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A. Manette Ansay: 11-01-1995

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Stan Sanvel Rubin

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Ansay: It is November and Ellen can hear the wind moving over the walls of the house stroking the windows, trying to coax its way past the curtains to blow the flowers from the napkins and plates to musk the perfect leaves of the plastic plants that hang side by side above the sink. The house is filled with knickknacks, China angels, statutes of saints, small glass animals with beady eyes. And each of them has to be dusted and the surface beneath polished with lemon oil. And then each has to be set back down precisely as it was before. The beady eyes staring in the same direction. The dust settling about it in the same design. The copper duck and goose Jell-O molds have hung for so long above the stove that the paint behind them has kept its color. And when Ellen takes them down for polishing a perfect bright shape of a duck or goose remains. A place for everything. Everything in its place. The house is as rigid, as precise as a church. And there was nothing to disturb its ways until three months ago when Ellen and James and the children moved in, because they had no place and nowhere else to go.

Rubin: Thank you and welcome to the Brockport's Writers Forum. Our guest today, Manette Ansay is a writer whose work encompasses all the major genres. She was born in Wisconsin, educated at Cornell and currently lives in Nashville where she is an assistant professor of English at Vanderbilt University. Manette Ansay's work includes the short story collection, *Read This and Tell Me What it Says*, winner of the 1994 Associated Writing Program's Short Fiction Prize, and the very highly praised novel *Vinegar Hill* published by Viking in 1994, which was the second place winner in the Friends of American Writers Prize Competition. And she has a new novel forthcoming entitled *Sister*, due out from Morrow in the spring of '96. Manette Ansay's many awards and recognitions include also the Pushcart Prize for Fiction, and 1993 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, The Nelson Algren Prize for Fiction and the Annual Literary Award for poetry from the Greensboro Review. Manette, it's a pleasure to have you with us.

Ansay: Thank you.

Rubin: You are a young writer, and you've been quite successful to this point. You've got a lot of recognition, a lot of fine awards and a novel coming out with a good publisher. Tell me, what do you make of your success?

Ansay: Well my father has a saying, the harder I work the luckier I get, and I think that that's a good thing to keep in mind, especially it's been something I've kept in mind as I've continued to work. I don't know I, I think I've been fortunate, I think that in many ways it's been kind of a charmed path. And on the other hand I, I've been working very steadily in keeping the work out there, so I think it's, it's a balance of both.

Rubin: There may be some kind of tradeoff between having as much recognition as you did achieve, which is rather extraordinary for someone at your point in your career, though not unprecedented, it's lucky and nice. And on the other hand, being able to continue laboring in private and in silence. Keeping the interior life alive. I guess my question is, do you now already have a sense that you have an audience?

Ansay: No.

Rubin: No. So that's a.

Ansay: No I still assume when I'm writing, I assume that no one's going to read it, no one's going to be interested. I'm always amazed when something publishes. I, I, I really, when I'm writing it's, it's something altogether different. If I bother to think about it, I think sort of, not helpful, detrimental, the thoughts about nobody's interested. So I don't know. When, when I write that's something very separate, it's something that I would do regardless of whether or not I was publishing it. It's something at this point that's, I'm addicted to it, you know. It's bitten and, and it's, it's the way I organize myself, and it's the way that, it's, it's just habit. When I originally left for college I was a piano performance major. I started playing the piano when I was two. And so I always had this thing, you know, I always had, you know, my two to three hours a day and then my four to five hours a day at practicing that I had to do. And that didn't work out. But I think that, you know, I've found a substitution for it. I mean all my life, there has been something, some sort of interior life that I've carried with me, and, and the writing is just an extension of that old habit that I had when I was a kid.

Rubin: And very interesting, discipline counts.

Ansay: Yeah or obsession counts.

Rubin: Obsession.

Ansay: Neuroses counts.

Rubin: Well obsessions and neuroses may, may fit your novel. We have to talk about the first novel that got you so much recognition. *Vinegar Hill*, which you set in a small Wisconsin town, and you are from Wisconsin. It's a novel of kind of a very grim, exceedingly grim some might say excessively grim, family relationships where a lot of pain, a lot of unspoken pain, and it's a book that takes us through, through several generations. It's a very fully realized book which has been praised again and again I think quite rightly for your extraordinary ability to go inside your characters and, and very vividly render what particularly your, your main sensibility, Ellen is, is what they're feeling, what she's enduring, that she never even speaks of. Where did this work come from? Where, where did it originate?

Ansay: Well I didn't start writing until I was 23, and I started writing as a New Year's resolution. I was going to write for two hours, three times a week. And that was my writing schedule. And I was living with someone who is now my husband, and you know, I told him my schedule, I told all my friends my schedule, I said you know for me, I can't remember what it was, I think it was from noon to 2:00 p.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. See I told you I'm narcotic. No I was going to be writing, and I didn't know what I was doing you know, but I just thought it would be something interesting to try. But earlier, when I was probably 20, 21, it became very important for me as a young woman to understand some of the choices my mother made, or didn't make when I was growing up, so that I could understand her experiences in order to have a context for my own reactions for things. And I think, there's a, there's a point in your life where, as a young woman you really try to get as far away from your mother as you can. And then there's a point when you realize, you know, in order for me to make choices and decisions and, and have an understanding of where I come from, I really need to find out, you know, what her life was about. So I really had a number of very frank conversations about, with my mother, about what it had been like to raise children in a rural, intensively religious, very isolated Catholic community in the Midwest in the 1970's. And so when I began writing years later, these conversations came back and, and formed the basis for, for this novel, which is dedicated to my mom. And she was in the shower when the book got accepted. I called her in Florida and she was

like dancing naked around the house, and my dad was describing it, sort of blow by blow. She's in the shower, she's out of the shower. She doesn't have a towel. She was very excited.

Rubin: What did your parents think of, of the book itself?

