

SHERIÉ FRANSEN

One Note from One Bird, 2014
Oil on canvas, 60 x 57 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

DAN WHITE

Stories of Displacement

Fiction writer
Molly Antopol
and the making of
The UnAmericans

Molly Antopol spent a decade working on her first short story collection, *The UnAmericans*; but the hinges in her fiction, the moments of revelation, came to her effortlessly. A young couple discovers a vault of hidden paintings that reveals a dead relative's secret infidelity, with grave implications for their own relationship. A father makes a rash decision to sabotage his daughter's efforts to honor him. A boy commits an impulsive act of theft to honor his blacklisted and disgraced father. Those moments are crucial in her stories, which are set in Israel, the Soviet Union, and America. She tells the stories of people who have lost their place and the young people who inherit the displacement. Long hours of preparation, drafting, redrafting, and research help her achieve these all-important moments; but the answers rarely come when she's sitting at a keyboard. They come when she's as far removed from her work as possible: taking a walk somewhere or swimming alone in a lake. Effort and preparation, including travel, interviews, multiple drafts, and intensive research, make such moments possible, and yet they feel received and mysterious.

Antopol is getting high praise for *The UnAmericans*. She received the National Book Foundation's 2013 "5 Under 35" award in the fall of 2013 (Karen Russell and Téa Obreht are past honorees), and was longlisted for the National Book Award. But her vision and the seriousness of her intent were present from the beginning.

Antopol earned her BA from UC Santa Cruz in 2000. The fiction writer, memoirist, and UC Santa Cruz literature and creative writing professor Micah Perks was her first writing mentor. "When Molly was my student, I was struck by her ambition and her willingness to work hard," Perks recalls. "I remember her coming to office hours often to talk about writing and books, and I remember how carefully she read Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants,' and how she then went on to experiment with subtext and dialogue in her own fiction. When you see a student reading like a writer, it's always a good sign. Even as an undergrad she won a literary magazine prize for one of her stories. At that time she was writing moody relationship stories, and I was surprised and gratified that her work took on deep historical dimensions in *The UnAmericans*."

This winter, Antopol spoke with *Catamaran* about her passion for fiction and teaching (she is a Jones lecturer at Stanford), her trouble with happy endings, and the roles of discovery, fate, and chance in the creation and development of a short story.

—Dan White

Dan White: In “My Grandmother Tells Me This Story,” you have a very striking moment at the end. The grandmother in the story has just finished telling a story about her days as a partisan, resisting the Third Reich, and in the process, doing some morally questionable things; at one point she robs a peasant family. It’s a painful story, and at the end, the grandmother suddenly turns the tables on the granddaughter: “All your life you’ve been like this, pulling someone to a corner every family party, asking so many questions. It’s no wonder you’ve always had a difficult time making friends.” I wanted to know how that hinge came to you and why it was important for you to have the questioner and the questioned reverse roles in the final moment.

Molly Antopol: All the stories were really hard to write. I think every one of the stories took at least a year for me to feel like I was getting it right, and that one took even longer. I think part of the reason is that I had been doing all of this research about the village of Antopol, where my family came from, in Belarus. I’ve been travelling to Eastern Europe and visiting partisan bases and conducting a lot of interviews and getting really lost, and just getting really, really swept up in a lot of archival research. And when I tried to write the story, it just felt like historical fiction, and the characters felt slightly wooden to me, and I was really disappointed. But I felt like no matter how hard I worked on the story, it just wasn’t coming together.

More than a year later, I was at a lake in Upstate New York and I was working on my book. I was at a writing residency, and it was as far from Eastern Europe as possible, but I was working on other stories, and I was on this long swim. I was out in the lake, and I thought to myself, “What is my problem? In so many of these stories, I explore dark parts of history that I didn’t live through—and why am I doing this? Especially when I sometimes feel as if I’m putting my family in an uncomfortable position by telling the stories of times that they don’t really want to talk about anymore.” I realized that tension was a large part of so much of the book. Yes, there’s a tension in what she does to a peasant family in the story, this robbery that she commits; but there’s also intense tension between her and her granddaughter, because her granddaughter won’t stop asking questions.

DW: Is that how the answers usually reveal themselves when you’re drafting your stories? They sound like something transmitted or received.

