



## The Winter Vault

*Anne Michaels*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# The Winter Vault

Anne Michaels

## The Winter Vault Anne Michaels

Award-winning poet and novelist Anne Michaels gives us a love story of extraordinary depth and complexity, a mesmerizing tale that juxtaposes historical events with the most intimate moments of individual lives.

In 1964, a newly married Canadian couple settles into a Nile River houseboat moored below the towering figures of Abu Simbel. Avery is one of the engineers responsible for the dismantling and reconstruction of the temple as it's rescued from the rising waters of the Aswan Dam. He is a "machine-worshipper," yet exquisitely sensitive to the dichotomy of creation and destruction of which machines are capable. Jean is a botanist by avocation and passion, interested in everything that grows. They had met on the banks of the St. Lawrence River and watched together as the construction of the seaway changed the course of the river and swallowed towns, homes, lives. Now, at the edge of another world about to be lost forever, Avery and Jean create their own world, exchanging the "moments that are the mortar of our days, innocent memories we don't know we hold until given the gift of the eagerness of another."

But that gift will not be enough to bind them when tragedy strikes, and they will go back to separate lives in Toronto. Avery returns to school to study architecture, and Jean enters the life of Lucjan, a Polish émigré artist. Lucjan's haunting stories of occupied Warsaw draw Jean further and further away from Avery. But, in time, he will also offer her the chance for forgiveness, consolation, and, finally, her own, most essential life.

Stunning in its explorations of both the physical and emotional worlds of its characters, intensely moving and lyrical, *The Winter Vault* is a radiant work of fiction.

## The Winter Vault Details

Date : Published April 21st 2009 by Knopf (first published January 1st 2009)

ISBN : 9780307270825

Author : Anne Michaels

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Canada, Literary Fiction

 [Download The Winter Vault ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Winter Vault ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Winter Vault Anne Michaels**

---

## From Reader Review The Winter Vault for online ebook

### Fionnuala says

I had the strange impression that this piece of writing was sculpted patiently out of a huge block of stone just as the giant statues of the pharaohs were sculpted in the Nubian desert. I felt that there were many more bits of writing that had been chipped away and discarded and what we were left with was the pared down shape which Michaels had carefully sculpted for us. I was fascinated by the engineering details relating to dam construction and the impact of man-made lakes on local communities. Michaels linked this theme of destruction of entire communities to the invasion of Poland by the Germans and the Russians but that part worked less well for me.

---

### Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

This one is special. To demonstrate, let me IGNORE the best parts, those where I had to stop, catch my breath, close my eyes for fear that the words are already blinding me while feeling "the blow, the disaster to a soul... caused by beauty." Allow me, instead, to maybe just pick a brief scene where nothing is happening, where the author appears to be giving the reader a respite from the seemingly endless glimpses of what literature probably is beyond this world we know--

"Dusk in Owen's bedroom, the window open to the rain, roofs black and shining, a crack of sunset. In this rainy blackness and this unexpected last light, the scattering of birds just before dark, both felt a new kind of desire, inseparable from the city. Inseparable from London, January 1964. The desire experienced in unfamiliar streets, one's body never more known by another."

I stared at this paragraph. I asked myself: how can a human being write like this, when she's just telling us that it's January 1964, the lovers lying on a bed inside the borrowed bedroom of a cousin (Owen), watching the dusk from the window?

Beauty everywhere, poetry even in the most mundane!--

"Brown birds lined the eaves of the vault roof. They balanced on the edge, small dark stones against the sky, now marbled grey: dusk."

Then, she just wants to share with you a word she has learned. She not only gives the word and it's meaning. She lays down the word like it is a plaintive song--

"I've been reading about the rain...That utterly distinctive smell, when rain first starts to fall--two scientists have analyzed it. They've named it 'petrichor' from the Greek for stone and for the 'blood' that flows through the veins of the gods. It's the scent of an oil produced by plants partially decomposed, undergoing oxidation and nitration, a combination of three compounds. The first raindrops reach into stone or pavement and release this plant oil, which we smell as it is washed away. We can only smell it as it is washed away."