Ansay: Well they're very proud of it. My dad in real life is a traveling salesman, or has, was a traveling salesman for many years, as James is in the novel. Unlike James, my father took us with him in the summers. And so we traveled, my brother and my mom and I with him, throughout the state of Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio, some, sometimes into Indiana. So I, I got a real good sense of the Midwest. It wasn't just Wisconsin but, but the landscape. And I got a real good sense of, of what it's like to be on the road like that. But you know his reaction to the book was, was a salesman reaction. How can we market this? It's a good product, he'd say, it's a good product, a good product is going to sell. And my mother's reaction was, was great pride. She's right now getting a PhD in sociology from the University of Florida. She's fully funded. She's teaching. She won a university wide prize for a paper she just wrote and just came in as a finalist in an international competition. It's taken her a long time to fulfill her dreams. I mean she's, she's a brilliant, brilliant person, and you know I, I think that the book, for her, I'm putting words in my mother's mouth. But I think that the book for her validates a period of her life that would otherwise be forgotten and unrecognized had I not written it. And it.

Rubin: You're suggesting that there is some, some family reality behind.

Ansay: Oh absolutely, absolutely.

Rubin: These events.

Ansay: I think many first novelists, and I'm no exception, write from, write from the heart when they're writing their early books. I read "In Writing a Woman's Life". It's a really good book. And I don't think it just applies to women, but she's talking about how a write needs to write about their own experiences, almost as a way of clearing a playing field, clearing space. This is what happened, this is how I choose to remember it. Everybody else remembers it this way, but this is my version. And once you have that laid out and once you have that playing field established, you can stand on it, and then you can move on into other things. And I think for me, this book was very much doing that.

Rubin: Inevitably it raises all these questions as a line between a life and art, which artists and writers understand, but the general public doesn't always understand. And I want to ask you if there was any reaction back in your home town of Port Washington, Wisconsin in terms of.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Because I know the book did get attention throughout Wisconsin and elsewhere because of reviews just a, a lot of reviews, gratifying number of them, including in your home area. What reaction was there?

Ansay: Well I mean this is what's really interesting. The only people who could look at this book, and find facts, I mean this whole book is true, it's just not factual. I mean I -- it -- I'm like Ann Sexton, you know, it was all true when I wrote it, that's how I feel about all my work. And, and my parents can go in and they can look and they can say well this, I remember this and I see how you changed it. This I remember this. And my mother is my first reader on everything. And she'll read it and she'll say, well you know that's interesting, this happened to your character because this happened to me, and you can use this experience to do this. And it will be more

realistic. And I'll say oh thanks and I'll use it. But I think when other people try to read a book of fiction as a way of learning facts about an author, I mean they get it all wrong inevitably. For the most part, I think you know my, my town in the area was, was very, you know not, not supportive, but not, well supportive. It's, it's not a, it's not a reading community it's, it's not a literary community. I mean it's, it's just a little Wisconsin town. And they, they don't read a lot of literary fiction so there wasn't a lot of context for it. And I, I met a lot of people at readings who would come up to me and they'd say, but you seemed like such a happy person. And I'm like well I am a happy person. You know this is a book. But there was, there was one review that was really kind of unfortunate in the local paper which was circulated to all the towns, in which this woman, something about the book she, she took it as an attack on the town, and she took everything in it as true. And the book is called, *Vinegar Hill*, which I got off a street sign in Upstate New York, and apparently there's a little street in Port Washington Wisconsin where I grew up called Sweet Cake Lane, and in the review one of the things she said was that, you know this book is really set in Sweet Cake Lane, but I changed it to Vinegar Hill. And you know she made up all of this, all these wild connections, you know. And I guess in a, in some way, it's very comforting and I tell my students about this, because everybody worries when you write, what happens if somebody reads this and they see themselves, or they recognize themselves, or they think it's true. Well look at it this way, they're going to anyway. Whether or not you do it or you don't do it. No matter what you write, people are going to think you did everything in your books. And at some point when you get four or five or six books, and they realize that it's physically impossible for you to have done everything that you've said you've done in all these books, then they're going to say, you lied, you're a liar. And they're going to do to you what they did to, to Sylvia Plath, you know. So it, you can't worry about it, you know, you just have to write.

I think I am very, very, very fortunate in having an immediate family. I've got, you know, my parents, I've got over 60 cousins and over 100 second cousins. My mother's the youngest of nine. And they are great and supportive. And I think that one of the reasons, thinking back to your question about why I've published so quickly, it doesn't seem quickly to me, but.

Rubin: I didn't say it was.

Ansay: But.

Rubin: But you've gotten a lot of.

Ansay: Gotten a lot.

Rubin: Good attention.

Ansay: Of attention, but I think one of the reasons is that I haven't had to deal with some of the excruciating censorship issues that I watch friends and colleagues and students dealing with, with immediate family. I mean a town if, if they're made at you, you can live with it, but you know when your family's upset with you, that's, that's really significant. So I'm, I'm fortunate in that.

Rubin: Well the, I'd like to get the passage you read at the beginning of this discussion. It's early in the novel, it's really setting up for, about for the first time the house as a metaphor or as a, a presence in the novel. You say, the house is as rigid as precise as a church. And it was nothing to disturb its ways until, until Ellen and James and his kids moved in.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: And the house is so intensely imagined, and so confining, so full of layers to be unraveled of emotional layers, things that are unsaid. And such a stifling sense of order as precise as a church and it involves also a certain kind of fatalistic Catholicism dominating it.

Where did this come from in your imagination? Are these stories that you heard from your mother, is this observation of Midwestern life, of a certain [inaudible]?

Ansay: Well.

Rubin: Or is it imagined? I mean.

Ansay: It's, it's imagined and it's heightened but it also is based on the fact that we lived with my grandparents for, oh I guess about a year, and, and I'm remembering their house. I mean you really did, you take down the Jell-O molds and there would be the, the bright pink behind it and it had to, it had to be put back. And then of course, you know, whenever you have an experience of your own, you start thinking about a context for it, why is this relevant, you know, why is this interesting to, to someone beyond, beyond me, you know. And I think that in the case of the novel, you know, a lot of the, the oppressive nature of, of the household reflects the, the situation of Ellen who's in a situation that I think is pretty common. I mean she's.

Rubin: Yeah.

