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Interview with Anya Achtenberg, author of *The Stories of Devil Girl*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Anya Achtenberg, who is here to talk about her new book "The Stories of Devil Girl."

Anya Achtenberg is an award-winning fiction writer as well as poet. Her recently completed novel, "More Than the Wind," was excerpted in "Harvard Review"; and her novella, "The Stories of Devil-Girl," was published in June 2008 by Modern History Press. Her second book of poetry, "The Stone of Language," was published in 2004 by West End Press (Albuquerque) after being a finalist in 5 poetry competitions. Her stories have received awards from Francis Ford Coppola's "Zoetrope: All-Story," "New Letters," the Asheville Fiction Writers Workshop, the Raymond Carver Story Contest, and others. Her first book of poetry, "I Know What the Small Girl Knew," was published by "Holy Cow! Press" (MN). She is at work on a novel centering on the experience of a Cambodian woman born of an African American father at the moment the bombing of Cambodia by U.S. forces began.

She has taught creative writing widely at numerous colleges, universities, and conferences. She has written curriculum for "at-risk" youth in and out of the public schools. She currently teaches writer's workshops and classes throughout the country, and is the founder and author of "Writing for Social Change: Re-Dream a Just World," a series of multi-genre workshops on writing for social change. She is in the process of writing a book on the subject. She also teaches online for Writers.com/writers on the net, and offers manuscript consultations for writers of fiction, memoir, and poetry.

Tyler: Welcome, Anya. I'm so glad you can join me to talk about your new book. To begin, will you tell us briefly what is the theme or idea behind "*The Stories of Devil-Girl*"?

Anya: It is in ways a strange little book, and it will be interesting for me to talk about it, something I haven't done for a long while, although it seems to have taken on a life of its own, in ways, so I thank you for this opportunity.

It seems to me that sometimes people living in extremity of any kind, people who have lived with oppression and poverty, as well as anyone who is deeply unhappy, and there are many reasons for that, sometimes focus on their children and rather than seeing the possibility for growth and for another chance at life, are only able to dump their misery there. The vulnerable and dependent often become the ones to blame or at least to act out rage and frustrations upon. When people cannot really parent, for so many reasons, the children become the dumping ground of nightmares. And we see globally a world using children as slaves for work and for sex, as child soldiers, and to receive the angers that adults themselves cannot organize into resistance that can make positive change. It is about this and about one soul's response to this.

Tyler: Where did you come up with the idea for *"The Stories of Devil-Girl"*?

Anya: Devil-Girl is one of these children. As I look at the world now, it seems that the silencing of the horrors of history in this family, the active PTSD of the father, the mental illness of the mother, is not such a rare constellation. I saw many children "cursed" by their parents, who sadly could not do anything else, "cursed" as they felt or were by their own circumstances, and it seemed to me the utter abandonment of children happens in many ways, and I wanted to depict one of the ways that children are not parented.

Tyler: Why did you choose to refer to the main character as "Devil-Girl"? Do you include her actual name in the book?

Anya: Actually, she has no other name in the book. Which means that in some way she will need to accept this name and rework it, transform it, into something that holds power for her. Something that affirms her and allows her to grow and become more than the curse and the limitations the epithet was meant to carry when she was called Devil by her own mother. This is a process that goes on with many oppressed groups of people, who take on the words others call them, and use them and change them to name themselves. But this took on its own life when parent after parent who heard or read any of this little book said things like, my own little devil-girl is starting kindergarten, or my devil-child fell off his bike today and got right back on.
There is a way then that a child being a little "devil" means something wonderful for good parents, that their child has a spirit that will NOT be broken. That their love of freedom and making "mischief" is related to the strength of their spirit, their desire to learn and explore and grow and live an endless curiosity; and related to their inability to be broken, by racism, by rigid socialization, by bad schools, by peers, even by their own parents.

So, Devil-Girl, or Devil-Child, became names that people with passion, with consciousness, with a desire for radical kinds of change in the world, with the ability to resist and to make change, seemed to take on naturally as having a relationship to something positive and unbreakable in the human spirit. Someone with their own center and truth; someone unafraid to take on the challenges of this historical moment in a daily way.

I guess this book in a way is about anyone and everyone who has been demonized by their society or family or culture. It is about the vision one develops through that, about reclaiming oneself and one's power, and joining your life, your power, your story, with those of others.

Tyler: Anya, there are many books out there about abused children. What do you think sets *"The Stories of Devil-Girl"* apart from those other books?