We can only smell it as it is washed away. Like life. You can only live it as it passes away. Petrichor.

May I add: this is a love story. It can't get any more wicked than this.

---

## Moreninha says

Que gran sorpresa. Leí este libro por casualidad, buscando una novela que tuviese lugar en el Egipto más o menos contemporáneo (siglo pasado). Y me ha enamorado. Es extraño porque no es el tipo de libro que yo suelo preferir: soy más de juegos literarios y grandes fabuladores, pero esta historia de ritmo lento me subyugó, no sé si por su hálito poético o a pesar de él. Sólo hubo un fragmento que me desconectó un poco, unas veinte páginas o algo así, pero en general me mantuvo absolutamente atenta, leyendo muchas frases dos y tres veces, no porque fuesen difíciles de entender, sino recreándome en su belleza.

Además de esto, la autora ha caracterizado a sus personajes con unas vocaciones diversas (una ilustradora de libros infantiles, un ingeniero obsesionado con la construcción, una botánica...) y cuenta mucho sobre estas materias. Lo hace de un modo tan maravilloso que ha conseguido despertar mi interés por todas ellas.

Quiero hacer especial referencia a la explicación detallada y conmovedora de la pérdida, de la extinción de una cultura, especialmente aplicada al caso de Nubia. De qué modo tan delicado nos cuenta Michaels cómo afectó el traslado de la población tras la inundación de su territorio por la construcción de la presa de Aswan. Belleza.

---

## Gemma says

The Winter Vault tells the story of an engineer and his young wife. It begins in 1964 with their life in the desert where Avery, the husband, is involved in the piece by piece removal of a temple threatened by the rising water levels caused by a recently constructed dam. The traumatising pivot of the novel is the stillbirth of the couple's baby girl.

Like Fugitive Pieces, her previous book, this is a very poetic novel. It's a novel that has you underlining wise and beautiful passages rather than gripping you with its storyline. After the removal of the temple there are several other narrated incidents of displacement and rebuilding, the most memorable of which is the rebuilding of Warsaw after the war. The question it asks, taking its lead from the dead child, is can we replace what is taken from us. Recommended if you like beautiful writing; not so much if you need compelling storytelling.

---

## Andrew Mcleod says

This is a detailed review because my wife asked me to read it and comment on it, since she was due to read it and discuss it at her book club. I must emphasize that this is a very personal perspective. I have not read Fugitive Pieces.

Hardback Edition. Bloomsbury 2009.

Prologue. A very poetic introduction - but essentially meaningless. Well - wait a minute - it may not be meaningless, but when a poet writes, it can be very difficult to get inside the mind of the poet. For example, many years ago, some of Dylan Thomas's poems were considered inexplicable. Someone once offered a prize for anybody who could interpret the Thomas poem which began 'If my head hurt a hair's foot...'. But then a critic supplied the possible (and likely) answer that the words are spoken by the fetus in utero before birth. So it could be with Michaels. It may not be easy to understand what she is getting at... But I have to say it sounds like poetic twaddle.

p5. "It would no longer be a temple". So what - it has not been a working temple for 3000+ years anyway!

p6. Flowery stuff! Deliberately flowery vocabulary, e.g. 'man-grown'.

p51. " the Hebrides, where sea and sky are driven wild by the scent of land" This sounds like typical female poetic 'Pseuds Corner' stuff. For those of you not from the UK, Pseuds Corner is a section of the satirical magazine Private Eye that sends up pretentious prose and journalism.

p57. "After a very long time". Why a very long time? Why not a long time. Poetic tautology.

p62. "cuffs". In UK - turnups

p78 "braid". Ditto. In UK - pigtail

p84. This is good. I'm sure that this is what architects would like to feel that they have planned for, but most of what happens in a building is chance and unplanned.

p133 Paras 2,3,4. What rubbish!

p137. A theme emerges. Displacement. Personal tragedy. (Michaels is Jewish.)

