

Interview with Aritha van Herk
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With Nicole Dargent, Erica Ens, Katja-Elisabeth Pfrommer and Tamara Pianos

T.P.: You seem to be moving further north with every novel you write or every book you write: So is this a kind of counterpart to the male defined western - the northern you write?

A.v.H.: I think males have tried to control the frontier. Always. That's their territory, and that's where they go when they want to run away from women. So for them the west always was a frontier to run away to. And when you run out of west, I mean, on a certain stage you hit the west end of Canada and you can't go any further, except into the ocean. And then actually by the time you get to Japan and to China you are in the East again. And so they get really upset because they have no more west left so they sort of did a turn and started going up north. But I think, the north is a more seminal space that does not permit itself to be colonised by the masculine interrogation and so I like the notion of north but also you noticed in *Places Far From Ellesmere* that I'm actually going over to Russia. If you keep going north you actually start going south. I think of the north as this wonderful kind of open space that does not already have a discourse attributed to it and that discourse you can alter or usurp or enter. So it is not so limited as the West.

T.P.: How did you get started? Did you want to write a Northern or did you want to rewrite Anna or something about place?

A.v.H.: I wanted to BE a Northern! And actually I started, I think, when I went up there to work the first time. It was 1975. I went to work in the North West Territories because I needed to make money to go back to university and it was the best place to make money quickly, right? So I went to Yellowknife to fly out with the bush plane pilots on their day trips because they got very tired and they would want someone to talk to them. And so I would go along and I started to get to know this incredible North. And it was wonderful and then I went back there and I kept going back and back and back. And the actor who plays my husband actually works in the North so I had all these chances to go and see different parts of the North. I think it is not so much that I want to be a Northerner but I like the notion of being Northern. Being enigmatic, being unable to read.

T.P.: So you think being a Northern is a state of mind?

A.v.H.: I think being a Northern is a state of mind. And I think it is a state of mind I am really interested in because it is not so already decided as other things.

T.P.: So "Ellesmere" is a state of mind, too?

A.v.H.: Absolutely! And once if you actually go to the place called Ellesmere the only thing you will discover is that place is a state of mind. You won't find out that - I mean, you will find out about Ellesmere but it is still very much a created space, it is an invention, it is an act of the imagination.

T.P.: So, is it that Ellesmere is not defined by anyone else, the tabula rasa thing, that is interesting for you?

A.v.H.: It is that but even more than that. It is not that it is a blank slate, but it is an enigmatic slate. It has been written on but it is not easy to read and it is up to you to read or to invent the text but it has been written on. I mean, Inuit People have lived there and live there, other people have gone around it or over it or through it, so it is not unwritten on, it is just that what is written on it is very

enigmatic.

T.P.: And that it can mean different things every time you read it?

A.v.H.: Absolutely!!

T.P.: I have the feeling that when I was rereading *Places Far From Ellesmere* it changed every time I was reading it. Like the ice is changing on Lake Hazen. Is this also a part of the image of the fragmented self and part of the construction of the book, that image of the ice on that lake?

A.v.H.: Sure, that whole notion of a substance that can change form - and this is what ice is: it is frozen water. And water is, as we know, a liquid that needs a container because it is so malleable while ice can be solid. But at the same time it can alter itself, so there is that whole wonderful notion of water and ice being the one element that can transform itself so readily. The same is not so true of other elements. And it has something to do with the way that you perceive the person in the place as a kind of changeable space all the time. Why Anna Karenina? You see, I thought, what is the place I can take her that is least likely that she would go? She is a sophisticated Moscow character, she goes to a place where she never went. But I had to find also the place that was the most changeable for her, that would enable her to change. Because you change when you enter a landscape that is so open. We behave quite differently here where we're walking down the street that's coded, where we say we want to get away from everybody. So there is a lot more controlling us here than there is there. So uncontrollable space is what enabled me to transport her there.

T.P.: So if you're talking about uncontrollable space and talking about graves: Is a grave something that is very fixed, where necessarily a coffin has to be? Or is it something where you can disperse somehow?