Anya: Those are important books, all. Tolstoy begins "*Anna Karenina"* in this way: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So there is much to learn and to look at in each of these books. Each child and his or her struggle past unfortunate circumstances is an inspiration and a very different story.

What in ways may set this book apart is something I am sure is present in many other books, again, in different ways. In part, it is the language. Stratis Haviaras was struck with what he called its "Powerful 'make it new' language," and this is of course a literary compliment, but it indicates what I think was important for me in writing the book.

The language becomes a home for this child who has no corner of safety or power. This is connected to the work I, and so many other people, have done with youth who for many reasons need to find that corner of safety and power.

And, indeed, part of what any writer does who is writing a child's story is to find the right balance for them and for their character between: this is how a child speaks or thinks, and this is how a child's soul would speak if they had the words. I guess I went beyond the balance. This is not how any child speaks. This is how a child's soul, or spirit might be more appropriate, in this situation might speak. Many writers have done this, in fiction and in memoir. I did it in my way. Going a little wild, I suppose. Finding the way into this child's knowledge and power.
The other thing I think characterizes this book is that the child becoming a woman is clearly not just herself. She is also protected and challenged by a larger being which inhabits her. She is raised to a mythical level by the presence of the larger Devil-Girl within her. And when she is almost at the point of death, it is a moment when she is also abandoned by that spirit, that mythical being, that archetype, if you will. That level of being must be restored to her for her own survival. In other words, we find our power is larger than we are, however we interpret that. And many such children are restored to life by finding what is within them that is connected to others, and to the deepest levels of being we hold. Somaly Mam, of Cambodia, was a child prostitute; now, her Somaly Mam Foundation works to combat trafficking in women and children for sex slavery, and to assist those rescued to rebuild their lives.

This is part of what Devil-Girl comes to see. How one's experience becomes gold. Useful in our lives' work.

Tyler: *"The Stories of Devil-Girl"* is a novella, but did any autobiographical elements get woven into it? Why did you choose to write a novella rather than a non-fiction work?

Anya: Yes, many autobiographical elements. And many fictional elements. And many elements that are both and neither. Which just are their own truth, maybe. Perhaps cowardice made me write fiction instead of non-fiction; perhaps my lack of ability. Perhaps I wrote this the only way I could, the way that followed the road of language into its own solutions. Into the mythical dimension of it. Into a ritual by language.

I didn't really choose, either. This took a long time to write, figuring itself out, and began with much of it in poetry. It moved into prose as I prepared to become a novelist. The kind of poetic prose here is something I doubt I could sustain for a full-length novel, nor would I want to. This book was a bridge for me between not only fiction and non-fiction, but between poetry and prose.

Tyler: The novel is also described as Urban Fiction. Would you explain to our readers a little bit about what Urban Fiction is?

Anya: The category of Urban Fiction has been largely associated with and developed from African American writing and looks in part at the violence and grit of the life of the streets in Black ghettos. This is not where my book fits specifically, although it certainly intersects with it. But there are many other valid experiences of the rough side of urban life, and "*Devil-Girl*" certainly holds some of that.

Here are some other ideas that I have about this category of Urban Fiction. Perhaps the city is itself a character, a central character. The city is more than a setting; it is a being that profoundly affects everything that occurs. It is a place, not static, a place in a particular moment, and in this case, a moment of great despair in the city, marked in part by the devastation and destruction that set the scene for the daily lives of people in the city who in large part had no cushion, but rather lived in the ruins of a city that was bankrupt, and almost sold to the bankers. We walked by rubble. We lived in a kind of constant tension that was racial and economic and gender-connected. In urban fiction, the characters search for respite in a blade of grass suffocated by the cobblestones, in the rain and its sounds. In the momentary glimpse of sun.

Urban fiction has a rhythm that is not calm, that partakes of the varied and constant rhythms of the city.

Urban fiction is also the story of encounters, encounters with all kinds of people, since the lives we lead in a city are constantly colliding and intertwining. Difference in a city is natural, normal, part of the daily fare. It is to be remarked, but not as unusual, just as what we do and see and experience.

Urban fiction means that one's challenges in many ways must be worked out in relationship to what others face. It means that each character is thrown into a world of complexity and difference, of parallel stories and stories at odds with each other. Urban fiction holds the stories that stretch into global fiction, since the urban setting is as well a setting of immigrants and their children, of the comings and goings of people from all circumstances and all points on the planet.