The relocation of the villages. A parallel with the cutting up and relocation of the temple. Soon to be a comparison on an extended scale, with the rebuilding of Warsaw.

p144. Michaels is getting confused with the TV series. It is not Greys' Anatomy, it is Gray's Anatomy, as in Henry Gray (1825-1861), known to generations of medical students.

p174-6. What is the purpose of the old man? It seems to be to transmit an external philosophy about fate and destiny. Seems a bit wishy-washy to me.

Oh dear. The baby episode. Parallel with destruction externally. The destruction of living things. Incisions in the rock. Incisions in Jean's body. So what? Get on with life, dear.

p183. Last paragraph. Can you explain this please?

Part 2. The Separation

p196. The planting... I think psychologists call this 'displacement activity'. Then we are into more painting and Lucjan, Lucjan's story, autobiographical, in Warsaw 1945 et seq.

p233. The rebuilding of Warsaw, as a facsimile, just like Abu Simbel. Jean says this is "a false consolation". OK - true in Warsaw's terms - it could have been changed, but Abu Simbel either had to go or to be moved and saved - it's a little different.

p239. The Rembrandt identifies it as the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto absolutely.

p241. The winter vaults and bodies awaiting burial. First mention.

p252. "Synchronized swim of chordal progression and bent sound". Good image. I think this is the best writing in the book - the descriptions of the band.

p272, and before, and after. What the \*\*\*\* is Jean doing with Lucjan anyway? Is it Avery or Jean who wanted the separation? It wasn't clear to me, but I didn't much care anyway because they were such wimpy characters! The painting on her back in the first few pages I found pretentious and rather unlikely. I am sure that you will respond with lots of answers about the decoration of the human body, but if he was such a good painter why not get some canvas, paper, or perhaps original papyrus (we believe that papyrus first came from this region, don't we?) and preserve his wonderful works for posterity.

p287. Use of painful holocaust images. Oh no not again. An easy trick to get sympathy.

p308. Muzak. Is that story true? I can't find any confirmatory evidence.

p320. Yes OK very poetic but do I understand this? No.

p319. para 5. Realisation of her mission - to have Avery's child.

p321. Ewa's bicycle. Jean is a 'stranger at the feast', a 'Ginny come lately' and this allows Jean out. Thank heavens. We've got to find out whether she and Avery (both of them wimps) can get it together!

Part III. Petrichor. Thank heavens. Nearly finished.

p327-8. Para 3. Hmmmm. Fanciful crap.

p332. Bottom half of page. Oh dear! What nonsense.

p335. Last para. Oh dear oh dear! Please let's open a Labatt's and put on a hockey game..

#### Final Comments

One could write a lot of portentous analysis of this book, and many readers on Goodreads pages have done just that, but quite a lot of reviewers seem to have seen through it. I'm sure that at a lot of author and audience meetings this happens and probably goes on in a navel gazing manner for hours. Frankly I don't

think it is worth that depth of exploration.

There are many things for women in this book, that are meant to tug at the heartstrings, and I will be most interested to know if a women's book club group felt deeply about it and were deeply affected by it. I will await the feedback from my wife's group:

1. Early loss of a parent - both protagonists
2. The need to follow the career of one's husband. The subjugation if you like.
3. Pregnancy and stillbirth
4. Husband's realisation that he is in the wrong job and his single-minded self absorption in following his new path.
5. Lucjan, a father figure, a father confessor, and although a lover, a very discreetly presented one, so that one feels eventually that it will be sort of OK for Jean to go back to her husband.

She obviously needed to get the holocaust off her chest, as so many have, and to use it as a major part of the novel.

Finally. Why the 'Winter Vault'? Is this where her husband's body is stored for the second half of the novel until he comes to life again and she can join him? I am sure that lots of book club devotees will love to discuss this topic.

Sorry, but as you may have gathered, I didn't think this was a great book. Unfortunately I had just read the whole of the Millenium Trilogy (Stieg Larsson), and poor old Jean and Avery just can't hold a candle to the characters of Mikael Blomqvist and Lisbeth Salander!

