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An Interview with Joy Ladin, Author of *The Book of Anna*

Risa · Wednesday, May 26th, 2021

Joy Ladin is a transgender lesbian scholar, essayist, and poet. *The Book of Anna* is a hybrid of diary entries interspersed with poem cycles that tell the story of Anna Asher, a fictional Czech-German Jew who spent her adolescence in a concentration camp and now lives in Prague in the 1950's. Ladin originally published *The Book of Anna* with Sheep Meadow Press in 2007; it was reissued this year by Eoagh Books, with a coda titled, "Afterword by the Author: Anna and Me." The afterword offers readers a great deal of insight into the process of writing this story and how writing this book was pivotal in Ladin's transition from male to female. Ladin explains that Anna is a character that spoke to her at a difficult time in her life and whose story took on its own life, as if it were being narrated by Anna to Ladin. The process of writing a complex fictional character is revealed in this interview with Ladin.

Risa Denenberg: In your afterword, where you describe the lengthy process of conceiving and writing *The Book of Anna* you say that the poems came to you first, the journal entries much later. What was the original impetus for these poems?

Joy Ladin: The poems grew first out of the despair I felt when, at the completion of my M.F.A. thesis, I thought about the limitations of my poetics and the lack of interest in my work. I was marinating in that despair on a walk when I "heard" a voice suggest I write about Anna. I hadn't been thinking about the Holocaust, and certainly wasn't planning to do a book-length project. But in retrospect, I realize that a long narrative poem I was working on, written in the voice of a fictional character whose life and concerns, like Anna's, emerged over a writing process that took years, was preparing me for *Anna*.

Denenberg: In my poem, "Yellow Star," I say:

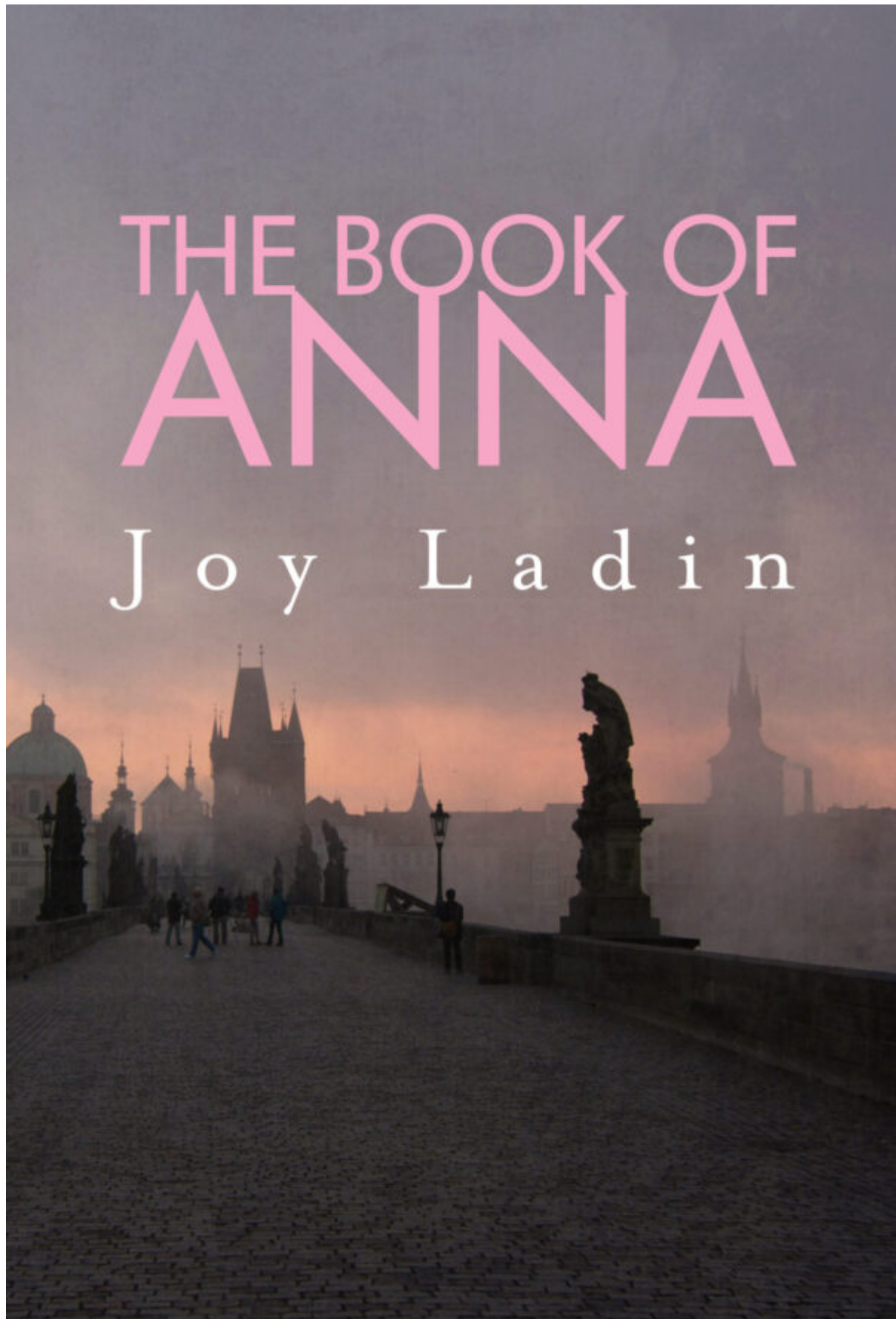
*I would be one
who would beg you to shoot me
who would know that borders lie
that I could not endure the march through the woods
in the snow to the trains at the end.*

