcy. I think probably my painting notion comes out of dealing with classical texts which are, like Sappho, in bits of papyrus with that enchanting white space around them, in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we can't quite reach. I like that kind of surface.

I: Who influences you?

AC: Um, probably Homer the most. Homer is the most amazing thing in the world, in every way. I think everyone should read Homer a lot. Also presently I've been reading a lot of Cèlan. He's clarifying. There are other people but Homer is primal.

I: I think this might be sidestepping official interviewer protocol, but I'll bring it up anyway. I once wrote you a letter, kind of fan mail, I guess, asking whether you had writing students at McGill and what your writing process was like. When you wrote back you said, "I have never taught writing nor would I ever essay to do so. Not teachable."

AC: Well that's true.

I: Is that because you've never had a writing teacher and had to find your way on your own?

AC: I guess so. I don't think I would know how to go about it. It seems a completely individual thing. Completely idiosyncratic.

I: Do you ever comment on people's stuff?

AC: With reluctance. Because, again, I don't know what to say. I have to grade all the time in classics and I hate it. Because my only experience of getting to a way of writing when I want to write is to break rules or change categories or go outside where they say the line is, so how am I going to say to somebody else, "Now, here is the line"? It's dishonest. All I can do is say, "Find the line and go someplace else," which is not helpful. But I understand it is taught. I mean, it's taught here, right? So it must be teachable. I just don't understand how. Unless we mean by "teaching writing" just getting together and having insights about what literature is.

I: This question might annoy you but I want to ask it just because it's hot.

AC: Why don't you move, it's cool in the shade. You're in the sun partly.

I: No I mean hot as—. Do you know what I'm talking about? Is that a joke?

AC: No. Are you hot?

I: No, it's nice in the sun.

AC: Oh. Okay. I'm a very literal person. "It's hot." Does that mean this is a fashionable question?

I: It's an essay question, so . . . yeah. It's trendy to talk about, I think. In that same letter you sent me—

AC: It must have been creepy for you to get this letter.

I: Are you kidding?

AC: Well I must have been so discouraging.

I: No. I loved it. I was honored.

AC: Well that's nice.

I: So, in that same letter you explained to me your understanding of the essay. You said it was "an attempt to reason and tell," "to have something to say and to do so." Which I find interesting, especially as a student in one of these new graduate programs in nonfiction because there's constant chatter about what the essay is, and there's a very strong claim that the essay comes out of Montaigne.

AC: Hmm.

I: Rather than, say, Cicero, or maybe somebody even older whom you'd probably know.

AC: Not too much older. Plutarch, maybe. But, okay, Cicero.

I: And those are really two different worlds. I mean, you get in Montaigne a mind willing to change its mind and change the facts within an essay, or essay to essay, or from edition to edition of the same essay.

AC: Which is more like autobiography dressed up as community.

I: Yeah. And this seems to be used to justify the memoir craze in the U.S. at the moment, which really seems kind of—

AC: Appalling.

I: Well. Yes. And I think Montaigne lets us take very literally this sense of the essay as an attempt, a trial, or experiment. Which makes the essay a process rather than a product. And you don't get that in Cicero.

AC: No.

I: I mean, he knows what he's going to say before he takes out his reed.

AC: Yes.

I: So your quote—"to have something to say and to do so"—lands you more in that camp than in Montaigne's, I think.

AC: Thank you.

I: Is that because of your academic background or is it an aesthetic choice?

AC: I find that idea of the essay as self-exploration kind of creepy. Because when you write an essay you're giving a gift, it seems to me. You're giving this grace, as the ancients would say. A gift shouldn't turn back into the self and stop there. That's why facts are so important, because a fact is something already given. It's a gift from the world or from wherever you found it. And then you take that gift and you do something with it, and you give it again to the world or to some person, and that keeps it going. It's hard to talk about these things because I realize as I talk about them that the way I think about them comes from the way the ancients talk and think about language, which is different from the way we do. Because they have this word for grace, *charis*, which means grace in the reciprocal sense of coming and going. It's both a gift given and a gift received. The Greeks used the word for the grace of a poem, the charm that makes it a poem and makes you want to remember it. So for them to make a poem is to make something that will be so charming that it will be a gift that the world wants to receive and also give back precisely because it's so good. And that reciprocation keeps going and makes culture have substance, a coming and going. A memoir that goes back into me doesn't contribute to that exchange at all. These things that people are writing nowadays seem to me self-circling. A form of therapy. It's a way of writing without having to have any facts, so it's also just lazy. But disrespectful, mostly, which is more important than lazy, because in

order to just concentrate on yourself you really have to do a lot of ignoring of the world. The world is constantly giving things to you that you could be giving back.

I: Then what about the autobiographical element in your writing? How autobiographically are we as readers meant to take that “I” of yours?

AC: Just a part of the facts in the world. You know, like I’m a set of facts, the river’s another set, these steps are another set—and just use them all in some kind of democratic fashion. I don’t know how autobiographical I am.