A.v.H. This is a good question. A grave is a fine and private place but none I think do there embrace. [laughs] My fixation on graves and coffins is really strange. I guess, I think of death as a real act of freedom. That may sound quite macabre to you, but I do not think of death as such a negative slate. Not that I believe in heaven, I do not believe in heaven either. We are so conscious all the time, but sometimes - and maybe this has to do with being a writer, that you must be that continuously conscious - sometimes I just wish I could turn it all off. That I could stop it - that may sound like a suicidal impulse - it is not. Going to another country I am always happy because at some state I do not have to listen to people talking - I don't understand the language. So there is a wonderful freedom suddenly. Everybody around me can be talking for example German and I don't have to listen if I decide not to pay attention. Unfortunately now I am starting to learn a bit, so I start hearing it but I do not have to listen. See, there is this constant kind of bombardment and that makes me think that death might be a very freeing space where you were not having to listen, pay attention, breathe and think, eat and sleep.

T.P.: And a coffin is a thing where you get stuck in, you can't get out?

A.v.H.: Oh, but maybe you can!

T.P.: You can try to get out. Is that what you want things and people and genres to do?

A.v.H.: So that is exactly it- that I think of them as coffins as containers. If you actually think about it, we only have the coffin for the people who put the body away. The body does not need the coffin to be contained. We put them inside this thing to say they are really dead and so I guess I have this notion that coffins or genres or books or even lives can be escaped or even transformed. I am

constantly trying to escape.

T.P.: So you think that death is kind of escape- but you don't like murderers, right?

A.v.H.: But I am one. [laughs] Have you ever been in one of my books? You might think you have been murdered. It is pure character assassination, that's all. I kill my characters so I'm a murderer.

T.P.: Is every character murdered in the end?

A.v.H.: Well, every character is in some way murdered when you close the book, even if they are still alive. That's why I'm so mad about Anna Karenina. She is so alive and Tolstoy murders her. He says, "I just don't know what to do with this woman: she is too smart, she is too interesting, she has a lover, she reads books - I'm going to kill her." I'm so mad at that, I think, "you murderer!!!" and I'm going to bring her back to life. But in some way when you close the book,-

T.P.: - you remurdered her?

A.v.H.: But in a different way. I hope I have given her a little more chance.

T.P.: Well, another thing you seem to be obsessed with is love-making.

A.v.H.: Oh yes, absolutely!!!

T.P.: As long as coffins are separations- is it that love-making brings people together again? Different kinds of people like writer and reader for example?

A.v.H.: Well, I guess I am really interested in sex. I think it is coy to pretend that we are not. You know, people are. I do not care whether you are heterosexual or lesbian or homosexual or asexual or a priest - I think people are really interested in sexuality. Especially now that all of its codes are changing so much. I mean, why do we find it sexier to sit around a table drinking champagne on a Sunday afternoon than to go running after a guy? We do. Whether we want to call it sexy or not - we do. We find this more interesting, we find this more sensual, we find it more fun and I guess, what I am interested in is: I think there is a new erotics and people are trying to articulate it. It used to be just the act of engenderment, the act of having sex as the act of making a child. But I think there is a whole new erotics of relationships and of reading and of everything. So I guess you would say, that I'm not that much interested in sex as I'm interested in erotics. See, this is an erotic coffee cup to me. And this is a way of - you know, first I talked about wanting to escape the world. But another way of making the world powertable is seeing it in an erotic sense. That is something to be experienced, to be enjoyed, something sensual. I mean, if we just suffer through life- who needs it? Why bother? I'm more interested in erotics and it is not, as I said, heterosexual erotics. There are connections between people that are made in all kinds of ways. It is the only positive feedback we have.

T.P.: So is there also an erotic relationship between reader and writer?

A.v.H.: Absolutely. See, the interesting thing to me is - let me give an example - I have an erotic relationship with Robert Kroetsch, but it is not at all personal or physical. Well, I hug him and I occasionally kiss his cheek. The fact is it is an erotic relationship with the text he has invented. It is not with the man, it is with the text. And that is the way I like him, I mean, I wouldn't go near the guy, right. I have an erotic relationship to his books because I think they are wonderful. Even though I criticize them a lot: especially when he tries to put women in coffins. But I still have this