If you think back to yourself as an adolescent (or in the present time, if you prefer, or both) and were in Anna's position, how do you think you might respond? I know this is an unfair question, but it goes to the heart of the will to survive.

Ladin: This is one of the most probing questions I've ever gotten. From the time I was first taught about the Holocaust as a child, I remember being sure of two things, both of which made me feel ashamed: if I had been a German during the Holocaust, I wouldn't have resisted the regime, and if I had been a Jew in the camps, I wouldn't have survived.

I knew I wouldn't have resisted the Nazis if I'd been a German because that's the way I was living as a trans person. I spent my childhood desperately trying to hide and pass in the binary gender world; I don't remember a single time when I resisted, or protested, or dared to say I was different. And though I wasn't aware of my whiteness as a child, then and for far too much of my life since, I have been a quiet beneficiary of white supremacy.

I knew I wouldn't have survived the camps because, despite the comforts of my lower middle class life, I spent my childhood longing to die. Because I couldn't live as myself and didn't feel alive pretending to be a boy, I didn't feel I had anything to live for.



Denenberg: Shortly after her liberation, Anna kills the man who took her from the camps to exploit and rape her. She says, “I had decided to live.” Yet in the aftermath of so much trauma, Anna considers suicide. Are there acts of repair (t’shuva) that the living could have done at the time that might have eased Anna’s pain? What acts of repair should we engage in now?

Reparations for African Americans comes to mind. What is the role for contemporary Jews?

Ladin: Anna's Holocaust experiences leave her with so much internalized rage, and she feels so betrayed by social structures, political ideologies, philosophies, religions, that she thinks of humanity as a genocide waiting to happen. She lacks the sense of connection to others, the belief that collective goodness is possible, that she would need in order to respond to others' reparative efforts.

The first crack in Anna's nihilistic rejection of humanity occurs during her therapy sessions recounted in the poem "Song of Songs," when she realizes that the women in the camps who gave their lives to save hers did so not for selfish reasons, not because they saw her as a means through which their lives could continue after they were dead, but because they loved her. Retroactively, their sacrifices take on the reparative meaning you mention here.

But that passive connection to humanity was not enough for Anna to register the moral significance of reparative acts. It is only at the end of the poem, "Golem" that she realizes that despite all that has been done to her, she is not only a victim, she is also a moral agent, that she is capable of acting, choosing, doing or not doing violence, working or not working for the secret police. That realization enables her to feel her connection to others, to understand that she is part of a society, not just a remnant of the evil done to her.

Even then, though, Anna isn't ready to respond to others' acts of reparation, because she is overcome by the grief and guilt that her nihilism has kept at bay prior to this realization. Anna's post-war existence has been defined by orbiting the black sun of her Holocaust traumas, and she doesn't know how to live, to feel alive, to feel connected to others in the way that is necessary for acts of reparation to have meaning. That's why, after resigning from the secret police, she tries to kill herself. Suicide is the only life she knows how to imagine.

But in the final poem, "Shabbat," she experiences a reparative act. Shabbat, the Hebrew word for "Sabbath," literally means "cessation." It refers to God "ceasing" the process of creation on the seventh day, and in the poem it also means Anna ceasing to live, and thus ceasing to be caught up in rage, trauma, guilt, and pain. But her suicide is interrupted by the reparative act of women who had come to love her mother in the camps, and who, for her mother's sake, had devoted themselves to finding Anna and bringing her the story of her mother's death and of her continuing love for her daughter. Anna is transformed by this visit and "Shabbat" comes to mean that Anna is ceasing to live solely in terms of death. Their faithfulness and determination do more than interrupt her suicide. By showing Anna that her mother never truly abandoned her, they enable her to realize that her connection to humanity is not, and never has been broken. For the first time, at the very end of the book, Anna imagines a future, even though it is only another visit with the women, and though her only plan is to cook for them.

