

Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

1997 WINNER

FUGITIVE PIECES BY ANNE MICHAELS

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Michaels was born in Toronto in 1958. She was educated at Toronto University where she continues to teach as an adjunct professor of creative writing. Her first volume of poems, *The Weight of Oranges*, was published to great acclaim in 1986 when it won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Americas. *Fugitive Pieces*, her first novel, has been published in over thirty countries and has won many international awards, including both the Orange Prize for Fiction and the *Guardian* Fiction Award when it was published in 1997. Anne Michaels has published several other books of poetry, including the award-winning *Miner's Pond* and *Skin Divers*. Her latest novel is *The Winter Vault*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jakob Beer, who tells his story at age 60 in 1992, is a Polish survivor of the Holocaust who, after losing his entire family in 1939, was rescued by a middle-aged scholar, Antanasios, and raised on the Greek island of Zakynthos.

Vivid memories of Jakob's dead parents and his sister Bella appear to him as both vocal and visible presences. In Athens, Jakob's own insistent memories jostle against stories of that city's wartime sufferings. Later, when Antanasios moves them to Toronto, he dies, leaving Jakob to complete his masterwork, a study of how the Nazis distorted archaeology to 'prove' Aryan supremacy: in so doing, Jakob must steel himself to excavate the horrors of his own history.

Jakob's life thereafter is devoted to his poetry, to a search for love he never seems quite able to find, and the growing wisdom that poetry is a language that can heal the past and the self.

A novel of astounding beauty and wisdom, *Fugitive Pieces* is a profound meditation on the resilience of the human spirit and love's ability to resurrect even the most damaged of hearts.

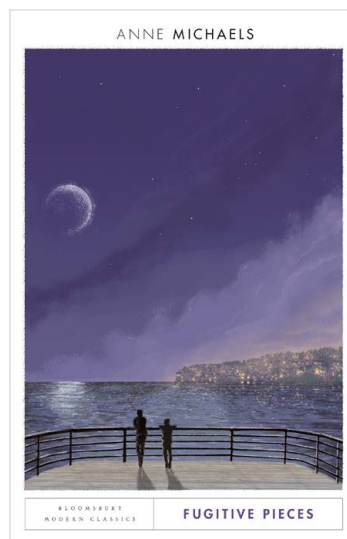
WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Michaels uses poetic language in a novel that chronicles the way that a character is processing his experience of the war and the Holocaust, which gives the book a certain artful feel but doesn't forget the atrocities committed by Nazis or their effect on Jakob and Ben.

Michaels' novel is split into two parts, the first being Jakob Beer's narrated memoir. The narration in this section

is written in the uneven way that memories tend to present themselves, giving us the information we need but without a sense of a measured, controlled narrative.

In the second section, the narration switches to Canadian professor Ben, whose parents survived the Holocaust and moved to Toronto to make a new life. We learn about Ben's experiences as the child of Holocaust survivors, reminding us of the impact that this trauma has had on a number of generations. Ben also uncovers Jakob's journals, which form part of the second section of the book. In this way, the novel successfully uses a variety of personal-seeming techniques to convey a deeply felt personal story.



DISCUSSION POINTS

When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts. And through their blood into another generation . . . those lost lives made molecular passage into their hands.”

What is Anne Michaels saying here about the trauma of the Holocaust? How does Jakob process the trauma of losing his family in such horrific circumstances?

And how do the generations that followed the holocaust – the grandchildren and greatgrandchildren of the survivors – continue to deal with the ancestral trauma of such a huge and violent event? Talk about the continuing impact of the Holocaust on our society today. Why must we never forget what happened?

QUESTIONS

In the preface to the book, Michaels attributes the following quote, “A man’s experience of war never ends with the war,” to Jakob. What do you think Jakob means?

Also in the preface to the book we learn that Jakob is dead. What does this knowledge lend to your reading of the book?

Anne Michaels uses a very poetic style of language. Is it wrong to make subjects like the holocaust ‘poetic’?

Or does poetic language add important depth and authenticity to the writing?

Why do you think Bella’s death affects Jakob more than losing his parents?



“ FUGITIVE PIECES IS A NOVEL THAT GOES TO THE HEART OF ANY DISASTER ”

LISA JARDINE,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 1997

NEXT STEPS

The Holocaust is a tremendously emotive subject. Write about what it means to you. How do you feel about it? Even if you aren’t directly

connected to the Holocaust by family or friends, you might say that all people are connected to every tragedy of this kind by virtue of our humanity. Even if it’s just a journal entry, acknowledge the fact of the Holocaust and record your feelings about it. Just by doing this small thing, you honour the millions lost with your remembrance and thoughts.

One of the most famous books about the experience of Jews in Nazi Germany is of course *The Diary of Anne Frank*. If you could write a letter to Anne telling her about some of the good things that happened in the world after

the war ended, what would you write about? What would you say to Anne? What would you promise to do in the world now to promote tolerance and love for our fellow humans?

“ THERE’S NOTHING THAT A MAN WILL NOT DO TO ANOTHER. BUT THERE’S ALSO NOTHING THAT A MAN WILL NOT DO FOR ANOTHER ”

ATHOS,
FUGITIVE PIECES

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE WINTER VAULT BY ANNE MICHAELS

THE CHOICE BY EDITH EGER