Ansay: She's not only in charge, she works full time, she takes care of her kids, she takes care of her in-laws as well, so she's kind of sandwiched between this, this set of demands and, you know, it's impossible, it's stifling. There's, there's absolutely no time. She's sort of everybody's servant. And I, I, I like using landscapes, and I don't just think of landscape as sort of, it's like this night at the reading but as, as sort of an outside place, you know, with trees and flowers and horses and barns, that are domestic landscapes. They're internal landscapes. And the landscape of this house reflects everything, the huge weight that she's going to have to shatter in order to escape from this situation.

Rubin: Striking, as has been noted by many of the reviewers, how much she endures not in terms of a lot of overt cruelty.

Ansay: No.

Rubin: But just a coldness, repression, lack of being able to give voice to one's inner life and situation. It's, have you had readers or particularly perhaps women, say this is unrealistic? That she takes too much. She, she endures too much.

Ansay: You know there's been a few reviews like that but not, I haven't had people say that to me.

Rubin: Have you had people recognize the character?

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: And say that?

Ansay: Yeah, over and over and over again.

And I've gotten a lot of.

Rubin: This is my.

Ansay: Letters.

Rubin: Grandmother's generation. Or this is.

Ansay: More like this is me. This is what.

Rubin: This is me.

Ansay: I went through. And especially when I read. And it's, and it's not, it's not older women. It's women in their 30's. You know this is, this is, this is contemporary. You know you, you fall into that. Ellen in this novel is very much the peacemaker in the family, the communicator in the family. She's certainly like the moms I remember from, from you know my generation. She's the

one that the burden of, of success falls upon in terms of family. And so much of our identity as women is caught up in the idea of family. If a family is successful, we are somehow successful. So she, she bears this enormous burden. And in, in the book it's made clear that, you know, if she says, you know, to James, the hell with you, I'm, I'm not going to do these things, I'm not going to take care of your parents, and I'm not going to clean up the house and, and work full time and take care of the kids and put up with all your, your goofiness. You know she doesn't just lose her economic base, but she loses her position in the community, she loses her, her own family, her mother and sisters who are saying, well what's wrong, he doesn't beat you, you know, there's, there's, there's nothing wrong, you know.

Rubin: This, this points to many of the things that make it a rich book, besides how well written it is.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: And it is a book about the mediation between generations.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Which of course is a contemporary thing with us as we're led to believe, many more people living who force of circumstance with their families, because of the economy, etcetera. It deals with the sort of clash of, of value systems in terms of inherited traditional really European immigrant pattern. European religious kind of patterns of, of life. And the idea of, of a more open American individualism and all these sorts of things in it. Do you think of it as Midwestern, in some sense?

Ansay: I don't think that it's, I mean I think the Midwest is certainly in the landscape, the landscape of the Midwest is the vehicle which carries the book. But I don't think it's, it's limited to the Midwest. I think people would like to limit it to the Midwest or to rural places or to obscure places, because you know, sexism is like racism, it's something that happened in the '60s. We're all over that now. I'm being sarcastic. But that, that's very much sort of this attitude that everything's hunky dory now, and, and you know it's, it's not. And it's, it's, it's also it's not always a matter of deliberate or overt cruelty. I mean people, especially families, we know each other so well, we have the infinite capacity for cruelty towards one another. And it's not so much that we lay awake at night dreaming up ways to oppress each other or torment each other, it's that we don't understand our own selves, so how can we interact with others.

Rubin: Let's talk about the cruelty in, in the novel, which is, there's some physical stuff, but it's really.

Ansay: It's all in the past.

Rubin: It's psychological.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Cruelty throughout. Did you know where this book was heading?

Ansay: No.

Rubin: When you began it?

Ansay: No. I didn't know where it was when I ended.

Rubin: It seems so driven. How much, well actually I said we'd talk about the cruelty for a moment. Did you find any of it difficult to write?

Ansay: Oh yeah.

Rubin: Were you surprised at what your imagination presented you?

Ansay: Oh yeah, oh yeah. You know, and you, you don't want to do this to people that, that you've grown fond of, like, like your characters. And you know, you want to make sure too that it's not gratuitous, that it's motivated. Fritz is a good example. The, the grandfather in the family who is, is, what can I say about Fritz? He's not a grandparent out of a Hallmark card, you know. He's, he's as brutal as the farm life that he's endured. But he was also born at a time in which a man was not a person, he was a tool. A man was a task. A man was what he could do in the field. And you know, who knows what Fritz could have been like. You know by the time you meet him, he says all I want is, I, all my life I've worked, now all I want is some peace. And he means it. You know, all his life he's been in the fields, that's all he's been doing. And you know, I, I did, he's one point of view I didn't get into in the book, because it seemed pointless to me. All that's there is rage. But I hope that there's enough there that there's a context for where he's coming from, because he never had the chance to, to be a person to have, have an interior life of any time, from, from little on he was in the fields. And this is what my own grandfather was like and, and many men much as, much in the same way that women are, are identified through their families, a man is identified through the work that he can perform. And it's, it's limiting and it's crushing and it's cruel.

Rubin: As you said, I think you're quite right, and this is the thing I find most extraordinary about the book, really. I mean if I may say this without getting into trouble, which I probably can't. You do see a lot of books by writers, younger writers that seem kind of whiny, they seem about look what the world has done to me. I mean I'm thinking of one I won't name that the, recently which was about how this quite successful young woman who can't quite make up her mind about relationships, daily life, crying her down, it's just such a trauma to live. And that's sort of a very precious thing. Your book, on the other hand, seems while not to forgive, to make forgiveness kind of unnecessary, to understand the characters, I think this is true about Fritz, you understand the world he comes from. He's not a, a cruel individual man representing male cruelty, he's a product of a time.

Ansay: He's a product of a time.

Rubin: A place, life. And you go into while, while Ellen is your main character, you do go into the consciousness of James quite well, and make us sympathize.

Ansay: I love James.

Rubin: With him.

Ansay: The father, the father in the novel. He is only two chapters, and for a while he was taking over the book, and I had to sort of, you know, cut him back. But I tried to make up to James some of the things that he does in, in the book, and the things that have happened to him in the past. I tried to make it up to him by giving him the most beautiful language in the book.

Rubin: You do.