I usually think of reparations in terms of large-scale economic and political actions. But thinking about Anna in this light prompts me to think about reparations in more personal terms, as a way to show individuals who have been oppressed and traumatized and dispossessed that they are seen and held by a community, a humanity, that acknowledges and takes responsibility for what has been done to them, but which is more than, and can be better than, our collective crimes.

Denenberg: The three comrades of Anna's in Barracks 10 are designated as the Physicist, the Rebbetzin, and the Whore. They bring to the surface the haunting misgivings of science, theology,

and sexuality as experienced during trauma. How did these characters and their attributes come to you?

Ladin: Honestly, I don't remember how they came into the poem. Most of the details of Anna's life emerged mysteriously, sometimes as insights, sometimes as new elements that popped up in the endless cycles of revisions. But some came when I was trying to figure out the relation between Anna's story and the texts from Jewish tradition she had chosen as vehicles for it, and I suspect that's the origin of these characters.

The Biblical Song of Songs is fragmentary and mysterious – scholars have debated its story and structure for centuries – but it is clear that the central female figure, named Shulamit in later traditions, is also accompanied by a chorus of “daughters of Jerusalem,” women who, like her, are in the royal harem. It was Anna's idea to turn the daughters of Jerusalem into the daughters of Barracks 10. But I don't remember if the specific “daughters” appeared through my efforts to figure out who they would be, by inferring, say, the Whore from what I already knew were Anna's sexual habits, and the Rebbetzin from her preoccupation with God, or if they were given to me by the whatever suggested Anna in the first place, or if (this happened sometimes) Anna just started referring to them as I wrote. I remember that when they emerged, their presence immediately expanded not only the narrative space but also the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual space in which the poems were unfolding, particularly once I realized that they each embodied a different aspect of the perspectives and kinds of language Anna mixes in the poems. They helped me understand how the savagely nihilistic and sexually driven Anna could also be so engaged with God; how someone so intellectually detached could be so sexually driven; how someone so at odds with her scarred body could also be so fiercely, physically alive. But they soon became more than ideas or representatives of different worldviews; to Anna, they were not only aspects of her thinking and language but individuals, women for whom she felt what the Biblical Song of Songs calls “love as strong as death,” and she insisted that I learn to love them too.

Denenberg: You use the cogent term “designated survivor” to refer Anna's status in the camps. This provocative phrase bears two other meanings today. The “designated survivor” (or successor) is a political role in the US held by the one person designated to become president if a mass casualty killed the president, VP, and most of the cabinet. And of course the term, “designated driver” refers to the person who agrees to stay sober in order to drive the inebriated gang home safely. It's clearly not an enviable role in any event. Other than being young, what did the women in Barracks 10 see in Anna that thrust her into this role?

Ladin: I'm grateful for this question, because I have been so identified with Anna's point of view that I have never considered it. To Anna, it is axiomatic that her survival is as senseless as the deaths of the women who kept her alive; indeed, she can't separate her survival from their deaths. Not only does she feel survivor guilt; she can't imagine that there is anything good in her that is worth their sacrifices. In the therapy sessions in “Song of Songs,” she portrays her post-war life as a continuation of theirs, ways that her life keeps them alive, identifying her skepticism with the Physicist, her engagement with God with the Rebbetzin, and her compulsive, predatory sex with the Whore. But even when she finally realizes that they were surrogate mothers who died because they loved her, she never imagines—I believe she would viscerally and morally object to imagining—that their love or sacrifice reflected any qualities in her.

Anna is right that that they designated her their survivor partly for practical reasons; she was young, she was strong, she kept her head down and her feelings at bay. But as she describes her

relationships with them, it's also clear that she was deeply attached to them; she listened to them, learned from them, tried to absorb what they said about the world and how to live in it. They must have recognized how deeply she was listening, must have seen her fierce intelligence and fiery soul. They must have seen her ability to develop such attachments as evidence that she could survive not just physically but as a human being.

I also suspect that they loved her because she helped them connecting with one another despite their mutual antipathies: the Physicist's disdain of the others' lack of intellectual sophistication, the Rebbetzin's disapproval of the Whore's profession and the Physicist's materialism, the Whore's certainty that she was the only one of them who knew anything about the world. Loving Anna gave them a shared purpose that must have helped them, too, stay emotionally as well as physically alive.

