

*Citation read on the occasion of the granting of the degree of
Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts to
Anne Michaels
by the Senate of the University of Victoria*

February 18, 2013

Mr. Chancellor, it is an honour for me to present Anne Michaels: poet, composer, playwright, teacher, and one of Canada's foremost novelists. It is also an overwhelming responsibility since she, herself, has said, "When things matter, one should speak precisely. Do justice to the characters." I look to do justice, Mr. Chancellor, as this is an occasion that matters!

Anne Michaels has been celebrated nationally and internationally for her writing. Her poetry, one nominator wrote, "has established her as one of Canada's major and most passionate, poetic voices." For Ms. Michaels, poetry is "a way of holding experience; not holding on to, but holding" and, like all compelling, metaphoric language, it is close enough for us to make connections and remote enough, in Virginia Woolf's words, "to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid."

As I read in her book of poetry, *Miner's Pond*—"The ritual walk to the bakery, Fridays/before supper. Guided by my eldest brother / through streets made unfamiliar by twilight ..." —I remember my own experience. I am on that same errand with my sister, miles (and a lifetime) away in Brooklyn, eating half a loaf of warm, fragrant, rye bread before we get home to my mother's gentle inquiry, "What happened to the other half?"

Writing, for Anne, is "to hold another human being close" and, indeed, we are held. Guided by her skill and her (he)art, we move back and forth across the thresholds of the real and the storied worlds she creates for us.

There are now three collections of her poetry—*The Weight of Oranges*, *Miner's Pond* and *Skin Divers*—published over a 25 year period—for which, in 1986, she received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and, in 1991, the Canadian Authors' Association Award for Poetry.

Dr. Michaels, recent recipient of an honorary doctorate from Carleton University, is best known for her powerful novel of love and displacement, *Fugitive Pieces* (1996). In Canada, it received the Trillium Book Award, the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award, the City of Toronto Book Award, the Beatrice and Martin Fisher Award, and was on the best-seller list for two years.

This complex, first novel was also recognized in England where it received the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Guardian Fiction Award and the Jewish Quarterly Prize for Fiction. These awards are in addition to

others in the United States and Italy. *Fugitive Pieces* has been translated into more than 20 languages and, in 2007, was made into a major motion picture.

Ms. Michaels was born and grew up in Toronto, graduating from the University of Toronto. Mother of two children, she lives there today and shares her talents with students at her alma mater in her capacity as adjunct professor of English. As a child she played both the piano and violin and was involved with theatre, composing musical scores for a variety of plays in high school. More recently, her connection with music (clearly seen in her lyrical writing) continued through her work with composer Omar Daniel for the oratorio, *The Passion Of Lavinia Andronicus*.

In 2005, she collaborated with London's great theatre company, Complicite, and fellow author and art critic, John Berger, on a "meditation on the part that railways and stations have played in our lives." Performed as *Vanishing Points*, it was later published as *Rail Tracks*.

By her own account, Dr. Michaels is a private person but that is not to say we don't know what she holds to be important—what she values. In *Fugitive Pieces* and her latest novel, *The Winter Vault* (both of which were short-listed for the Giller Prize) her incredible research allows the complexities of history to come alive. For Anne, "books are a safe place to talk about things that are not safe; to ask questions for which there are no answers." Although fiction, truth is made evident.

If, as she says, "a book has a moral and ethical function" that allows "us the space and time to contemplate right actions" then, certainly, in these times of tension and potential divide, we must embrace her words.

For us as readers, the experiences of our shared humanity—memory, evil, love, dislocation, loss—allow us to enter into these novels already knowing the feelings that lie at the heart of our sense of family, and connect us to our sense of community.

Ms. Michaels has already visited and contributed to the life of our university as part of the Writing and Religion conference three years ago, a gathering of major writers to discuss with students, faculty and members of the community—religion, spirituality and contemplative practice in literature and the writing life. We welcome her return. For Anne, writing is a way "to learn to live better." And we, through her, can learn to do so ourselves.

Mr. Chancellor, it is my great privilege to present Anne Michaels for the degree of Doctor of Fine Arts, *honoris causa*.

*Written and presented by
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