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# ONE *to* WATCH

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*Anne Raeff*  
*Interview by Sejal H. Patel*



Anne Raeff is the author of two novels and a short story collection, which won the 2015 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Her newest novel, *Winter Kept Us Warm*, will be published in February 2018. A veteran East Palo Alto high school teacher, Anne is not only a writer but also a lifelong learner. She grew up in New Jersey and lives in San Francisco, has lived in Southeast Asia, New Mexico, and Spain, and speaks fluent Spanish with a perfect accent. Her writing speaks to how stories evoke memory, history, and our sense of connectedness. Who are we as children, as citizens, as immigrants and refugees, as sexual beings, and as partners? Where are any of us from—the land of our birth, a place we live in for some time, or where we end our lives? Bold and tender, her writing incites deep compassion through storytelling. I sat down to talk to her about her impressive body of work.

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**Thank you for taking the time to do this interview. Children occupy a fairly central place in much of your work. I'd love to start by asking you if you could share a moment of your childhood that preoccupies you now as a writer.**

There are so many moments from my childhood that influence my work. I think that is probably true for most writers as childhood is the age of discovery and every experience is heightened because we are learning so much. So much of what I write about comes from my parents' stories. On my twelfth birthday my mother told me that she wasn't sure that my grandfather was her biological father. She told me when I was washing the dinner dishes, which was my evening task. I remember her standing next to me, nervously, saying she had something to tell me. I turned off the water and turned to her, but she told me to keep washing. I think she didn't want us to look at each other face to face.

She told me that my grandmother had been married to someone else, an older man whom she had met on the streetcar. She had married this older man because he promised to pay for her to go to medical school. It was in medical school that she met my grandfather. They had an affair, and just after my mother was born, my grandmother left my mother with her husband and ran off with the man whom I knew of as

my grandfather. My mother lived with my grandmother's first husband for the first six years of her life, and then my grandmother took her back, wrenched her away from this man whom she thought of as her father. The last time she saw him was in 1938 when Hitler annexed Austria and just before my grandparents, my mother, and my uncle escaped. My grandmother's first husband, my mother's father, stayed behind.

At the time I didn't understand exactly why she was telling me this story, but I knew that it marked a coming of age, that my mother thought I was old enough to know adult things. As I look back on it now, it also was a turning point for me as a writer, for it was after my mother's revelation that I began to more consciously imagine my parents' lives outside of my own life, imagine what it was that had made them who they were. This story marks the beginning of my contemplating other people's lives, which is the essence of what writers do.

**Your novel is a gorgeous historical fiction piece that takes us to Berlin. The Red Army's invasion of Berlin is a particularly important historical fact in the novel. Ulli wrestles with survivor's guilt throughout the story. Can you tell us about how you engage with that feeling—both personally and as a writer? How does Ulli's feeling of guilt inform her choices as a mother? In your novels**

**and stories, how much choice or agency does any person who has suffered really have at all?**

This is an extremely complex question, and it is the question that is at the center of my writing. I suppose that, on some level, I write in order to try to get at the answer to that question, though I know that a truly satisfying answer does not exist. I suppose, however, that I do believe that all of us have some kind of agency and choice. If I did not believe that, I wouldn't write, I wouldn't teach. I don't know how I would even be able to get up in the morning.

The question is how to find those choices, make those decisions, how to regain control over one's life after terrible suffering, and how to continue on despite the burden of guilt. This is the central theme of my writing and was also the central theme of my childhood. I was the first person in my family born in the United States. Both my parents were refugees from Stalin, war, and the Holocaust, and those traumatic experiences followed them to the New Jersey suburbs where I grew up. Though I was growing up doing all the typical suburban things—sleigh riding on the hill behind the library, trick-or-treating on Halloween, flipping baseball cards with the neighbor boys, the sadness, the suffering, and the loss were always there.

**I read abandonment in your writing in several ways—one person literally walking out on another, a person giving up on themselves, and a person leaving another to a certain tragic fate. Why does abandonment strike such a chord with you as a writer?**

Again, this harkens back to my childhood. My mother's mother suffered from depression and my mother inherited it from her. I think that this depression had its roots in a combination of genetics and the great losses and traumas that they suffered during the war. They lost not only the family that stayed behind in Vienna but their way of life. They lost the love they had had for their culture, their language, their music. And my mother experienced an especially personal form of survivor's guilt. When my grandparents, my mother, and my uncle left Vienna, my mother also left her first father, the man that she thought was her biological father. In exile, in an effort to embrace her new life and my grandfather, whom my grandmother now insisted she was sure was my mother's real father, my mother buried her love for her first father. When he contacted

her after the war, she did not respond. She was trying to start over again, and I think she felt guilty that she had abandoned him, buried him when he was not dead, when he was left behind in so much danger.

Everyone has his or her essential story, and this was my mother's. My essential story was growing up surrounded by that story and by the reverberations of one of the most traumatizing events in human history. My essential story also includes the fact that I grew up with a mother who was often depressed, and, because of this depression, she abandoned her responsibilities as a mother and a nurturer. It was my father who took on those roles. This was the inspiration for the creation of the Buchovsky family in which the mother is absent and the father is the one who takes over.

**Ulli moves to New York City from Germany post-World War II. She feels the need to express apology to Americans for what her country has done. To what extent are we guilty for the sins of our homeland?**

This is a very interesting question and it is perhaps the fundamental question of our times. I don't think that we are necessarily guilty for the sins committed by our compatriots or our homeland before we were born, but I do believe that it is our responsibility to work hard to right the wrongs of the past, to acknowledge the sins and crimes of our ancestors and to do everything that we can do to make the world a better place for all people.