I could say more, but it is indeed a very interesting concept and category, one I think we need to grow and continue to reinvigorate, because of the city's connection to the global community, and because it affirms our need to live together, and to create something that is livable and hopeful and transcends the old ideas and boundaries.

Tyler: One of the *Devil-Girl*'s influences is the voice of the ancestors. Will you explain to us what that influence is?

Anya: One of the things I have come to understand in my own life and in the lives of so many people who have been called my students (teaching me something all the time) is that without knowing where you come from, without having a connection to your ancestors, your life is difficult in particular ways, and finding voice, finding a place to stand, is always and ever a challenge.

This can be something to be lamented. It can also be something that joins many of us together in the sweep of history, in the rapid eye movement of the dream of the planet that is constantly shaking itself up and moving us around. Some of us float gently in the same place for a long time, generations, centuries, while many of us are kidnapped, dragged, lured, exiled, in flight, and lose whole lines of our people over chasms too wide to breach, and yet we have a sense of something in our bones that is silent but present.

So many of us can never say, yes, that is who I am and where I come from; these are my ancestors; here is her comb and his watch, their land and their photo, her letters and his carvings. We all "have" ancestors, but for many of us, we may have little more than a line of story, a few names, a rumor, and a desire for guidance and connection. Many search; some find.
The ancestors in Devil-Girl are somewhat ineffectual. They would help but have been silenced and can do little more than file by to remind, to check, to mourn. They do not go back many generations. Those generations have disappeared back into the elemental world, into a generic history, into the big stories of her people, but how does one claim that?

These are the shades, the ghosts, the remnants, the beings in the fragments of story which are all I have. They were enough to keep me going, to know that somehow I am claimed and recognized at least by some of my lineage, but not enough to give me place and identity in a category recognized or acceptable yet. Just enough. Name. Physiognomy. Suggestion of the long ago, the mix, the migrations. Just enough to have a spine and stand up, and barely enough to have a voice, and just enough to begin to have a story.

The ancestors for Devil-Girl are in large part absence and silence. Yet, so necessary, their faint presence. Their absence helps her to find her name. Devil, in ways, is that which was expelled from the Garden, as my Sephardic ancestors were expelled from Spain. She can make myth, not having it all handed down to her, but just enough to say, there are beings older and larger than we are. That perhaps is the form the spirit of the ancestors takes here in "*The Stories of Devil-Girl.*"

Tyler: Anya, as Devil-Girl's story concludes, what do you hope readers will feel and come away with when they finish reading the book?

Anya: This is interesting to think about. I believe that this book goes toward the idea that there is always a story next to a story. That there is a child, a young woman, a spirit at risk here who works hard to survive, almost doesn't, and then moves into a process of transformation which allows her to take in the stories of others and develop an awareness of the suffering of others. And with that, she becomes a helper-spirit, if that makes sense. She is a tough little smart mouth to survive but becomes one who lives more fully in being of use.

She also develops in the process of gaining the power of language. Again, she uses it first to survive, but it becomes a medium of healing, and a road into joining the world, going beyond marginalization, into resistance, into community, into a journey that is lifelong and impacted by earlier challenges, but can become a joyous one.

A strange little book that journeys to hope, healing, transformation, empowerment, but nevertheless it does.

Tyler: Anya, I know you have taught writing extensively. Will you tell us a little bit about your writing workshops and other experiences as a writing teacher?

Anya: Ah, but this is a long story. I want to direct readers to my website for full descriptions of my workshops and retreats, as well as testimonials that tell you something of their use for many wonderful writers.

Tyler: Do you find any difficulty in balancing between being a writer and teaching writing, and have you experienced benefits in your own writing from your teaching?

Anya: I do have difficulty in balancing between being a writer and being a teacher. Being a teacher has usually won out, in some part because it is just a demanding job, and one must make a living or at least approach that, but in great part because this is a heart-and-soul kind of occupation, and I tend to make my students my priority, leaving me a bit in the dust. Like many teachers who are writers, I have vowed to change this, and think with each new setting for the scene of the crime, I will find a way to work a bit less intensely and perhaps fewer hours. Why so many of us have so much trouble with this is an interesting question. Is it that ability and desire to cross borders into the lives of others that both compels us to write story and to interact on as true and complete level as we can with our students and with the texts they create, whether written or otherwise?