Ansay: That the chapter, their hands remind him of a skeleton hands, their eyes, the round blank eyes of ghosts. As a boy he was afraid of Halloween. The neighborhood children carved tiny jack-o'-lanterns and carried them leering and lit from farm to farm. From the window of the bedroom he shared with his brother he could see strings of jack-o'-lanterns smiles gliding through the dark fields. So you get the image of this little boy, you know, looking out the window on Halloween night. And that's what the kids used to do. They'd carve the pumpkins and they'd light them and they'd walk through the fields, from house to house, house, and you could see the strings of children. And of course then his brother comes home, smelling of crushed pumpkin rot and climbs into James' bed and sits on James' stomach and pinches his nipples hard

saying, chicken, chicken, chicken. And then you realize what's going on. James is looking at his children, he's trying to tuck them in, he's trying to be a good father, and he looks at his children and he's kicked back in time to these, these events of, of, of trauma. And you know, for a person like James, if, if your past is more real to you than your present where can you go? So he's kind of a defeated character from the start. And even his, his job as a traveling salesman is kind of an impotent one because it leads him away from 512 Vinegar Hill, but then brings him back. So he's sort of caught in these endless circles.

Rubin: He's progressively living back with his father, he progressively.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Becomes.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Diminished and it's terrible.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: But it's wonderful what you said about the language you gave him.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: We haven't mentioned Mary-Margaret yet, the most awesome.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Terrible, powerful figure in the book, in a way.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Do you want to say something about her character? I mean one thing Ellen finds out when she has to move in with her mother-in-law is what her mother-in-law thinks of her.

Ansay: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. You know that's, that's sort of out of life. My, my, my grandmother who is now dead, she was, she was very concerned with, you know, High German versus Low German. You know any community.

Rubin: Luxemburg, Germany.

Ansay: Well Luxemburg doesn't even count. I'm Luxemburg.

Rubin: Yeah.

Ansay: It, it does, it doesn't even, it's sort of interesting to me, because no matter what community you have, people will find ways to divide each other into groups, and fight. You know, if, if they're, if everybody's European, then they'll divide all the Italians and the Germans and, and if everybody's German then, then, okay High German and Low German. I mean there's just, there's something tribal and awful about us is that we, we just have to keep confronting. But that was, that was real out of life, because my mother you see was Low German and my father's family was High German. And of course, all it means, it comes from the German Hochdeutsche you know as, as High German. But it just refers to the elevation of the land in Germany. It has nothing to do with class. But when it came over the United States of course, then it, then it got, you know, translated into something else.

Rubin: But how does, so I, I guess what I want to ask you is, how, which character did you imagine first, or, or what, what groups came to you when you first were working with the book, or knew you had this book to write?

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: What sort of relative proportions were there among these very distinct individual characters? Who was there first? Who came after?

Ansay: The first thing about this book was the image of a cat at the door. There's so many cats in all of my story collection has so many cats. I always get these comments about cats. But there's

an image of a cat at the door. And this one small thing, Ellen answering the door, something about the cat, this one small thing was, was enough to shape, just to break everything open.

Rubin: Just tells us that Ellen came first in a sense.

Ansay: I think she did, yeah. And originally, she was in first person, and everybody else was in third. And already, I mean I fought with the publisher over this, because the book was originally set in, in 1980 something. And they wanted me to move it back to the '50s. And we fought and fought and fought and we compromised on the '70s.

Rubin: Why, why do you think that was?

Ansay: Because sexism is something that happened in the '60s, and, and we're all done with that now. You know, everybody has, has equal rights and, and we're all.

Rubin: I was struck by.

Ansay: We're all so happy. You know.

Rubin: As I told you before we went on the air, I was struck by one reviewer, a woman reviewer, who said, it's really incredible to believe that a woman would let her husband take money out of her bank account in this day and age, what.

Ansay: Ellen has no bank account, yeah.

Rubin: And of course, you know, so you're really talking about styles of life that persist all, all over the country.

Ansay: Oh sure.

Rubin: But there was a juggling about where it would be credible to set it in terms of.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: Some.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: Idea of what life is.

Ansay: Right. And I have no doubt the book would have sold better if I'd moved it back then.

Rubin: Yeah. You do make the '70s, when I read the book, you make the '70s seem older to me. I have to think about the '70s and remind you of the regionalism of the country. And as you say, within a part of the country that thinks of itself as very advanced, like the Northeast or something.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: There's all sorts of lives being lived, obviously. As you were working the material, when was this actually, how, how long did it take you to realize.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: You had a novel here, to work it, to write it, any revision, how did it grow to become a novel, if you could kind of briefly [inaudible]?

Ansay: I wrote it in 14 months. I pretended that it wasn't a novel until it was over 100 pages. And then it seemed like I had to start calling it a novel.

Rubin: Did you work every day on it?

Ansay: Oh yeah. And I had just started teaching for the first time, and it was so energizing, I'd come home from teaching, I was so excited you know, and I didn't know what to do, so I'd work on my novel. I know that after about 100 pages or so, it was just going, going, going, I got cocky and I made a wrong turn, and I knew I was making a wrong turn, but I persisted. So I wrote about 150 pages about, you know, this, that and the other thing. Ellen's childhood, and you know, all this stuff that I needed to know as the writer, but you as the reader definitely didn't need to know. And I deleted it all. It was, I want to say it was New Year's Eve, but it wasn't, but

it was right around Christmas, New Years' time. I destroyed the copy and I went, on my computer and just deleted it, because I knew that if I kept this 150 pages around, because 150 pages, that's like oh I knew I'd, I'd find.

Rubin: And it was a lot of Ellen's.

Ansay: An excuse.

Rubin: Background.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: And family.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: Her family doesn't play a very, her own.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: Parents and sister don't play.

Ansay: Right.

Rubin: Much of a role.

Ansay: And that's what it all was. And it just wasn't that interesting.

Rubin: But you needed to know it. Did you need to know this much about the other characters?

Ansay: I needed to know the most about Ellen. And eventually, I mean I think I know all of them pretty well. But with Ellen I learned about it through writing about it. And it was just something that didn't need to be included.

Rubin: Did you play around with the, her children? That is exactly how many children or what age they should be. Did that pose a problem for you? Because the relation, her relationship to her daughter Amy is going to be inevitably symbolically charged.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: In a book like this. And handling of those things is always difficult.

