

Ann Lambert launches her latest novel *Whale Fall*

## Description

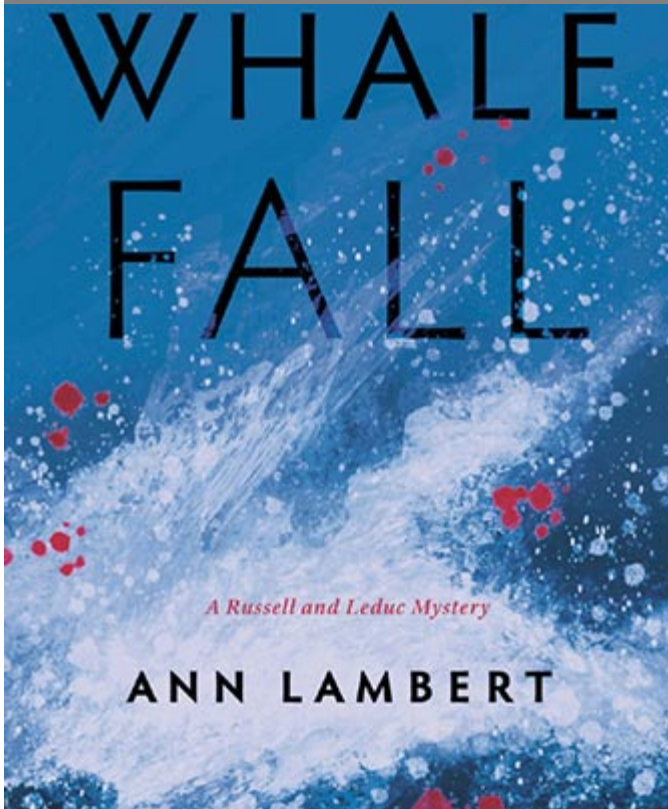
# The novelist and playwright discusses her writing style and what drives her creativity

By Irwin Rapoport

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Montreal's award-winning novelist and playwright **Ann Lambert** recently released ***Whale Fall***, published by Second Story Press, at Paragraphe Books. Her third novel in the award-nominated **Russell and Leduc mystery series** follows the success of books one and two, ***The Birds That Stay*** and ***The Dogs of Winter***.

Lambert explains how she is driven to write about social and political issues and how they intersect with real life. "In *Whale Fall*, I wanted to look at how humans exploit and devour this planet like it was an endless source of material for our personal consumption, with no regard to the future," she said. "We are, in a way, committing collective murder – so a murder mystery is an appropriate forum to explore this."



In the novel, Quebec is once again a central character,

examining its political history through the eyes of both Francophone and Anglophone characters. Whales, the author points out, are like canaries in a coal mine; when they fall, so will life, as they provide half the oxygen breathed. The term whale fall describes an extraordinary occurrence. When the carcass of a whale falls to the ocean floor at a depth greater than 1,000 metres, it creates an ecosystem that provides a bounty of nutrients for deep-sea creatures for decades.

The novel is relevant, topical, and universal. Lambert tied ecological issues in with the related concern of how some of the most vulnerable in society are treated, the elderly.

“I wrote *Whale Fall* during the height of the COVID pandemic,” said Lambert. “At that time, horror stories were emerging about our elders dying in unimaginable conditions in seniors’ homes. I think many of us saw COVID as a metaphor; we humans are destroying this planet – and Mother Nature is getting her revenge.”

The characters in the book share people’s ongoing struggles: family dysfunction and anxiety about the environment/climate justice and the future while trying to live a meaningful life. This fits in perfectly with what drives Lambert to write.

Lambert spoke about her novels, plays, and literary activities in an interview with Westmount Magazine:



**WM:** *The article's introduction addressed some of your serious concerns about how humans treat the environment and biodiversity. Could you elaborate on the damage we are doing as a species, locally and globally?*

**Lambert:** I have always, as a playwright and now a novelist, been driven to write about social and political issues, and where they intersect in our individual lives. I try to weave personal stories into a larger historical, political and cultural backdrop, hopefully in ways that deepen our experience through the juxtaposition of the personal and political. In *The Birds That Stay*, I explored family dysfunction and the need to face the truth of our past in order to heal. In *The Dogs of Winter*, I looked at the injustice of homelessness, systemic racism, particularly regarding the indigenous homeless, and sexual violence against women.

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In *Whale Fall*, I wanted to look at how we humans exploit and devour this planet like it was an endless source of material for our personal consumption, with no regard for the future. Our denial of this behaviour and our refusal to change are killing us. We are, in a way, committing collective murder, so a murder mystery is an appropriate forum to explore this, don't you think? I believe that "genre" mystery books are a perfect way to look at urgent issues in a way that makes them understandable and accessible.



Ann Lambert – Image: Pierre Arsenault

**WM:** *When did you start working on *Whale Fall*, and how would you describe the progress of the writing?*

**Lambert:** The initial impetus/idea for the book came from an experience I had several years ago. I was at a protest against the clear-cutting of a mountain near where I live in Ste. Lucie in the Laurentians, where my books are set. The planned development was short-sighted and idiotic, and threatened to destroy a beloved nature preserve. Anyway – long story short – a very well-known environmental activist came to offer his support to our cause and arrived to much noise and fanfare – in a helicopter. I’m not sure why that struck me as so ironic – he is a busy man and had about thirty minutes to give us – but he seemed like any other celebrity dropping in, posing for a photo op and rushing off again. So... the seed of my new book planted itself. I saw a way into writing about climate change and environmental destruction while weaving it into a very personal story connected to Marie Russell, my protagonist and Romeo Leduc, my cop. I saw a way into writing about how people on either side of an issue become so polarized, each entirely committed to their own agenda and vilifying the other. I saw what happens when we as a species can’t agree to stop denying what is happening to us, and work together to salvage what is left of this beautiful planet that is our only home.