---

### **Robyn says**

There is very little story to this novel. Two decent, smart and unremarkable people are in love and then find it difficult to love one another following the death of their child. The details of this story are given much less attention than you might expect; instead, long passages consider the wife's interest in botany or the husband's involvement in public works projects. I wondered why this is so and the answer I came up with is that this is kind of the way life is: Thinking about what you do or agonizing about the past - these musings don't add up to a story, necessarily, but they do add up to a life, or what constitutes a marriage. What this novel lacks in plot, Michaels makes up for with her attention to words, meanings and feelings, and I didn't mind the lack of plot because I found the writing so beautiful.

---

### **Maia says**

I'd give this another half star if I could but I cannot, in all honesty with myself, give it three.

This book was chosen--a little to my dismay, I admit (something about the title!)--by my more 'literary' bookclub. I read it slowly, trying to do so with an open mind. In the end, however, I was left feeling the same way I felt when i began: these novels are a perfect example of all the problems in so-called 'literary novels' and in so many novels written by authors who are first and foremost poets. We often make the mistake of believing that a) a poet and a prose writer must necessarily be the same thing, or b) poetry is somehow a higher form of art than prose and therefore a poet, when attempting a novel must necessarily do so with greatness. And this is rarely if ever true. In my mind, it's closer, to say, painting and filmmaking. Even Sylvia Plath--who desperately always wanted to write The Great American Novel--didn't succeed with 'The

Bell Jar' as she did in poetry.

So this novel: some lovely writing, some acute lyricisms, some wonderful metaphors and bell-ringing language and gorgeous words and even incredible ideas--but never quite a novel. The protagonists aren't entirely believable, the early times in their marriage seem 'an idea' more than a reality, the tragedy that destroy it does not appear to occur organically but rather as an authorial imposition in order to continue with said ideas, and, in the end, the narrative never comes alive. The Holocaust theme--which is clearly a big topic for the writer--has been done better and more originally elsewhere. Perhaps Michaels has something fresh to say about it in her poetry--which I have not read--but certainly not here.

I was unsurprised to find that many responded as I did at our bookclub meeting.

---

### **Violet wells says**

I have tremendous admiration for Anne Michaels' courage and ambition. She composes her novels as though she believes she has a place beside the very best novelists in history. I suppose though you could also use an argument of hubris against her. Her insistence on the poetry of life can be exhausting. Her characters are immune to 90% of life's emotion, especially all the petty stuff. Every moment is an epiphany. Often these are very beautifully described with lots of wisdom. Her characters are talking encyclopaedias. She tends to give them the entire crop of her research on any given subject, in the form of long uninterrupted monologues. The same was true of *Fugitive Pieces*, the other book of hers I've read. On the one hand she does a good job of conveying how much excitement and enlightenment she gets from her research; on the other the novel becomes less an act of storytelling and more like a lecture. Sometimes it can feel like she has too possessive a grip on her material and doesn't give her characters any freedom to breath, to develop beyond her intellectual construction of them. She constantly breaks two of the cardinal rules of novel writing – she tells instead of shows and makes little attempt to alchemise her research into narrative dramatization.

At times it reminded me of her Canadian compatriot Jane Urquhart with the relentless duplication of symbolic imagery. She gives us so many examples of the demoralisation inherent in the displacement and rebuilding of a community that it sometimes felt she was shouting in her attempt to make her point. This was especially true when she brings in the reconstruction of Warsaw after the war to parallel the displacement of the villagers as the result of the Aswan dam in Egypt and a Canadian community as the result of the construction of the St Lawrence seaway.