Ansay: Yeah I didn't play around with it. I think I noticed it as I was approaching the end and made use of it. And that's often the way my writing works, where I'll, I'll write and then I revise as I go. And I'll say okay I've got this, this and this, now what can they mean? What's the significance? And I'll use that to focus what comes next. And then I'll go back, okay you've got these things, now what does that mean? And I'll sort of build that way.

Rubin: So you're revising as you go?

Ansay: When the book was finished it was finished.

Rubin: You knew when you were done, and it ended where it ends here.

Ansay: It ended where it ended. The, the, well it ended with, yeah it ended where it ended.

There was originally another chapter at the end. Which I stand by, but, but the, the publisher was just so convinced.

Rubin: Did, did it take us further into the future?

Ansay: It, it was, it was after Ellen has left, and it was, it was, someday I'll get to publish this book anyway I want. But it was a last chapter in which you see the house after Ellen has left it. And you see Fritz caring for Mary-Margaret, Salome triumphs. Salome has been sort of faithful to, to Jesus and her vision through all this. She's like, this is the traditional, heterosexual romance plot, right. Salome gets Jesus, she gets the guy, you know it's all right there. So she feels she's been rewarded for all her hardship because Fritz comes to her and says, come live in this house. He needs her to take care of Mary-Margaret. So she moves in and appropriates all of Mary-Margaret's things. All the cruelty that she suffered, Salome, Mary-Margaret's sister has suffered,

at the hands of Mary-Margaret, she moves in and claims the house. And it ends with, with Mary-Margaret caring, well I can't talk about that because it will reveal.

Rubin: No.

Ansay: The surprise, but.

Rubin: Do you see, in, in terms of what's there, do you see James and Ellen getting back together and.

Ansay: I do actually. I.

Rubin: You leave that open.

Ansay: I leave it open. But.

Rubin: Okay.

Ansay: He'd have to change a great deal. But I think he's capable of it.

Rubin: I, I, we've been lost in the world, not really lost, but in the world of the novel, so rich. I want to pull back to the technique here. You're, you're making it sounds as if you were driven to write it in and at some point you realized where it was going, or you had a sense that it was going to be a full novel. You work and revise and work and revise, and an end. I want to know about the, the very interesting technical choices that were made. I mean the book is strikingly effective in present tense, a lot of it, Ellen's world. That's a difficult point of view to sustain.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: And it's kind of punctuated with rhythmic flashbacks, which explains several generations of this family. I think it's quite a sophisticated and successful technical means for a first novel. And I want to know how this came to be.

Ansay: The past tense is delivered, it's sort of an in your face tactic. And again, I, I just didn't, I didn't want her to be marginalized as, you know, she's someone who lived long ago. So I, that's why I used present tense. And.

Rubin: You mean the present tense is the in your face part. It is, I mean you're sort of violating some kind of unwritten rule.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: For the way novels can be.

Ansay: I know.

Rubin: Narrated.

Ansay: I know.

Rubin: You enjoy that.

Ansay: I like the present tense.

Rubin: But it was, but it's the way it came, it's not that you went back and revised and draft and changed the.

Ansay: No.

Rubin: Point of view.

Ansay: That's the way it came.

Rubin: What about these sections in it, the last of which I think is Choice, isn't it? Grace next to last, and Choice last. Was that part of the working draft or is this a, a.

Ansay: That's part of the draft. So it's a, it all is pretty much the way it was, except it's missing that last, that last ten, ten page moment at the end. But it also, the reason, the reason I, I mean I'm not convinced that there's only one version of a book. And even as I read it, as I read from it, I want to revise it and of course you can't at this point. But I think that the, talking about the structure of the book, the only chapters in which characters share consciousness are Amy and

Ellen. And, and that was very deliberate. So it makes sense that it would end on sort of a, a note where, what's the word I want to, transcendent note where the two of them, by breaking the cycle, Ellen makes a, a better life for Amy. So I, I think it's resonant the way it is. It's resonant in a different way with, with the last chunk on. But it's interesting, because with writing *Sister*, *Sister* took me a lot longer, and the process was very different. I mean I, I have revised it, after finish, I mean when I finished it I knew it wasn't done. And I had to go back in and break it open.

Rubin: How soon did you begin *Sister*, or how soon did you even know you had another novel project to get into after the *Vinegar Hill* was published?

Ansay: I was working on it at the same time. And I've been working on another novel at the same time as I've been working on *Sister*.

Rubin: Was it difficult to find a publisher, in the sense that how, you know, did you shop it around a bit, or was?

Ansay: Oh yeah. It took me, I was with one agent and I finished *Vinegar Hill* and sent it to her, and she, she dumped me, she said it, it was too bleak and no one would ever buy it, and so it took me a while to find another agent.

Rubin: Didn't have the Hollywood happy ending.

Ansay: Yeah. And then it, it took a year for her to place it. And then, the.

Rubin: So it.

Ansay: The story collection came out, and then the novel, the next novel.

Rubin: Now let me get to the short stories.

Ansay: Okay.

Rubin: A marvelous title, *Read This and Tell Me What it Says*, I love the title.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: It's an inevitable one. You've got a collection of about 16 short stories in here. How did they come, come into existence, while you're teaching and struggling with this obsessive novel?

Ansay: Really.

Rubin: When did you.

Ansay: Comic relief.

Rubin: Which story came first? When did you know you had a bunch of stories? Are there many others written that didn't make it into here?

Ansay: Oh yeah. These are.

Rubin: Tell us about the stories.

Ansay: These are the, these are the 15 that hold hands. You know these are the ones that belong together.

Rubin: Fifteen right.

Ansay: And some of these, I mean two of them, *Sibyl* I wrote as an undergraduate. I wrote I was, I was in this undergraduate class where, oh there was this awful professor, and he'd always say well when I go home to beat the wife tonight, blah, blah, blah, he was just, he was repulsive. And I was so angry in that class. And we read the *Wasteland* and there's that epigram that says, you know, I've seen with mine own, my own eyes the *Sibyl* at *Cumae* hanging in her cage, and when the boys asked *Sibyl* what you want? She answers, I wish to die. And I was just sitting there like, I could make a story out of that. And I saw this, this older woman and, and so that's probably the earliest one, it's not the first story I've written. But they span I, I wrote two of them since becoming a professor at *Vanderbilt*, so they really.