wonderful reaction to reading him. And for instance the same is not true when I read, well, what can I say, I don't know, I can't come up with an example right away, but I do think between reader and text and writer, because the text is kind of relationship between writer and reader. If you had never met a writer but you know their text, you still form a conception of them even though it may be completely wrong. I mean before you guys all met me you sort of had read one thing or another and you thought well, that is what she is like. It was like when I gave this lecture in Ottawa this man was sitting right next to Christl Verduyn and he said "That is Aritha van Herk?? I thought she would look different," Because he had decided I was supposed to wear jackboots and I was supposed to have a you know... So he had made up his mind, but he was wrong, wasn't he? So his relationship with my text was something that he had made in a certain way. I think that that is one of the most evocative and interesting things. It is the erotic relationship of the reader and the text and the way that there is an invocation - it is wonderful. Texts are still a way - stories, novels, poems- are still a way of connecting with someone that we may never have a chance to connect with. I have never met Christa Wolf. But I have an erotic that I attribute to *Cassandra*, that is profoundly implacable. I mean I have written about it as if it were something that I were reading with a lover on an island, right. I mean, to me that text is incredibly erotic. But I don't know what I would think if I met Christa Wolf. But I know what I think of the text.

T.P.: So, you think reading is as creative as writing or can be - the act of reading?

A.v.H.: Actually I do, you know, I read a lot and people always say to me, I mean students say interesting things to me about this. They say things like, well, are you not influenced? That is the first thing, which is nonsense, of course, because influence is a good thing. And secondly they say, "Well, why do you spend all that time reading? You could spend it writing!", i.e. it is a waste of time. And then I always quote to them Virginia Woolf, because she said, "reading is writing, when you can't write, go and read". But I think reading is so much a part of the act of the creation of story that I can't imagine writing a book and then not imagining a reader for it. When I write a book I imagine a reader and I write the book for that reader and if other readers get other things from it that's great. But you write the book for a reader, I don't write the book to put it on a shelf and leave it there getting dust.

T.P.: And how do you imagine this reader? Is it a very specific image, is it male or female, or is it androgynous or what?

A.v.H.: Oh, it is a very smart person first of all, they get all my references. They have a good education in the bible. They really have to have one, all right, Katja, they love language. I mean in some ways they are projections of ourselves. But in other ways, you know, one student said to me and it is a really interesting idea, when I was asking my students who their ideal reader was, one of my students said, "Oh, the ideal reader is actually the text itself." Which is a really interesting idea because that goes back to that doubling and that mirror-images-stuff. But I sort of do imagine, I think they are androgynous but I think they have a female sensibility. I think I do take a strongly women's position, not always feminist, but a woman's position of point of view. Again, notice this new novel that I'm just finishing, which is making me crazy or has almost made me crazy, I mean I got stuff in it like stuff about sixteenth century Switzerland, I have got stuff about the Second World War. I do not talk at all about anything but what might be of interest for women, right, like how to cook sugarbeans and stuff like that. So I know that for me my gender has something to do with how I present the text to be read, even though lots of men read my books and I don't think I have a problem with that. So you see, it's interesting because I'm sure that most male writers have always invisioned their readers as male. That is why they are all so mad now, because most readers are women and they are not getting read because women don't want to read that shit anymore. It is really true. So that is happening. Did I answer your question?

T.P.: Yes. One reviewer is talking about the significant other in *Places Far From Ellesmere*.

A.v.H.: I did not read that review. The significant other - yes - The man who is in the text.

T.P.: Not necessarily the man. I mean, I think she was talking about Anna. So I thought it could be extended to Ellesmere as a significant other as well and the princess-

A.v.H.: - Mayardishevskaya? She has a great name, she has a moustache, too, she's in *Anna Karenina*, she is the only person who ever speaks the truth in the novel. She is really interesting. Sorry go on.

T.P.: - the reader, I guess, can be seen as a significant other then, too, if you put it that way?

A.v.H.: That's true. Because you see, in some way the text itself is your significant other because you are making something that is separate from you but it is also part of you. So it is both other and nevertheless it is significant. And you signify the text you know if you want to get into dirty terminology But I do think of Anna Karenina as a significant other because she is a character in a novel that I want to resocietate [sic?] because I think only a writer, another writer, has the right to do that. Or another reader so to say. And I am functioning both as reader and writer. But although it is quite true that Ellesmere itself becomes the significant other that's right. Another place that gives significance. That sounds like quite a good review. That's not the one I was thinking of. It talked about who the man Robert was in the text. This one sounds smarter.

