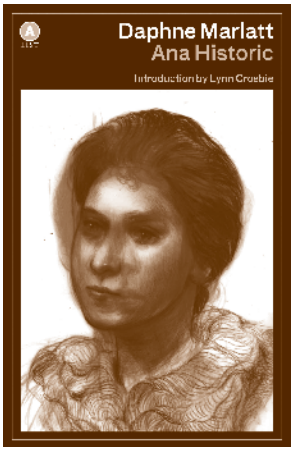
Whatever his reasons, Forster had both the audacity to envision a joyful union for a queer couple at a time when it was available to so few and the awareness to realize how few got close to it. It might be hard for contemporary readers and writers to understand how great a feat that was in 1913.

The filmmakers James Ivory and Ismail Merchant—themselves a couple—did. That's why they fought to make *Maurice* into a movie at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, even though (according to interviews both gave years later) they weren't crazy about the source material, and the keepers of Forster's estate were reluctant to have *Maurice* on the screen. After the film—which has strengths the book lacks—was made, Ivory said he was proved right. He claimed that people thanked him on the street for making it. As men like Maurice—and many people unlike him—were dying in droves, the film offered comfort and hope at a time when seeing two men together on-screen, and alive, was rare.

Today, when hateful beliefs are growing in boldness and visibility, we are offered daily proof that there is no easy, linear progress. Acceptance and safety are not guaranteed. In such a time it feels worthwhile to remember a piece of art that, despite an inhospitable world, kept alive the possibility of "a happier year."




ON DAPHNE MARLATT'S

## Ana Historic

**ROHAN MAITZEN**

There's a spectacular view from the twelfth floor of Buchanan Tower, where the University of British Columbia's Department of History is housed. Deep evergreen forests encircle the campus; beyond them the steel-blue waters of Burrard Inlet cross to the North Shore Mountains, providing a majestic backdrop for the city of Vancouver. Through the west-facing windows of the study room where I once had a carrel, the sunsets are so extravagantly beautiful that it could be difficult to concentrate on my work. The perspective within the department, though, was often less inspiring. "You're trying to change something in your culture!" expostulated one fellow student, angrily pushing his chair back from the seminar table as we argued over including feminist readings on a course syllabus.

I also sometimes studied in a stuffy room on the fourth floor. This one had no windows at all, but the welcoming atmosphere made up for the lack of panoramic vistas. It was the domain of the Department of English, and I shared this space because I had badgered the bureaucrats into letting me be the first UBC student to pursue an honors degree in both English and history. It was the late 1980s and interdisciplinarity was no more in vogue on campus than feminism: the only common ground in my dual program was me. As I shuttled back and forth between floors, though, I found myself also crossing and recrossing intellectual boundaries that seemed increasingly artificial—and increasingly gendered. Isn't history, after all, just a specific kind of storytelling? Don't novelists often tell true stories about the past? And doesn't enforcing the line between history and fiction end up particularly limiting the stories we can tell about women's lives?

Books have an uncanny way of appearing in your life exactly when you need them most. With nice serendipity, Daphne Marlatt's novel *Ana Historic* was published just as I was struggling to articulate answers to these questions. Fragmented, exploratory, provocative, *Ana Historic* proposes new stories and new forms, reaching beyond the conventional limits of both history and fiction. Annie, the novel's narrator, is a former graduate student who abandoned her own history degree to marry Richard, one of her professors. Annie has let her identity be subsumed in her husband's, accepting his boilerplate acknowledgement as compensation: "to my wife without whose patient assistance this book would never have been completed." This, her anxious mother raised her to believe, is "a woman's place. safe. suspended out of the swift race of the world." Now, however, Annie recoils at "the monstrous lie of it: the lure of absence, self-effacing." Waking in the night as Richard snores comfortably beside her, she feels lost, adrift: "the story has abandoned me."

But what if there were another story? Gradually, Annie awakens to different, liberating possibilities. The process begins when, while doing Richard's research in the Vancouver city archives, she comes across a rare passing reference to a woman in the man's world of what was then a rough frontier town:

> 'The first piano on the south side of Burrard Inlet was one which was . . . sold to Mrs. Richards, school teacher, who lived in a little three-room cottage back of the Hastings Mill schoolhouse, and afterwards married Ben Springer.'

"There is a story here," Annie thinks, but "that is all that history says": "she buys a piano and afterwards marries Ben Springer, as if they were cause and effect." History, as Richard likes to remind her, "is built on a groundwork of fact," but to tell Mrs. Richards's story, Annie needs something else: "i don't want history's voice. i want . . ."

What she wants, it turns out, is *Ana Historic* itself. In her hybrid text, Marlatt interleaves fragments of different

elements—archival excerpts, Annie's autobiographical reflections, Mrs. Richards's experience—giving no more authority to what is known than to what is imagined or desired. Into this undisciplined space, Mrs. Richards emerges, rechristened Ana ("back, backward, reversed / again, anew"), "free to look out at the world with her own eyes, free to create her vision of it."

Annie begins by reconstructing Ana's life, filling in the gaps, turning her absence into presence. This reclamation of narrative space is the familiar work of historical fiction, and of much women's history. As Ana's story approaches Ben Springer's accepted proposal, however, Annie chafes against following the facts along "that path that led to marriage or death, no other fork in the trail":

> what if that life should close in on
> her like the lid of a hope chest? if she
> should shrivel and die inside, constricted by the narrow range of what
> was acceptable for Mrs. Springer? if
> all the other selves she might be were
> erased?

"That fiction, that lie that you can't change the ending!": "the truth is," Annie reflects, thinking of her conventional mother, and of her own safe, conventional choices, "our stories are hidden from us by fear"—what might we find, where might we go, if we could overcome it?

> the silence of trees
> the silence of women
> if they could speak
> an unconditioned language
> what would they say?

For Ana, the answer comes with "a sudden rush of desire" that Annie herself can barely keep up with: "you've taken the leap into this new possibility and i can't imagine what you would say." Then as Annie finally escapes her fear, she finds her way to a happy ending for herself as well—Zoe:

> she asks me to present myself, to take
> the leap, as the blood rushes into my
> face and i can speak: you. i want you.
> *and me*. together.

Ultimately history and fiction both fall away, leaving Annie with poetry:

> it isn't dark but the luxury of being
> has woken you, the reach of your
> desire, reading
> us into the page ahead.

It's an exhilarating and somewhat vertiginous conclusion, one I have been thinking about and also arguing with for decades now. My own instincts are more prosaic; I am pulled up more often by the warning Annie hears but transcends:

> come back, history calls, to the solid
> ground of fact. you don't want to fall
> off the edge of the world—

Rereading it now, *Ana Historic* seems a little dated, too, with its invocation of

*écriture féminine*, its appeal to writing through the body, its self-conscious lowercase "i." Its metafiction is less novel now, its feminism less subversive—though these are signs, I hope, that we have indeed, at least a little bit, changed something in our culture. In its own way, *Ana Historic* is now a historical document. But rereading it also reminds me of the excitement I felt discovering the kind of woman, writer, and scholar I would be, and of the debt I owe to writers like Marlatt, who pushed past the boundaries I too contested. As Zoe tells Annie, "it's women imagining all that women could be that brings us into the world."