The sexual politics in this novel are sometimes like a throwback to the 19th century. We have a passive female (a passionate but amateur botanist) who is good at listening, far too good for her own wellbeing, and two men who love the sound of their own voice. In my experience men who relentlessly hold forth are controlling men. Doesn't matter how knowledgeable or interesting they are. Talk taken to extremes can be a form of dictatorship. I found it strange that Michaels idealises and romanticises this kind of relationship. Jean, the female lead in the novel, constantly frustrated me. The catalytic event of the novel in personal terms is the stillborn birth of her baby girl. The most contrived and forced part of the novel follows when she leaves her husband for a man who tells her about his experiences in Warsaw during and after the war. His narrative itself is fascinating and compelling but it's all a bit too conveniently relevant intellectually which renders it clumsy emotionally and artistically.

In a nutshell I enjoyed the writing a lot more than I enjoyed the rather overly contrived clunky artistry of this novel. It's the kind of book that makes you realise there's more to a brilliant novel than beautiful writing and thematic unity. Perhaps there's too much intellect here and not enough imaginative and emotional empathy. As a result the characters come across as constructs rather than living human beings. The writing though is

often so good it makes it well worth reading.

---

### **Shirley says**

Anne Michaels is primarily a poet, and her prose shows it. I'm not sure I know where she is going in this book, but I think she is exploring the destruction of whole ways of life: the farms and villages that made room for the St. Lawrence Seaway, Nubian culture and life for the Aswan Dam, the Holocaust for??? Not sure about the last one, but there are hints.

How can you not love a book that starts with"  
"Perhaps we painted on our own skin, with ochre and charcoal, long before we painted on stone."

This iwas a hard book, but well worth it.

---

### **Mila says**

It took me quiet a while to read this. But simply because I read it very slowly, deliberately slowly. I loved it so much, I didn't want it to end.  
Anne Michaels' prose is so wonderful, every new sentence, every new paragraph, is a poem, is a love song to language, to the written word.  
(My copy of the book is now full of notes and underlined bits. It's like I had conversations with the characters, while reading. There was so much going on in my head while I was following the story, I couldn't help adding my own comments, questions and thoughts to it. Marvellous!)  
What a great start into the New Year, book-wise. :)

---

### **Natalie says**

It was better than OK.

The crazy thing was that I was reading it for no better reason than that I picked it up from my bedside table before heading out on a trip. Then I found myself sitting in a presentation in a hotel ballroom where a tidy well dressed speaker told of how a village and its inhabitants would be displaced by a mining operation and how the technology he was demonstrating would predict the costs of relocation and burden of disease before and after for the population. Why weird? Because the night before I'd read in The Winter Vault about the displacement of people caused by the St. Lawrence Seaway between Montreal and Lake Ontario (1959) and by the Aswan Dam project ten years later in Egypt (1970).

Serendipitous things happen to me when reading (see my review of Hypnotizing Maria) but this coincidental reading of The Winter Vault was so downright timely freaky that frankly the coincidence was bigger than the story for me.

Why not rate it higher? The imagery is evocative and the language is quote-worthy but the structure was disjoint and one of my favorite characters, Marina, and her relationship with the protagonists was left behind too quickly for my taste and that unbalanced the whole thing for me.

---

## **Friederike Knabe says**

Review from May 2009

Not many authors would have the boldness to connect three completely unrelated examples of engineering ingenuity in three different continents under one thematic arc, however complex and multilayered. Anne Michaels has done just that in her new, long awaited second novel, *THE WINTER VAULT*.

Michaels' passion is, however, less focused on the impressive visible results of three engineering achievements - the Aswan Dam in Egypt, the St. Lawrence Seaway in Canada and the post-World War II reconstruction of Warsaw's Old City - and centred more on the people who have been involved in these constructions or those who have been impacted by the resulting changes. In rich poetic prose, the author interweaves the intimate experiences and musings of her protagonists with broad societal questions and her own philosophical reflections.

The story begins in 1964 when the ancient Abu Simbel temple complex in Upper Egypt needed to be carved up and moved block by block, through a complicated process, to higher ground, to protect it from the impending flood waters of the dam. Avery Escher, a British engineer, is overseeing this delicate operation. His relevant experience stems from his training through his father during the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway. Avery is a practical, forward looking man, who can only imagine positive change emerging from such major redesigning efforts. His young wife Jean, having grown up in that region of Canada, had a different perspective on the project, and as a result is less convinced of the potential benefits of change for the affected people. She is also concerned with the need to preserve what was there, such as the local flora and fauna.