T.P.: You as a reader reading Freud-

A.v.H.:- I hate Freud!

T.P.: The red purse and that it sounds very-

A.v.H.: -Freudian.

T.P.:- but very ironic as well.

A.v.H.: To me it is really amazing that the critics have missed that- the red purse that she clutches all the time, when she first meets Vronsky, Anna Karenina that is, when she dies under the train- that this is not a symbol of her sexuality. But you see the whole thing about 19th century Russia: women weren't allowed sexuality and so her owning this little red purse is Tolstoy's (I was going to say Trotsky's) [laughs] way of saying that she is a sexual woman but I don't know if he knew it himself because he was so fearful of women's sexuality. But I mean I don't think of that actually as a Freudian thing, Freud would say that she was afraid of her sexuality. He would go into a whole different take on it. But I must admit that I think that *Judith* is somewhat Freudian and I hate that. When I go back and read it now and I see the influence of psychoanalytic thinking I'm a bit uncomfortable about the relationship with the father and that and I wish that it were different but it's too late to change. Too bad. No that's the text that I think that is most Freudian. I'm being very ironic when I read that in *Anna Karenina* because I know that whole symbol hunting stuff is really-

T.P.: - like the train being phallic as well?

A.v.H.: Oh, yayaya!! The wheels and that. But you see, you can also look at it in a Marxist analysis as the train being industrialization. That she is happy when she rides in carriages but when she comes up against trains she's dead, right. The romance of living in a pre-industrial conservatory is

that's when she does o.k. but the moment she's on the train she's dead. So there are many ways of analyzing that, I mean, and I think every critic has done a take of one sort or other on it. But I'm being quite ironic because I don't trust those pat interpretations. Still you see, this is the forbidden word. It's the cunt. And I still really felt the importance to talk about that because nobody in all the criticism has talked about Anna as being a sexual woman. They all talk about her neurosis and her psychosis but they actually don't permit her to experience desire. They all try to give her reasons for you know: her husband is this, her husband is that blablabla and they don't really look at her as an entity who may choose however unsuitable desire.

T.P.: She can only choose because her husband has big ears?!

A.v.H.: Exactly, exactly. So you've got the irony, exactly what I'm poking fun at. Good readers. I love good readers.

T.P.: Another review said, the book is losing much of its power because you use the "you" instead of the I-narration. I-

A.v.H.: God, reviews are so mean to me.

T.P.: Well I think you thought about it thoroughly before you choose the "you" instead of the "I"-

A.v.H.: - No, what I wanted to do was I wanted to make the significant other part of the self. The problem with using the first person is that there is an attribution of autobiography and because the first three sections: Edberg, Edmonton, Calgary- the assumption would be that this was autobiographical text and by making it "you" I introduce the question of the reader is reading me into it. In short it becomes the accusative case, what we call the accusative case. So that I can't let the reader off the hook. But the reader is being accused at the same time that they know very well that the "you" is merely a displaced "I". I mean, I'm not being queer about it, the "you" is "I" but I didn't want to use the first person because the first person makes you (just like I'm talking to you now) makes you realize that you too as reader are implicated in this act and you have to be a part of it, you have to be aware of it.

T.P.: You were talking about autobiography. You just don't want it to be called "autobiography", right?

A.v.H.: No exactly. That's why I called it a "geografictione" because the geography, the geographical element is the way that the book is shaped but it is nevertheless a fiction of geography and a geography of fiction. So it's kind of an atlas of how fiction gets invented. Rudy Wiebe says that fiction is the story that we invent of our lives –

T.P.: - So, you do the mapping?-

A.v.H.: -So I kind of disagree with that because I'm not just using my life but I'm fictioning all the time even when I'm in my life I'm fictioning. And we have to start to recognize that because we like to make this distinction between fiction and truth and I think that there is a lot of blurring but I don't want to say that this is true autobiography and you're quite right it's a kind of cartographical gesture. You're mapping your way toward some kind of space that gives you- space.

T.P.: And I think that "geografictione" is open at both ends somehow.

A.v.H.: Exactly, because geography is an unfinished act and so is fiction.

T.P.: Why the Italian word. Does it really exist?

A.v.H.: No, it's not actually an Italian word.