Rubin: Which two?

Ansay: Neighbor and July.

Rubin: Well how did you, what was the earliest writing you did? Actually as a, you know, in your life, when did you begin or did you start with short fiction?

Ansay: I started with poetry, and, and I.

Rubin: When was this?

Ansay: I, this was when I was 23, so it was 19.

Rubin: What caused you to start?

Ansay: '88.

Rubin: Writing at 23? Most writers will say that they started writing poetry much young, in the womb, or, so what was it that provoked you into poetry?

Ansay: Health problems. I mean I needed to find something I could do sitting down. I'd been working for the American Museum of Natural History, Banding Birds. And I was working on a number of projects. And I was interested in getting a degree in ornithology. I wanted to do all this stuff. And you know, I had health problems, and I couldn't do that stuff anymore. I thought, well do I want to do data entry? No. Maybe I want to try writing. I mean it was really sort of a talking.

Rubin: Were you aware of the poetry world, or the literary world?

Ansay: No. No.

Rubin: Were you reading any poetry?

Ansay: No I wasn't. And the only books I ever read were the kinds you could get in the grocery store with, you know, the, the hole in the cover and the, the breasts poking out of them, you know, and. This is what really interests me because I have so many students that are the same way. They, they come to reading through writing. Instead of the other way. You'd think it would be the other way. But I know for me, I hated English classes. I didn't do well in English classes. And, and I always, there was always the feeling that I would be thought stupid, I would be told I was wrong. And I also, I never encountered books that reflected my own experiences. And the thing is, I go back now and I read many of the books that, I mean Henry James drove me crazy because I would read it, I'd think, if these people had jobs they wouldn't have these problems. You know they, they, why, why are you obsessing about the bowl, go out and get a job and that little, that crack in that bowl isn't going to bother you anymore. You have too much time on your hands, you have too much money. But you know, now that I realize there's, there's a whole range of voices out there, and I can fit my voice into that spectrum, I can go back to writers that, that as an, you know, late teens, early 20's, just left me going, ugh. You know I can go back.

Rubin: What was your inspiration as a writer? What would you say has been important in your own education as a writer, formally, informally?

Ansay: What was really important to me was the day that I cut classes at the University of Maine, where I, I have a degree in anthropology from the University of Maine, and I. So this was before I got the degree. I was cutting classes and I wandered into the wrong section of the library. The wrong section as there were.

Rubin: It happened into the wrong section. Yeah.

Ansay: Oh there were, there were all these metal shelves. It was clearly the underfunded section of the library. And I saw these, these little, I don't know, they were books, but they had soft covers and they had bright colors on them. And I started opening them. What I found was the literary journal section. I'd never known there was such a thing as literary journals. I opened the

Yale Review and I read Any Minute Mom Should Come Blasting Through the Door, by David Ogden, Ordan. David Ordan. And it is now in that book, Sudden Fiction, that, that anthology. I read it, and I just, I'd never read anything like that before. Like, like about real people that I that I might know. And it just was like this light going on. At that, at that point I started to read, and soon after, was when I started writing.

Rubin: And you started writing poems?

Ansay: I started writing poems.

Rubin: Did you show them to anyone, send them out?

Ansay: No. I've never showed my poems to anybody except at, right after I started writing, I showed them to, to a professor and he said, why don't you try writing fiction? So I did. And recently, after finishing, I've got a poetry collection together, and, and basically the way that, I, I have never showed my poems to anybody. And, and if I published them, you know, I, I'd feel that little rush of achievement. But I showed them to, I showed the collection to a colleague, and I got my first critique about six months ago. And it was very helpful, but it was very strange because in terms of my fiction, I'm very much, you know I got an MFA, and I've gone through the workshops, and I've.

Rubin: Tell us about.

Ansay: Done that.

Rubin: The MFA program at Cornell. Why did you apply to it? You know on the, when, where were you in your life that you decided to go to, did you?

Ansay: I was making a living reading, making tapes for the blind. And, and I'd worked as a, a receptionist at a hair salon. And I, I had heard about MFA programs because I got a scholarship to the Stonecoast Writers Conference. And I worked with Robley Wilson there who's the editor of the North American Review. And he said, are you serious about this? I said yeah, yeah, sure. And he said, you know, this is what you need to do. This is an MFA program. This is what, what needs to happen. And around the same time I read my first story I had ever written at that conference. And Madison Smartt Bell was in the audience. And he came up to me and he said, here's my name, here's my address, if I can ever do anything for you let me know. So I sort of had these two people that I really, you know, they were like writers. They were out there on Jupiter. But no they were flesh and blood, and they were like, you, you might want to try and MFA program. So I could only afford to apply to four because the application fees were like \$50. And I applied to four and I didn't get into any except Cornell, which was the only place I thought I'd never get into. And I still don't know why I got in. Well I do know why. Jim MacConkey was on the committee and he's like, I want her.

Rubin: Well what, without having to do a, a PR job or an expose on Cornell, what did the MFA program mean to you? I mean was it really.

Ansay: They paid me.

Rubin: Important to you?

Ansay: Money to be a writer. They waived my tuition, and they paid me \$10,000 a year. I mean it was just, it was incredible. I mean I could not have gone without funding, and they fund everybody there, everybody.

Rubin: Was the program.

Ansay: Gets equal funding.

Rubin: Good for you in some way, particularly? I mean did it especially change you in some way or?

Ansay: Yeah. Because I went in without publications, without, I mean they wanted a 50 page portfolio to apply. I didn't have 50 pages written. I was finishing it like right before the, I had to get it into the overnight mail to get it there. And I went out having a sense of myself as a writer. I went out as a person who was publishing. I understood how to do that. I under, I met writers. I'd never met writers really before, except at Stonecoast.

Rubin: You had a credential to teach. How interested were you before that in teaching or is that something?

Ansay: I wasn't. I thought I'd never get a job, because everybody said, you'll never get a job, and I get a job. But everybody said you'll never publish a book, I thought I'll never publish a book, and then I did, so.