MA: With all of those stories, I would hit on the ending as I was writing, and it would just feel so right, and it would be incredibly exciting. For “Minor Heroics,” I had this image of two boys fighting, and I knew that one of them was going to let the other one win—and then I could kind of write toward that image. That’s the way that all of the endings worked in the book, and then it was an interesting and gratifying process once I figured out what my ending would be. Then I would spend a couple of drafts going back through the story and figuring out how to drop little clues for readers so that the ending didn’t feel engineered, but also didn’t feel like it was coming out of left field. For one of my stories, I was writing in a fog, and I got there and I thought, “Oh my God! This is happening to these characters and this is completely devastating. This is going to devastate the entire family.” It was pretty chilling, because I had spent so much time with these characters.

DW: The “grandmother” story was really unsettling for me because it gave me a sense that the moral fog of war applied even to those who were resisting Nazi rule and extermination. It unsettled me because there’s a certain relativism of terms like “freedom fighter” and even “terrorist.”

MA: Absolutely. And that was something that I thought so much about, especially when I was doing the research. I was reading every partisan memoir and biography that I could get my hands on, and it was interesting to think how people’s ethics were changing during that time. I asked many people what it was like in that moment—was it desperation? Was it anger? Was it rage? What do you do after that moment? It was interesting for me to think about what it was like for this narrator after the war ended and she lived, and she was left thinking about this act that she had committed.

DW: The grandmother is one of many characters whose context is gone. These characters have their moments in

their home countries—joining a cause larger than themselves, risking their lives, resisting power, and being under surveillance—and then they lose their moment, they lose their place, no one is watching them anymore, and they have to deal with their families.

MA: Many of my narrators are so obsessed with leaving a particular legacy to the world that they’re completely blind to what’s actually happening in their own home—what’s actually happening with the people closest to them.

DW: In just a few pages, you are able to establish a strong emotional connection between the reader and these characters, and you have this chance to let them off the hook at the end, and then you don’t.

MA: I think happy endings just don’t feel real to me. It’s interesting to travel with the book and hear from readers who were looking for a happy ending. As a reader, I never craved them myself; but I was thinking about how incredibly hard they are to write, because they’re often so fleeting in life. For me, it’s almost like I can only write about moments of pure joy when I see the bus speeding around the corner, and I know that the bus is about to hit this character, so I’m able to write about the sort of joyous moment that occurs right before, and that bothers me. I would like to write towards more moments of joy, and just figure out how to do it even if those moments don’t always last. In some ways, I felt that “The Quietest Man” [a story in which a once-heroic political activist gives false and potentially devastating information to his estranged daughter, who is writing a biographical play about his past] did have a slightly happy ending, and that there was that moment in the end where they’re connecting, and you and I both know that it’s going to fall apart and that his ex-wife is going to hear what happened, and everything is going to get blown up in their faces. But I felt like, in that moment, I was giving them that happiness and that connection, and that was as close as I could get to it.

DW: And within the frame of the story, it is a happy ending! But the reader has this terrible sense that it’s all going to fall apart. Somehow the story really begins after the

“I was just writing toward a strange image that I saw and I didn’t know what to make of the image; or I would be swept up by a voice, and the voice would be enough to keep me going.”

final word. I wanted to know how you developed this technique: having the stories appear to take on this uncanny life that continues after the reader closes the book.

MA: I think a lot of the writers I love are able to do something like that in a way that I really admire. I think Alice Munro does that in such an incredible way, where we are in a suspended moment of joy, but her narrators are so self-aware and so self-reflective that they’re able to see beyond that moment into the future. I learned a lot by reading her endings. I think Edith Pearlman does a similarly wonderful thing. Edward P. Jones also.

DW: Research plays a major role in your work. I was wondering: how much research do you need to do for any given story—to feel you know your way around that world well enough to play around inside it, write about it in a work of fiction—and at what point do you say “enough is enough”? It seems to me that research, hard as it is, is so easy compared to writing; it can become addictive, and an end into itself, for the same reason.

MA: [Research] is so much easier. The way that research played into this book may have been different, at least for this first project, just because the places that were already very close to my heart and central to my life. I lived part of the time here in San Francisco, and in Israel, and I used to be there full-time, and my family is from Eastern Europe. That's the part of the world where I spend a lot of time, and I hopped on every research grant or fellowship that I could get my hands on in order to spend more time there. Then, obviously, with the McCarthy era stories, those were coming directly from my family history, so with a lot of these stories it was history that I was already interested in and would have been reading about anyway. For all of these stories, it felt incredibly exciting to be able to interview people and spend time in the archives and be in a place and imagine everything for my characters. I found that I fell in love with the research a little too much in the beginning because, as you said, it's so much easier than writing a book. But I think that all of that stuff really matters in the end, because even if the reader never needs to know the price of groceries in 1951, I think I need to know as a writer, and the more that I can know about the landscape that completely shapes and informs my characters, the better job I can do telling the stories. I tried to read every book and see every documentary that I could get my hands on, and then I had to chuck everything away in the revision process that wasn't directly informing what was happening to my characters within the span of the story. That meant getting rid of a lot of historical details that were completely interesting to me, but would have just felt like I was showing off how much research I had done to the reader, and I don't ever want the reader to feel that they are reading a researched story. I don't even want them to feel that they're reading a story. I want them to just get swept up in the lives of these characters.