T.P.: But you pronounced it like it were Italian.

A.v.H.: I spell it wrong, you know. If it were Italian there would be two "c"s. No, we did that on purpose to make a new kind of hybrid word of Canadian Italian and the whole notion of asking a question. So it is an invented word and an invented space as it is an invented genre - the way that I keep inventing genres like the frictioned fiction and the crypto-frictions and the ficto-criticism.

T.P.: So it wouldn't be called a "geografiction" but a "geografictionne" because of the "e" in the end.

A.v.H.: Yeah, that's why I call it a geografictione.

T.P.: And I thought the "e" would somehow indicate a female ending –

A.v.H.: - Yes, yes, absolutely. And you noticed that the three quotes at the beginning that are from (oh, shit I can't remember where they are from) but then I have the square brackets saying why are women never quoted. That is my own quote, right. The square brackets mean "here I am" I'm citing all these authorities, Foucault and I don't know who the other two is - Here I go, I start this book and I've got these three experts who are all men, who are all talking about colonization, so I invent my own quote. So I have to become my own authority because I can't find a woman as an authority. So it's a way of de - authorizing, and you're exactly right, the "geografictione" has a female ending. [...]

T.P.: You think we are all Annas, right? Kind of?

A.v.H.: Yeah-

T.P.: Are there several degrees of Annas ?

A.v.H.: Well, we're not going to stick our head under a train, are we?

T.P.: I hope not.

A.v.H.: Exactly, I hope not. No, I think in some way we are all Annas because we're living in a fiction that has been invented by a male author and we're trying to write our lives within that, o.k.? If you think that language is patriarchal, right and that even when we try to express ourselves we're working with a patriarchal language. And the master - you know the Audrey Lourde quote about how the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house - You know that you are functioning within a kind of fiction that is constraining you but I guess I feel we're all Annas but we are also Annas who have a right to be set free to a kind of Ellesmere. Not to stick our heads under trains although some Annas will do that no matter what you say. And others will set themselves free or do whatever they choose. But I guess I want the range that's implied by that that all women are Annas then there's a range of women but if Anna is all women then we don't have very much choice. See, I'm always turning things. It's a contrary position to take.

T.P.: But you create this space for us to escape to?

A.v.H.: YEAh.

T.P.: For all of us Annas.

A.v.H.: Don't we all want to? I mean, it's like the whole act of disappearance that I'm so interested in, o.k.. In the end of *No Fixed Address* Arachne disappears. She does not die, she does not settle down and become a good girl and have three kids and live in a house in the suburbs. She disappears and I want to bring her back. I'm going to write a new book with her in her new configuration where she's going to travel the world, see Trier, and travel the world because there is that sense of the empowerment of the act of disappearance, the world can't contain us so easily and by - as you say - creating Ellesmere I create a place for women to disappear to.

E.E.: But in a positive way.

A.v.H.: Yes, disappearance for me is a positive thing but if you have the magic to be able to disappear you also have the magic to reappear when you damn want to.

E.E.: And where.

A.v.H.: And where you want to, exactly. Exactly. See, I'm often using language differently and people really get that confused they say well she disappears - she died - but I didn't say that. Disappearance for me is very positive.

E.E.: You know it also depends on the perspective, like if the person telling the story isn't the one who disappears. It's different from the person who herself is saying "I'm disappearing".

A.v.H.: That's right. Or someone who is disappeared the way in South America people are disappeared. It's quite different if you take the verb and make it your own than if it happens to you, right.

[...]

A.v.H.: [...] it's the empowered position rather than being disappeared by someone else or being made to disappear or feeling like you're disappearing because nobody is paying attention to you.

[...]

T.P.: [...] Helen M. Buss is playing on the "mere" in Ellesmere. But I thought you weren't so mother fixed-

A.v.H.: - She is. She is my colleague. She wants mothers in everything. She is really pissed off with me because I don't write about mothers enough.

T.P.: And there it was but it wasn't??

A.v.H.: Right, you're right. I mean, I would like to write about mothers but not in the same way she wants me to.

T.P.: This playing about Ellesmere, elsewhere and here. Are you also playing with Northrop Frye as well?

A.v.H.: The great author of Canadian, yes, yes.

T.P.: - Where is here?