I think that acknowledgement is the first step. Perhaps feeling guilty about what our country has done in our name is part of that process, but if we stop at that, if all we do is feel guilty or spread the word about what was done and apologize, that is not enough. Words are just a beginning. In the end, actions are what make change and it is in action only that we can find redemption. This is why for me writing is not enough. It is part of the conversation about these big questions, but writing about the past and the effects of the past do not change the present. Literature helps to illuminate the problems; it asks the questions, but then we have to act. This is why I have devoted so much of my life to teaching high school. I feel that through teaching I am helping young people acquire the tools and develop their power and confidence so that they do not succumb to the forces of fear and violence and prejudice.

I think that Germany, in many ways, does a better job of this than the United States first by acknowledging the crimes of the past and then doing things like taking in refugees, more refugees than any other country in the world. That is an action. They cannot bring back the millions of people who died because of what their grandparents' generation did, but they can help the new victims of violence and ignorance. Of course not all Germans embrace this and not all Germans acknowledge the sins of their ancestors, but I think they do a better job than Americans. I think that there are many more Americans who refuse to acknowledge the lasting wounds of slavery and Jim Crow, who just want those who suffered and continue to suffer to "get over it" and who feel that they are being personally attacked when we expose racism and discrimination and the legacy of slavery and violence.

Perhaps if I were German, if I were living in Germany, I would be more critical of their way of dealing with history. In any case, because I am not German, it is not my role to criticize Germany, but it is my responsibility to criticize and try to improve my own country whose sins and accomplishments are now both part of my inheritance.

**Languages are powerful tools in your novel. Ulli makes her living after the war by interpreting for American soldiers and their German girlfriends. Isaac rescues Ulli from depression and inactivity by getting her to sign up to train to be a United Nations interpreter. Isaac grew up speaking many languages. Why does language occupy such an important role in the book?**

Language is another one of my preoccupations. I love studying languages and learning to speak them. Last summer my wife and I were invited to Tianjin, China as visiting writing fellows. It was a great experience, and we want to continue the relationships we developed with the group that invited us. It's called Metacircle and it is dedicated to promoting literature and discussions about literature in China. So right now I am working really hard on learning Mandarin. I do two lessons per day in the car during my horrendous commute to work, and I have a lesson with my friend once every two weeks. It's a huge challenge, but I am enjoying it immensely. I can't wait to return to China so that I can put what I've learned to use.

When I decided to move to Spain after finishing my studies, I had no idea how the process of learning Spanish and falling in love with the language would help me find aspects of myself that I did not know existed, that had been squelched by the circumstances of my childhood. It was in Spain that I truly learned how to talk to people, how to communicate my feelings, how to argue and drink until the early morning hours, and, ultimately, it was Spain and Spanish that helped me come out as a lesbian and to have confidence in who I was and what I wanted to be. In *Winter Kept Us Warm*, Ulli has a similar experience. Through the process of translating other people's words and communicating other people's ideas, she finds her own voice as well as the strength to take up her life again just as I found my voice while struggling to learn a new language in Spain.

**Your novel begins after a major historical event, but it is not a historical fiction novel. Can you tell us why that difference matters to your work?**

My book begins just after World War II and continues on through the twentieth century to contemporary times. I think American literature traditionally has been somewhat ahistorical, though I think that is changing now, but that is maybe why any book that has history in it is labeled historical fiction. I think that historical fiction is fiction that takes place completely in another time period and in which the time period is a backdrop, not a character, not a force, but a mood, a setting. Often historical fiction is full of nostalgia for another time period and it does not examine the effects of historical events on the next generations. In my work, I try to examine the effects of the greater forces of history on individual lives.

**What advice would you give to someone who is working on a book that contains a lot of history about how to research?**

I don't really do formal research for my fiction. My knowledge of history comes from growing up listening to my family's stories, from growing up with a historian as a father, and from reading. I read a lot of nonfiction of all kinds—history, political science, philosophy, anthropology, anything in the social sciences—so what I am reading and what I have read informs my work. Also, I would never set out to write about historical events or time periods that I don't know about. The

knowledge that I have gathered over the years finds its way into my writing, but I do not specifically acquire knowledge for my writing. For me writing is a synthesis of my thoughts, experiences, and studies over the years. That is not to say that I think that doing specific research for writing fiction is wrong. I think that every writer has a different approach and finds a different way to develop a story.

**Point of view confounds all fiction writers. You tell the story in *Winter Kept Us Warm* in three points of view. How did you come to the decision to write the book that way instead of in a single character's point of view? What would you tell novelists to think about when making that choice?**

The first few versions of this novel were told from only two points of view, Isaac's and Ulli's, but an editor who was interested in the book said that she felt that she wanted to know more about the third member of the love triangle, Leo. Though I was disappointed that she didn't buy the book, after I got over that, I realized that she was right, so I added Leo's point of view to the story, and when I was finished, the book felt whole to me. I don't think that I consciously set out to write the book from two points of view. I began writing, and both points of view emerged. I suppose that some writers decide from the beginning how their books will be structured, but for me writing is a process of discovery. I begin with some characters and a situation and then I set them loose. I don't know what is going to happen when I sit down to write, but I try to let my characters lead me.

**Tell us about the title *Winter Kept Us Warm*. It is from "The Waste Land" by T.S. Eliot and references "forgetful snow." Is your novel a charge to remember or to forget painful moments of our past?**

I hope that it is neither. I don't think that the purpose of literature is to tell people what to do. Its purpose is to help readers to think about things that are difficult to think about, to grapple with questions that have many answers or no answers. Perhaps it can help readers to come closer to answers and even to act differently in the world. Perhaps the goal of the book is to show that there are periods in our lives when the past is buried, when it is covered in "forgetful snow," but it is always there. And eventually the snow will melt. ↪