DW: You've spent a lifetime thinking of these issues and working on them. I'm wondering how your time at UC Santa Cruz lit a fire for you and got you started.

MA: I was just so swept up by what was happening in the writing classes [with Micah Perks], because she's such a great writer and she's such a great person, and she was so

supportive, and I felt like she was really on my side. She was constantly giving me book recommendations and helping me with my drafts. She made me feel like this was a worthwhile endeavor, and I remain so grateful to her for that, because I really don't know what my writing life would have been like if I hadn't had that crucial support.

DW: Perhaps you could talk a little bit on how your own practice as a teacher at Stanford influences your writing—or do you think it is a completely separate sphere?

MA: Oh, no, I think it's completely intertwined. I love it. Even if by some miracle I was allowed to write full-time, I don't think I would want to. I love teaching. It inspires me, and it informs my writing. And my students are so smart, and they're so engaged, and there is something just so tremendous about bringing in a story that I've read thirty times and that I think I sort of unpacked and understand—and now here's a group of people who are reading it for the first time and they shed new light on it.

DW: In your recent talk at Bookshop Santa Cruz, you talked about the importance of students reading like writers. But what are some of the issues that come up when you're guiding them through the drafting process?

MA: I would say there are certain things that come up across the board. Writing dialogue that can feel both very tight and believable, thinking about how to make sure that everyone in your story sounds different, just kind of peeling back, draft by draft, layers of interior so we can really understand what the characters are thinking and feeling, not just about in their own life but also how they're thinking and feeling in every scene and every moment in the story and how that will consistently change. We talk a lot about structure, a lot about things like when that last moment to enter a scene can be, when the first moment to get out of the scene can be, all of these questions. Then there are larger questions that happen when my students are writing.

One thing that I often think about is, "Is this really the best choice for the narrator of the story?" Often, in my own work, I'll start off with one narrator, and realize that, no, it

would actually be a lot more complicated and interesting and messy if this other person took the narrative reins and we were in their head instead. There are all of these different questions, and it is interesting because it's some of the things, like I said, like dialogue or structure or scene building—what happens, happened in many stories. But then there are these scenes that are unique to each piece. That's exciting to unpack and talk about.

DW: You encourage them to make more creative trouble for themselves in some way to unsettle the stories that they're doing.

MA: Absolutely! That's something that we talk a lot about in class—how to make things emotionally and psychologically messy in early drafts, which is the way I want them to do it because that goes through the life. And then there's the exciting moment in revision where you have this messy, tangled situation that you're writing about, but you get to tell the story in curls that are tight and lean and clean.

DW: You talked about how you hit on your ending in the process of writing. But as a reader, everything in your stories feels inevitable.

MA: All of the stories where I knew what was going to happen right away, where I could see the ending right when I began the story, went to the cutting-room floor, because I think that when I know too much about a story when I began, it's like I'm moving chess pieces around on a board. Things feel too wooden, and so much of the excitement and energy of writing, of discovering a character, is lost. For all of the stories that made it into *The Un-Americans*, I really had no idea what was going to happen for the eighth or the tenth or even the twelfth draft. I was just writing toward a strange image that I saw and didn't know what to make of, or I would be swept up by a voice, and the voice would be enough to keep me going. That was really all that it was.

Molly Antopol's debut story collection, *The Un-Americans* (W.W. Norton), was longlisted for the 2014 National Book Award and was a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 honoree. The book was chosen as a "Best Book of 2014" by over a dozen venues and will be published in six countries. She teaches at Stanford University, where she was a Wallace Stegner Fellow, and is at work on a novel. She lives in San Francisco.

Dan White's second nonfiction book, which he describes as "an embodied history of American camping," is set to be published in 2016 by Henry Holt & Co. His first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, (HarperCollins) was an indie bookstore best-seller and a Los Angeles Times "Discovery" selection. He was a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University in 2007–8.