What brought those two very different people together, other than some parallel aspects in their personal lives? In Michaels' sensitive portraits they come across as complementary soul mates rather than passionate lovers "... at what moment during their years together had this woman... become Jean Escher? He knew it had nothing to do with marriage, not even with sex, but somehow had to do with all this talking they achieved together." And talking to each other they do, indeed! Much of their background is revealed through back story sharing. From the beginning, though, Michaels gives Avery the more prominent voice; strongly influenced by his father, he is grounded in his convictions, confident in his actions. Jean is an excellent and beautiful listener following Avery's story while her own reflections are more easily kept to herself than expressed to her mate.

Their dissimilar characters are well explored through their differing reactions to the Abu Simbel project and the visit of an abandoned Nubian village. The author takes great care to convey the beauty of the place, the romantic atmosphere on the one hand and, on the other, the deep pain that those who had to leave it must have experienced. While Jean feels for the refugees and the loss of their ancient history and of their natural environment, Avery prefers to see the positive side of new beginnings: the life that buildings can emanate. His perspective of "home" is that is something that we create over time and not the place where we were born or grew up. "Home is our first real mistake. It is the one error that changes everything... It is from this moment that we begin to build our home in the world. It is this place that we furnish with smell, taste, a

talisman, a name."

The couple's fundamentally different mind-sets come to the fore when tragedy strikes them to the core. They return to Canada to struggle with the fallout in their own, separate ways. What is striking right away in this second part of the novel is that, apparently, the "talking they achieved together" and that had cemented their relationship, is no longer an adequate tool for dealing with the crisis. Avery quietly fades into the background while the focus is on Jean as she attempts to reclaim her poise. Can she change sufficiently to succeed in her efforts? There are questions that linger.

It is at this point that, rather unexpectedly, the third successful architectural construction project is woven into the narrative. Using the same technique as earlier - personal flashbacks - timelines appear to be deliberately blurred, as the author's focus is as much on the devastating impact of occupation, destruction and dictatorships (Nazi and Soviet) on the population of Warsaw as on the reconstruction itself. Again, Michaels expands into opposing philosophical positions: faithful restoration of historical sites as a positive step to reclaim the past vs. any restoration of historical places defined as fake and therefore fundamentally wrong.

Michaels delves into a range of fundamental themes, such as human suffering due to displacement, loss of cultural roots and identity, the needs of the many over the rights of the few - the Nubians vs. the Aswan Dam, etc. Yet, she is first and foremost a poet. Her language and imagery is often impressionistic, leaving the reader to interpret the meaning and, even more so - not always successfully - to attempt linking poetic phrases to the novel's depicted realities and characters. At times, Michaels interweaves her own musings, and while we can admire her power of words, it can also distract the reader away from the narrative flow.

The two parts of the novel could easily be treated as stand-alone novellas, linked loosely through Jean as the consistently present protagonist throughout. Whether Michaels brings the novel and the story of Avery and Jean convincingly to a close in the short third section has to be left to the reader to find out. For this reader, a number of issues remain unresolved. It is evident also that the author's overriding preoccupation in this novel is not to produce a plot driven or character-based story, but to open the reader's mind to important and existential topics, even if they at times swell beyond the confines of a more traditional novel. [Friederike Knabe]

---

## **Isla McKetta says**

I've been thinking about what I could say about this book that would express how much I loved it. The only way to start is with my own story. Four months ago I married the man I have loved for sixteen years and I thought marriage would be a capstone on our relationship. I didn't realize our marriage would be the beginning of a new phase of love. Reading about Jean and Avery falling in love, I saw a closeness and intimacy that mirrored ours. I remembered what it was like to fall in love with my husband so long ago and that helped me understand the beauty and fullness of what was happening in this new phase of our relationship. I've heard it said that no marriage in literature can be a happy one, and Avery and Jean are confronted with a loss that divides them, but it does not divide the book and the ways they continue to relate and to love are an equally important part of the story.