A.v.H.: Where is here, exactly. Because he keeps telling us where is here. He won't let us decide for ourselves and I'm kind of fed up with him as being the articulator of the Canadian "here" I mean he says "Where is here?" but then he goes on to tell you by gum and you better not disagree with him.

E.E.: And I always thought it excludes the native Canadians - that question.

A.v.H.: Oh, and it excludes so many people. I mean Northrop Frye, the Frygian view is really eurocentric and extremely patriarchal view. That entering the river, you know like swimming upstream, it's extremely penis-oriented and I have a lot of trouble with it.

E.E.: It's the same way that we were taught Canadian history: The Explorers dis-covering –

A.v.H.: - oh, one of the things he said which is really interesting is that the explorers in writing, in their writing, (because now there is a kind of critical movement to include the explorers), and he says they were innocent of intention. Well, you see there you get this obvious: "Well, they have no intention." It's not true. They had every intention. What they were doing when they were writing was mapping the territory to make it seem like it would be hospitable for fur trading or for settling. He makes disclaimers about agenda. I don't pretend not to have an agenda. I have an agenda but men pretend all the time that they have no agenda and they say to me, "Oh Aritha, you've such an agenda!", I say, "You don't?" [...]It's just because they can pretend that their agenda is the center they can pretend not to have one. Everyone has one just as everyone has an intention. Just as everyone has a geography. Just as everyone has a history. Just as everyone has desire. You can't go 'round pretending that you desire nothing. Even if your desire is admitted to, you know, a cup of coffee.

T.P.: What's your notion of home?

A.v.H.: Ahhh, that's a tough question. You know it's changing a lot. It used to be a notion that I found very constraining and wanted to explode. And you can see that in *Judith*, you can see that in some of *Places Far From Ellesmere* even *The Tent Peg*. She goes away. Arachne has no home. She is totally homeless. Even when she gets a home with Thomas she rejects it in the end but very strangely lately I'm starting to long for a fictional home. Now, I don't quite know what that is or where it is but wonder if it's part of getting older or if it's part of the desire to - maybe it's because my family home has changed so it's not there any more.

E.E.: Do you include the idea of erotics, too, in the notion of home? To me this [indicating circle] is also a home.

A.v.H.: That, that actually is interesting because to me the home should be transportable and that you can feel at home with the people that you care about no matter where you are and if there are people that you care about than a place seems homely, homelike but its transportability is something that I think has always sort of been shunted off and part the whole nuclear family is there is only one home and that's where you must go and that's where you must stay. So, I guess, I'm looking at it as a more portable or malleable or moveable feast in a sense.

T.P.: That's why you like tents and cars.

A.v.H.: I do. I like tents and I like cars and I like hotels and I like trains.

N.D.: A car really is a transportable home, it stays there and it waits for you to go somewhere else.

E.E.: Part of home is still the familiarity and the trust. Well, that's what home is supposed to be.

[...]

K.-E.P.: One more question: So who are you?

A.v.H.: Which "you" are you talking to? About who am I? Which one do you want? The person that you see drinking coffee and champagne is different from the person that you would see at the university of Calgary and different from the person that you'd see if you caught me getting out of bed in the morning, is different from the one who would stand in front of my class-room at the university- I think there is no fixed "you" just like there is no fixed address. There is this plurality of things that can come into play in this fiction we call life. This notion that people have that they are going to find out the real "you", right, there is no "real me". There is no real you either. I know that very well.

N.D.: Is it when you write a character that you get deeper and deeper into it that you want to stick to it, that you want to be it?

A.v.H.: No, I don't want to be my characters. They have too much trouble.

N.D.: Always?

A.v.H.: Always! Too much trouble. I'm happy when I shut off the computer at the end of a day. Enough, good- bye.

K.-E.P., A.v.H., T.P.: Go to sleep! I'll be obliging tomorrow.

A.v.H.: Yeah, that's right. Shut up. Stop talking back. No but I mean there is this wonderful kind of plurality. We all differ. If your mother was sitting here, you would be a different person. You wouldn't just behave differently, you would be a different person. And we have this thing that there is somewhere buried deep inside all of us is a real person. It's a construct. We're constructing ourselves every minute. We're reconstructing ourselves, we're inventing ourselves, we're thinking, "Oh well, if this is the case then I'll say this."