Rubin: You didn't show your poems at Cornell though?

Ansay: No. No.

Rubin: You were a fiction writer.

Ansay: I hadn't, I hadn't gone back to writing poetry yet, at Cornell.

Rubin: Let me ask you about this though. Would you like to read one of your poems?

Ansay: Sure.

Rubin: There's one, they seem to draw on the same kind of landscape.

Ansay: Yeah they do.

Rubin: That the fiction does.

Ansay: Sure.

Rubin: We should say that you have, in your collection of short stories, the same basic setting of this Midwestern town. Holly's Field.

Ansay: Yeah and in, in the novel and.

Rubin: Wisconsin.

Ansay: The stories, yeah.

Rubin: Yeah and you're developing your own Faulknerian universe.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: I mean is Sister set also in the same [inaudible]?

Ansay: It's split between there and, and other places.

Rubin: Do you think of these poems as coming from that place?

Ansay: Yeah they do.

Rubin: Read us one.

Ansay: I'll read you as a, a, just a short one. It's called "Nothing Wrong."
"Nothing Wrong."

Alone in a three bedroom house in Wisconsin.

My father awakens with headaches.

Soon there are other symptoms.

Dizziness, fatigue, loneliness.

The specialists find nothing wrong.

The house has white carpets and walls,

tinted glass in the windows to keep out the damaging light.

My father has gout, a stiff right shoulder, and six briefcases filled with the papers he carries in the trunk of his car.

For who knows where one might be called, and when.

My father keeps his documentation in easy reach.

He knows where he's been, what he's done, he's kept receipts.

He doesn't want more than his due and no less either.

He doesn't believe in God and yet he busies himself with preparations, scouring the house to such whiteness, an angel might flutter from room to room and remain unseen.

Rubin: That's very nice. Let me ask you this. What, what is the difference for you between these genres? I mean are you writing them at any time, any given day you might write poetry work on a short story and pursue the, the novel, or, or what?

Ansay: All at the same time, right.

Rubin: Do you know that something that's coming to you is going to be one or the other?

Ansay: No. But poetry is always harder.

Rubin: What happens, a line comes, an image? Which could be a start, a beginning of a story or I mean how does that work for you? Can you distinguish?

Ansay: I can't. I mean I'm working on so many things at once, that they all sort of slop over into each other.

Rubin: Is that a different part of yourself, or is it all coming from the same?

Ansay: It's all the same. It's all the same. I get really annoyed with, with poets who are like, you know, oh I could never write poetry on the computer. Of course I write, I write stories on the computer, but poetry is, it's more intimate, you know, it's like, if you, if you, there's a lot. Poets are more high maintenance I think than, than fiction writers. Not, so, now I'm probably saying something that, something that will get me in trouble. But you know they, there's just, there's just sort of this mystique about it, and, and fiction writers, you know we're, we're the grunts you know, we just sit down, and you know, we work on schedules. But.

Rubin: But yet you write a lot of poetry and you published them I'd say in very good places.

Ansay: Yeah. I don't think, I think I didn't know enough to make such a distinction or such a fuss about it. I mean I didn't know you were supposed to. So I haven't.

Rubin: That's good.

Ansay: To me it's, it's, it's just, it's, when, when you're trying to write something, you're just looking for the best vehicle to express what you have to say. And that's why I started writing formalists poetry because I was working with a lot of free verse for a long time, and I found that you know, I, I wanted more, oh there's such, I want to say weapons in my arsenals. Oh. You know. I'm a child of the Reagan Era. I wanted to have more just tools at my disposal. I wanted to have, you know, more vehicles. And.

Rubin: Does writing poetry help your fiction?

Ansay: And vice versa. But I, I always find it interesting when people shut themselves down creatively by saying, oh well I don't like formalist poetry, I don't like language poetry, I don't like narrative poetry, or I write poetry, I don't write fiction. Or I write fiction but I'd never write poetry. Well you know and like they, they compartmentalize themselves.

Rubin: A certain kind of discourse often in, within academia forces these, these kind of self-distinctions and.

Ansay: I think so.

Rubin: Categorizations that are not always at all helpful.

Ansay: It's totally artificial, because if you get a class filled with students that don't know better, and you say, you've got to write this, you've got to write this, they'll.

Rubin: You are.

Ansay: Write everything. You know, and they'll do it without complaint. So I think it is sort of an artificial distinction.

Rubin: So you speak, you speak enthusiastically of your teaching and, and you've been at it just a few years, but it seems to energize your writing, rather than pull you away from your writing.

Ansay: Yeah. Yeah. So I also only teach two classes per semester.

Rubin: That's useful. What about the issue of music? You were trained as a, a young girl, as, as a pianist. And has the music gone into the writing? Do you think of?

Ansay: I think so.

Rubin: Your poetry as in any way more musical, or is language, language, whatever genre?

Ansay: Language is language. I think my, my, this sounds really arrogant. I don't, well maybe not, it depends what you think of my poetry. But I think my fiction is every bit as beautiful as my poetry. I scan my fiction when it isn't going well, if I'm, if I'm tripping up over something, I'll scan it. I'll, I just, I think that it, that it, you know, it, it ought to be beautiful, or you ought to like shove it into a genre plot and make money on it. I mean one or the other. But it.

Rubin: What does, what does beauty mean to you in this sense?

Ansay: Beauty means a rhythm that makes sense. It means when the rhythmic expectations match the, the concrete expectations. In other words, if you've got, if you've got somebody who's, who's afraid or longing or happy or sad, the rhythm of the language supports that and doesn't conflict it. I mean you get, people talk about, oh this drags. This passage drags. And what they aren't realizing is what they're telling the writer is that rhythmically it's wrong. You know and if you're able to hear that, and able to make sure that the rhythms of the language match what you're trying to do with language, you know, the work just goes a lot better.

Rubin: Well we are at the end of this discussion unfortunately because we're at the most interesting place to continue it, I hope we will continue you it sometime soon. Would you conclude by telling us what you, what your ambitions are at this point as a writer, and what do you see? Are you working on something now that *Sister's* already coming out?

Ansay: Yeah I'm working on a.