I: I think you’re hedging.

AC: No, I’m not. That’s a big space, the “I.”

I: Okay. Next question. A friend asked me to ask you something.

AC: Does this mean you’re not responsible for it?

I: Yes, definitely. So, she asks, “Why do you choose to be erotically shocking at times?”

AC: I don’t know. It’s something to do. Maybe it’s a way of lifting the erotic material slightly separate from the rest of what you’re saying.

I: Making it shocking does that?

AC: Yes. It puts an electricity around it, as erotic experiences have around them. She would be a hard interviewer, your friend.

I: Probably. Well, more up front, at least. Now. In essays like “Kinds of Water,” the “I” reads specifically as an individual pilgrim. But there’s also a sense of Pilgrim throughout it. You know, of an “I” speaking generally, on behalf of all questers. How do you respond to that, to this idea of a more generalized voice, especially in light of Jorie Graham’s announcement last night at your reading that “We love Anne Carson

because we find in her the universal voice that we once lost”?

AC: I tuned-out before she said that. I can't listen to people talking about me.

I: Well you should have because it was beautiful.

AC: No.

I: Anyway. That's what she said.

AC: Yes. That's what she said, and I guess we have to confront it now. [pause] In the essay about pilgrims it's true. Sections begin with “Pilgrims . . .” and then generalize about them as a category.

I: And end that way, too.

AC: Yes, right. So it must have been something I wanted to do there. But probably it was endemic to that experience. I don't think that that happens too much elsewhere. I mean, I don't think I say, “Swimmers . . . dah dah dah” and then expound on them. So—

I: But it's in other works, too, like “Short Talks.” There's a lack of an “I” there. There's certainly a strong voice, but there's no self in there. I don't think there is.

AC: Oh, I see. So you think it's a mechanism for avoiding the self?

I: Well, I don't know.

AC: Let's see. Well, in “Short Talks” there was a definite effort on my part to avoid the autobiographical impulse. That's true. I wanted those each to be a short kind of dance.

I: Maybe even as pictures of things, as you've said?

AC: Okay, right. Pictures of themselves. That's all I know about that,

though.

I: Is there a difference between essays and poetry?

AC: You know, I see all those questions you have about that on your sheet there, but I just haven't the faintest idea. This is one of those things I just couldn't know unless I was finished doing it. And I'm not. So—

I: Let me ask this: Do you see the form in your head first?

AC: Yes.

I: Do you sometimes try something as an essay and then rework it or revise it into a poem and find it works better that way, or vice versa?

AC: Well, there's a novel I've written that was all prose at first and very thick. Then I thought, "What if I break these lines up a bit? Maybe they'd move along more smartly." So now the novel's in verse. But when I'm writing, usually I mush around first with the form, and if I don't get it in a few days then I don't try to write the thing because I can't begin without a form.

I: Davenport said something interesting about this in his introduction to *Glass, Irony and God*.

AC: And I didn't read it. I was tempted, though.

I: Well I'll tell you what he said—

AC: No, don't.

I: No? [pause] Well then I may have to ask a hard question to compensate.

AC: Okay. Ask a hard question.

I: Okay.

AC:

I:

AC:

I: Okay. Even though you didn't listen to Jorie Graham's intro last night, and even though you don't read reviews of your stuff, or read Davenport's thing, I'm wondering what you think accounts for what seems like the sudden and kind of overwhelming response people have had to your work recently.

AC: Am I supposed to know this?

I: No. But I'm asking you to. I know it's embarrassing, but I'm the one asking the question and hereby forcing you to respond, so it won't look bad in print. Trust me. It'll be my fault.

AC: [pause] I was just talking with someone about John Ashbery and how I can never understand anything he writes. That's frustrating to me. I think that there's a sense that people are lost, especially in so-called creative writing in America today.

I: And you think that's why we're responding to you?

AC: I think yes. I think people like to be told something that they can get, you know? I mean otherwise it's like giving a person a gift that they can't unwrap. That's cruel. And so I guess writing is a kind of gift that can be undone in different ways by different people. John Ashbery may be beyond that claim.

I: And the "universal voice"?

AC: I think it arises out of compassion, you know? People are just out

there struggling to make sense of life. You have to give them something they can use. It's only polite to do that.

I: Finally—

AC: Finally. Yes?

I: Volcanoes?

AC: Oh, volcanoes! Well, it was winter. I broke my knee. I had to stay in a lot, so I started painting. At the time it seemed the obvious subject to paint. I realize there's a narrative gap there. My paint collection at the time included only red and yellow acrylic. And I had black ink. But I also just like volcanoes. They're a lot in the novel, too. The boy in the novel goes to South America and visits volcanoes, in fact he flies over them. He has wings. Also, when I first started to do the paintings my friend in Montreal said, "Oh, good. You're dealing with your anger." And I said, "What anger!" So there's that, too. Does that help?

I: Yeah. Thanks.

AC: Good. Now turn that off.