The benefits have been profound. I became myself in part through teaching. I became a much better writer through the exploration of language and story I have had to do to feel worthy of being called a teacher. I have learned something from every student, every class and workshop. I have opened my language in the search to say something of use. I have been given license in the most magical groups to feel my way into the mysteries of this work of writing, and I have found the magic to bring others along. There is testimony, or I would have doubted it. But sometimes the most amazingly real things happen in the sharing of language and story, and in the collective brilliance that comes from approaching the workings of the creative process in such a group.

Tyler:: Anya, I know you are also a poet. Do you prefer either poetry or fiction? What influence does writing poetry have on your fiction and vice-versa?

Anya: I began as a poet for many reasons. One is that I did not come from a standard-American-English-speaking household, added to a certain kind of intensity of interactions and emotion-laden-speech at home. I had only fragments of story, my own and my family's, and did not feel I could ever tell an actual story. I lived in a city of millions of stories, and generally only got glimpses of so many of them.

I needed to find language, and poetry provided the intense investigation of the medium I needed. I no doubt used language to explore my own being, in individual and more mythic ways. But at a certain point, I got tired of "I." I needed story. I needed others' voices; I needed others' stories. I needed to discover and explore the other beings that were not only outside of me but within. At this point, I continue to work with fiction and find it daunting and

compelling and aim it to be my work for the rest of my life, although I hope very much that I will write poetry again, as I seem to from time to time.

Coming into writing that works, that communicates, that takes the treasures of my immigrant off the boat—street hewn—cantor driven—jazz inflected—urban rumbled—desert stretched—pressure cooked—subway English, and moves it into magic and song, turns upside down the years of threat and suffocation that was school for the poor, labor for the exploited, marriage for the victim, daily life for the homeless, memory for the forgotten—this is the blessing of my life. Poetry brought me part way there, story continues this work.
A great miracle happened to me in my writing that transformed me into a fiction writer. After years of being driven by something quite internal, and perhaps of use to others but of urgent necessity to me, I was freed of the story of myself, at least in part, and the one note of my voice, and entered the work of the novel with its multiplicity of voices and its revelation of character, sometimes from the inside out. Devotion to fiction has brought me into deeper knowledge of others, as poetry had brought me into knowledge of self. I tend to believe that it was completing this novella, "*The Stories of Devil-Girl*," that helped accomplish this shift through its crossing of prose and poetry, and autobiography and autobiographical fiction.

I talk about just these issues, of what the two genres mean to me, in an article posted at my website http://anyaachtenberg.com/?p=35 on February 16, 2007, "Genre-Jumping: From Poetry to Story." Please do take a look.

Tyler: Anya, I'm intrigued by your next book coming out about a Cambodian woman born during the Vietnam War—will you tell me a little more about your plans for that book and maybe when readers can expect to see it available?

Anya: I connected to the main character, Devi Mau (which means "dark-skinned angel" in Khmer), quite rapidly for reasons that lie in my own experience and the lives of people I love, the issues I am moved to bring forward, the questions of evil I grapple with, and my understanding of the hard road that follows historical trauma, war and displacement. During the summer I will do research and return to the writing after a particularly full teaching and consulting schedule. The movement between research and writing is delicate, since I have to keep the strong sense I have of the novel as a story with its own demands and trajectory, but I need to honor the experience of people in the real world.

I am afraid it will be a year before the book is essentially finished, but the writing and research has been and will be very exciting for me. Then, I am hoping, the road to publication will not be too long.

Tyler: Thank you so much for joining me today, Anya. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they will find there?

Anya: My website, which is called *Writing Story / Finding Poetry / Freeing Voice: Swimming through the ocean of language with Anya Achtenberg*, can be found at http://anyaachtenberg.com/

There is a blog there, with many articles posted about the craft of writing and related issues, everything from suggestions on writing about *Bad guys: characters who are unpleasant, embarrassing, evil, heinous, or even unsexy*, to discussions of creativity, of writing and its relationship to dancing, to *The Effects of Travel on Storytellers*, and much more. There is, of course, contact information and a calendar of events; ways to purchase my publications; descriptions of workshops and retreats, including my "*Writing for Social Change: Re-Dream a Just World Workshops*;" description of my individual services for writers; testimonial and breakthroughs; readings and interviews, written and audio files; reviews and articles; some of my writing and some recordings of excerpts of "*The Stories of Devil-Girl*," my novella just published by *Modern History Press*.

Tyler: Thank you, Anya. I've certainly enjoyed having you as a guest and wish you much joy in your continued writing.

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