Rubin: It's *Sister*, not *Sisters*.

Ansay: *Sister*.

Rubin: Yeah.

Ansay: I'm writing another novel. I'm working on a collection of personal essays. And my ambition is to just keep writing.

Rubin: Do you, do you, I will say is, you are definitely working in a, in some sense, a female territory, very strong female central consciousness as *Sister*, the title implies this to, the mother, daughter, relationships. There, do you see the same concerns running through all your work? I mean in the short stories which we barely talked about, there again centered particularly around female characters.

Ansay: Although a lot of them are centered around male characters.

Rubin: There are male characters too.

Ansay: Yeah.

Rubin: Is there, what do you feel about that writing the male characters, writing the female characters? Can you do them with equal confidence?

Ansay: Yes.

Rubin: Why? Why?

Ansay: There's no.

Rubin: Can you do them with equal?

Ansay: Because we're all people.

Rubin: And this, this stuff about quiet, unspoken things, changes that happen and, and in the characters and may be subtle ways, that may mean a lot for the future, though we don't know what they mean, this kind of thing runs throughout your work. I do think it will be nice at the very end here if, if you might take us out with a little bit of reading.

Ansay: Okay.

Rubin: And there's really not enough time to, to read extensively.

Ansay: To do "Lies."

Rubin: Which I wish.

Ansay: Okay.

Rubin: Because you said, that's a three minute read?

Ansay: Yeah that's a three minute.

Rubin: Well you want to read it, and say something about it?

Ansay: Sure do we have time? Three minutes?

Rubin: Do we have three minutes? Yeah. We do.

Ansay: We do.

Rubin: Just quickly say what it is, it's a story.

Ansay: This is a story from my collection, *Read This and Tell Me What it Says*.

And that's all you need to know about it.

It's just a little sudden fiction called "Lies."

Rubin: You, you do sudden fiction, short fictions and you write novels, and you said you were going to continue in all of these.

Ansay: I hope so.

Rubin: Okay.

Ansay: I hope so. "Lies."

I slept in the same bed with my cousin Nancy until I was ten years old. After that my aunt said I was grown up. And she bought me own bed, a used metal cot that someone had painted white with pink flowers. She put the cot next to Nancy's bed and at night we held hands across the open space between us. Nancy was 11, and wore rings on all her fingers. I traced each one until I knew them by heart. Our room was the attic, and when it was too hot to sleep, we lay naked on top of the sheets and talked about whether we were good looking. I had dishwater hair and crooked teeth, but we would pretend I had long blond hair and straight white teeth and breasts like Nancy. Nancy looked just like my aunt. I didn't look like anyone at all. My aunt said I probably looked like my father who none of us had ever seen.

Nancy liked to tell lies. When people asked where my father was, she told them he died of an allergy to bananas or that he collected octopus eggs off the coast of France. She told people I was quiet because I was a genius and that I had invented the first household anti-gravitational device when I was eight years old. She told them I had been bitten by two different kinds of poisonous snakes and lived. She tried to teach me to lie, but I couldn't learn no matter how hard we practiced.

Some boy in the park really liked Nancy, would say to me, hey, what's your name? I could feel Nancy give me a look. But I always said, Jane, which was my real name, instead of Landa, or Beulah Lee or Sparky, the way Nancy would have done. When a boy asked Nancy for her phone number she gave them the number to the police station. When a boy asked Nancy how old she

was, Nancy told them 15. You have to be real dumb to be, to believe a lie, Nancy said. My aunt didn't know what to do about Nancy. Nancy she said, was out of control. When Nancy would put on her white summer skirt with the lacy blouse that scooped at the neck, my aunt put her head in her hands. You know what you look like, my aunt would say.

Nancy had a secret boyfriend. His name was Edward Martin and he was 36 years old. We knew, because Nancy had stolen his wallet from where he'd left it on the front seat of one of his cars. We spied on him from behind the lilacs as he worked in his backyard, taking pieces of his cars apart, taking apart those pieces.

Edward Martin wore cut off shorts and shirts hanging from his waist by their sleeves. He drank beer and tapped the ashes from his cigarettes into the empty cans. Nancy stole one of the cans and smudged the ashes on our foreheads. This will make us invisible to him, she said, but she was wrong. One day, when we turned around, he was behind, and his arms were full of lilacs. How come you two watch me all the time, he said? And when we didn't answer he said, do you like cars? He split the lilacs into two bunches. Here you can have these, he said, and gave one to each of us.

We like cars, Nancy said, and she tossed her hair. I like cars particularly. I'm going to buy one for myself next year when I turn 16. We followed him into his yard and he walked from car to car, explaining what was wrong with each one and what he was doing to fix it. We scratched the backs of our legs. We chewed the tips of our braids. You're not interested in cars, he said. Well how about kitty cats, you girls like kitty cats? He pointed to an old yellow Cadillac that was missing one of its doors. You take a look in there, he said. And on the floor, half under the front seat was a momma cat with her babies. Can I hold one, I said? But the momma cat hissed and her teeth were long and thin and white. Her pupils filled her eyes until they were solid black. She didn't look like any kind of cat I had ever seen. She tried to bite you, Nancy said.

But you know why she does that, Edward Martin said. When we didn't answer he said, you know how things get born? She went through all of that, and that's why now she protects them. They are all she cares about. You'll be the same way when you have babies, he said. And he was looking hard at Nancy. That's a lie, Nancy said, I would never be that way. Yes you will, Edward Martin said, you'll grow up and have a baby, and you'll be just the same. No I won't, Nancy said, you're not me so how can you say what I'm going to be like? Her voice was high and squeaky and she did not sound 15. She dropped the lilacs on the grass and walked away with her braid bouncing hard between her shoulders like it did when she was mad. Nancy, you going home, I yelled. But she wouldn't answer. I didn't want to have to look at Edward Martin, so I looked at the momma cat again. And the kittens tucked tight to her belly. Do you want a baby someday, he asked? And I said, yes, I did. You're so sweet still, you little ones, he said. And he ran his hand over my hair. He said, I could pick out names for the kittens. I named them Nancy, all six of them.

Rubin: Manette Ansay, thank you for --

Ansay: Thanks.

Rubin: Being here today.