T.P.: Is this why you are so mad about realism?

A.v.H.: Oh, realism. Yes of course, because realism pretends an equation between the text and real life, o.k.. Well we know that this [holding piece of paper] isn't the same as that tree over there. This is a text so it's not real anyway even if it were the most realistic text. It's already a translation into language of something. And realism's pretence to be kind of reading the world, realism's desire to be taken as such is I think quite objectionable and presumptions. So I sort of want to reject it even though I occasionally use it. You know, I have some very realistic stories.-I mean, I think it's available to be used but the 19th century curse even though the 19th century novel is the least realistic novel of all.

T.P.: But it has been celebrated for being so realistic for so long.

A.v.H.: Exactly!

T.P.: Now you tear it apart!!

A.v.H.: I'm sorry!!!

T.P.: How dare you???

A.v.H.: HOW DARE YOU? Yes. But people say to me, "How dare you write about Anna Karenina?"

N.D.: What?

A.v.H.: Oh yes. Tolstoy this great man -

E.E.: But writers do that a lot. Christa Wolf does it, male writers do that too, right.

A.v.H.: But you see there's a critic inviolability to that great man.

[...]

A.v.H.: - not to mention he ran away from home when he was whatever-

T.P.: - 82!

N.D.: "I can't stay at home any more, I'm going -"

A.v.H.: With the coachmen his illegitimate son. Get me alive, this man's whole life was an act of fiction. If he wasn't pretending one thing he was pretending the next.

T.P.: So what's moral?

A.v.H.: What's moral? Whooooaaahhh! Her questions are getting bigger and bigger! What's moral, what do you mean, Tamara? I bet she [pointing at Katja] made you ask that question.

T.P.: No, she didn't. - Anna was considered immoral.

A.v.H.: [...] I think the morality question has been imposed on women so bloody much that we actually think for instance when we are rude to someone that we are being immoral. We think that when we want to go off by ourselves that we are being immoral, we have been so moralized that merely to stand beside it is an incredible act of rebellion.

T.P.: So, killing off a character - is this immoral?

A.v.H.: No

T.P.: Killing her in a bad way, throwing her under a train, is that immoral?

A.v.H.: God, she is good. Shit. I'm in trouble now. I don't think he is immoral. I just was mad at him for it I don't think her death was immoral but it made me grief, o.k.? I mean in many ways *Places Far From Ellesmere* is a book about grief. My grief about what's happened to the world of women, right So I don't think it's immoral. She is his character, he threw her under a train but I

guess in some ways I do think it's - no - did I say it was immoral? I don't remember,

T.P.: Not explicitly, I think.

A.v.H.: Good thing, too.

T.P.: I was just wondering because morality creeps up every now and then, so I was wondering if you rejected the whole idea of moral –

A.v.H.: -I do, I guess. For me to cause someone pain is the only immoral act and at the same time it's almost necessary to do it every minute of the day because we can't be nice sweet people.

E.E.: I think what's frustrating about immorality is when people who pretend to have morals we see them break those morals and yet claim to be moral, that's frustrating.

A.v.H.: No, that's quite right. If you think of the larger nations of the world, you know, the Americans going in and saying, "Oh, you have to be democratic and you can't kill people" and at home they're turning around killing someone every two days. That's, that to me is a whore, the employment of the moral construct to actually bolster a kind of immorality. For me, I think, *Ellesmere* was about grief. Strangely about grief. I know I have to write something about that but I don't know how yet. *Anna Karenina* had had no epitaph and that was what I was writing: an epitaph.

E.E.: Like Cassandra.

A.v.H.: Exactly, like Cassandra. All you have on most tombstones, most epitaphs are "wife of", right?

T.P.: That's the best thing you can become.

A.v.H.: The best revenge is writing well. Audrey Thomas says that at the end of *Latakia*. There is this woman who has this affair with the man and they are engaged in this writing contest and at the end she says because he leaves her "The best revenge is writing well, I'll invent my own story, I'll invent my own life. I don't care if you're here with me or not".

T.P.: Good thing to do. - Thank you!

A.v.H.: You're welcome. You can publish it, I don't mind.

T.P.: Here's what she said.

A.v.H.: Lies. All lies, lies, lies.