Building on recurring themes of creation and simulacra in the wake of destruction, this novel created for me a sensation of deepening understanding as I encountered loud thematic echoes and subtler inferences throughout. Even tiny technical details of the transplantation of Abu Simbel, though woven into a beautiful story, reinforce these themes.

Michaels is first a poet and she re-imagines each sentence so that it is at once unique and seemingly

effortless. It is a joy to read about new and familiar subjects and to follow her curious mind as she describes the genesis of wheat and the varieties of palms.

Portions of this book and the general structure recall *Fugitive Pieces*, which I also loved, but *The Winter Vault* is in most ways a very different story and perhaps one with a wider audience. This is a good book for the curious mind and for anyone who has ever loved deeply and lost. I'm not ready to part with it yet. Perhaps as I read it again I will fall even more deeply in love. If so, I'll spare you the details.

---

### **Nicole Beaudry says**

This is nigh on sacrilegious, but I may just prefer this to *Fugitive Pieces*. Barely. It's beautiful and a bit soul destroying and those who can't find a plot in this aren't reading closely enough, or aren't feeling closely enough. I imagine this is the type of book one revisits, and I'm already looking forward to finding out what I'll get out of it the next time.

---

### **Shane says**

I was cautioned by those who had attempted to read this book that they had found it like “work.” Some had even given up in the attempt. And it was work in the opening chapters, when I was treated to excessive descriptions on engineering and botany, and given the exact number of villages, houses, people, goats, camels, ducks, geese and other assorted denizens who were moved during the building of the Aswan Dam in Egypt in 1964. And this excessive “dumping” of research data repeated whether in describing the objects in an open-air marketplace, or the types of maps in existence at the time, or in identifying the variety of birds that populated the flood zone.

The story line is sparse: engineer Avery meets botanist Jean, they have a still-born child; botanist leaves engineer, finds solace with an émigré painter, Lucjan, whose life experiences in wartime Poland are so extreme that botanist runs back to engineer. There is also a weaving of extraneous detail of the main characters' parents and their lives, which tends to overpower and deflect from the central story.

The theme of loss and displacement that Avery and Jean go through with the death of their child is contrasted against the wider loss and displacement of entire communities to accommodate mega engineering projects like the building of the St Lawrence Seaway and the Aswan Dam, and the wanton destruction and alteration of Poland during WWII to accommodate the Nazi expansion, and later, the Soviets. Avery and Jean are restorers by profession: he moves temples and others buildings in the line of flood to safer ground, and she replants indigenous and rare plants which are under the same threat, but they are each challenged when having to transplant and transform their own lives in the face of loss.

The dialogue runs on for long passages of recounting by Avery, Jean or Lucjan and is somewhat artificial. There are also long sections of philosophical discussion by these three, which I thought unnecessary. What happened to “show don't tell?”

That said, the language is beautiful and the author's poetic prowess shines in this area, and reading some of the passages made me abandon my “work” load to simply revel in the poetry. Lines like “Language is approximate, violence is precise,” or “Everything we do is false consolation, or any consolation is true,”

made me reflect, long after I put this book down. And the anecdotal descriptions of the destruction of Warsaw will live long in my mind.

Having limped to the end and bested my peers who had given up in the attempt, I paused to ask a couple of questions:

- 1) While a poet has a reader for a few minutes at a time with her poem, and can therefore take the attitude of “figure this out if you wish, I don’t really care, I write what comes to me,” can a novelist take that same approach?
- 2) Is there an obligation on the part of the novelist—despite taking detours into metaphor, lyrical language and rich research—to also tell a story that flows easily for the reader?

If the answers to the above are Yes and No in sequence, then I think Anne Michaels has succeeded brilliantly. If the answers are reversed, then she gets a failing grade. And of course, if there are no clear answers, which I suspect is the case, given that the form of the novel continues to evolve, I give her my three stars.

---