But I doubt they would have loved Anna as they did if they hadn't seen so much in her to love. I think they fell in love with the flame of her spirit, the very flame that, throughout the book, threatens to consume her.

Denenberg: Another character in the book is Suzanne Wischnauer, Anna's aloof neighbor who is a sounding board for Anna and also obviously cares for her. She also provides a layer of comic relief at times. Do you know more of her story? There is a reference to "no doctors" which seems to refer to medical experimentation done to her in the camps. You described Anna as a heteronym (as used by Pessoa) of you; was Wischnauer a heteronym of Anna's?

Ladin: I don't know much more about Wischnauer than what Anna says. She's almost a generation older than Anna, having completed a college degree and, before the war, begun a career as an engineer, building bridges and other structures. She went to a German university, had a boyfriend, and attended and was bored by the lectures of a famous fictional philosopher, Reinhardt, who I hope will remind readers of Heidegger. Like Anna, Wischnauer ended up in the camps, but she seems to have had a more privileged position due to her engineering skills; she refers to having built a bridge for the Germans, a bridge she designed to fail. Like Anna, she grew up ethnically rather than religiously Jewish, but unlike Anna, she isn't interested Judaism, the Bible, or God, or, for that matter, poetry, philosophy, or theology; she is faintly amused by Anna's engagement with such abstruse matters.

Wischnauer seems to be single and, as Anna jokes, "retired from desire"; she strongly disapproves of Anna's sexual activities, or at least of the men she has sex with. Though clearly scarred by the camps (like you, I'm guessing she was experimented on or otherwise tortured by Nazi doctors), she seems much more stable than Anna, more grounded, less driven by rage. Unlike Anna, she seems to think psychotherapy can help overcome trauma, as we see when she gives Anna Dr. Solomon's business card. Like Anna, she is non-political, non-ideological; unlike Anna's other neighbors, she isn't afraid of Anna's connection to the secret police, nor does she seem to object to Anna's job in principle, though she does think Anna shouldn't be sleeping with her boss.

Throughout the writing process, I always assumed that Wischnauer was as "real" as Anna – that even though we only see her through Anna's eyes, she has a life of her own in this fictional world – and so I was shocked when, in one of her final diary entries, Anna suggests that Wischnauer has never existed. Though I was relieved when Anna immediately walked that back, since then, I have never been completely sure about Wischnauer. It is fascinating to think of her as a heteronym for Anna, an idea that hadn't occurred to me until you mentioned it.

Denenberg: In the afterword, you say, “[A]s I was writing Anna, Anna was writing me. You are referencing your gender transition, which seemed to be intricately bound with the process of writing *The Book of Anna*. At the outset of this project you were closeted and during the years of writing the book you transitioned and came out. You say that Anna was, “someone whose sufferings, unlike mine as a closeted trans person, would be readily recognized as worth writing about.” Can you say more about the invisibility and violence experienced by transgendered persons today?

Ladin: Yes, the process of writing *The Book of Anna* was bound up for me with gender transition, although I didn’t realize that until a couple of years after the book was finished, when, not long after the manuscript was accepted for publication, it became clear that I couldn’t continue living as a man much longer.

There is much more awareness of trans and non-binary people today than there was at the beginning of this century, when I started writing *The Book of Anna*. In some families, some schools, some institutions, some communities, there is more than just awareness, there is active concern for our well-being, cherishing of our voices, rethinking of habits based on binary gender assumptions, and support as we face violence, harassment, and personal and social stigma. This represents progress I could not have imagined when I started *The Book of Anna*, progress that is saving lives every day.

But though most people in the US now know we exist, the islands in which our lives are valued are just that – islands. Statistics are spotty, but physical and verbal violence against trans people, particularly trans people of color, has not declined. Trans and non-binary people across the country face crises of housing, employment, health care, and education, and continue to have far higher rates of suicide, homelessness, and poverty than our peers. There is still no federal anti-discrimination law that explicitly protects trans and non-binary people, and in many states, there has been an explosion of anti-trans laws that permit and sometimes mandate discrimination against us. Even in a recent “sympathetic” report on NPR, trans and non-binary journalists working to raise awareness of trans lives were repeatedly asked by the NPR reporter whether they could “objectively” cover these issues. The fact that there was such a report shows how far we have come – and the reporter’s obliviousness shows how far we still have to go before trans and non-binary people really matter.

Anna would consider me naive for thinking that the lives of any stigmatized minorities can matter to society as a whole. But I still believe that we can prove Anna wrong, that our species can achieve humanity.

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