The process of *Whale Fall* was very similar to my other books. I get the main characters talking to me, usually on long walks in the woods with my dog, Lucy. Then I start working out the main plot and subplots. I record it on my



voice memo on my phone and then transcribe it to my document later. I also do a lot of research – I write pages and pages of notes in a beautiful leather-bound notebook I received from a close friend about ten years ago. It is my talisman. Once I have the ending of the book – I need to visualize that last chapter – I'm ready to start writing. I write brief plot notes for each chapter on a big desk calendar from Bureau en Gros, in pencil. This is my map. It is essential. Then... I read each fresh chapter to my husband David after I write it. He will ask a question or call out less compelling writing, but mostly he is my number one collaborator.

'I write the kind of book I like to read. I like complex, flawed, and vulnerable characters who struggle with moral questions and try to navigate the world with a sense of purpose and, most importantly, a sense of humour.'

**WM:** *Many mystery novelists have various styles of writing that intertwine main plots and subplots. How would you describe your particular writing style, or does it vary depending on each novel?*

**Lambert:** I write the kind of book I like to read. I like complex, flawed, and vulnerable characters who struggle with moral questions and try to navigate the world with a sense of purpose and, most importantly, a sense of humour. I like books that create a rich, textured geographical, political and historical landscape that I want to know more about. I like subplots! I weave what seem like incongruous storylines together in a way that keeps the reader turning the page if for no reason than to see how the heck all these people are connected. I like prose that makes me look at something familiar in a fresh way. I like effective storytelling that makes me feel reluctant to put the book down. I think for some people, my books are those kinds of books.

**WM:** *In the Russell and Leduc series, you develop many characters, setting the stage for later novels in the saga. To what extent do you see your characters as real individuals with strengths and weaknesses and unique ways of looking at and understanding the world?*

**Lambert:** All my characters are individuals who struggle with issues that, I think, most people or their loved ones do at one time or another in their lives: family dysfunction, addiction, divorce, anxiety about the future and the need to live a meaningful life. Each character is, to some degree, haunted by his or her past, and each will have to reckon with it. I think most people can relate to that. I love creating characters from as many backgrounds as possible – an eclectic cross-section of human beings. Then I love bringing their different worlds together and seeing what happens when they collide.

In terms of the bigger global issues the book examines, certainly the idea of our refusal to face what we are doing to our environment is very resonant and urgent. I also think readers will enjoy the local references and the familiarity with the world of the book. The landscape my books are set in – geographical, political and cultural – are key ingredients. Place becomes a character. I live in both Ste. Lucie and Montreal, so I know both intimately.

'In *Whale Fall*, the issue of climate change, climate injustice and its effects are examined. What is more important than our continued existence?'

**WM:** *Why is it crucial that your books and plays raise ethical and moral issues and problems affecting society as a whole?*

**Lambert:** Because they are the urgent themes of our time. In *Whale Fall*, the issue of climate change, climate injustice and its effects are examined. What is more important than our continued existence? What is more important than the fact that so many of our children do not want to have children of their own? I understand why so



many young people feel this way – I do. We are a voracious species that seems incapable of controlling our worst appetites, unwilling to sacrifice any part of our entitlement to make meaningful change. So here we have a generation scared to bring new life into this world. This is gutting to me. We must have hope. And children are the living embodiment of that hope and a wish for our future. I don't mean to suggest that everyone has to have kids. But to see no reason to have them because of the state of our world? We have to do better.

**WM:** *Have producers contacted you about bringing the Russell and Leduc series to the television screen?*

**Lambert:** Yes. One producer approached me – a year? Two years ago? She contacted me and got very excited about the books as a series. I did all kinds of work creating a “bible” for *The Birds That Stay*. We had several enthusiastic meetings and then – she ghosted me. Like none of it had ever happened. Another producer contacted me and seemed very keen on making a series as well. After several meetings, he explained they couldn't move forward. Sigh. Do any of your readers produce TV series? Movies? I am open to discussion!

**WM:** *How long have you been writing and directing plays, and what inspires you to do so? What are some of your favourite plays, and who are some of the playwrights that speak to you?*

**Lambert:** I have been writing plays for forty years and directing for almost as long. I have so many favourites! I love story – I love where a good story and complex characters intersect. I love a world imagined. I love a play that makes you laugh and then breaks your heart.

‘Books, plays and poems articulate what it is to be human. The vast universe of that experience. They put us in conversation. They open up the world. What would we be without our stories?’

Plays that have changed my life? I became a playwright because of the power of seeing *Master Harold... and the boys* (by the South African writer Athol Fugard) on Broadway many years ago. Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* made me realize all the things that theatre makes possible. I could read it over and over and never tire of it. There are too many playwrights who speak to me to name. I love a writer who takes a risk. Who asks the hard, uncomfortable questions. Who is willing to say what we, as a society, are terrified to. I also LOVE Stephen Sondheim musicals. Almost ANYTHING by Sondheim.

**WM:** *What led to the creation of Theatre Ouest End, and is it fulfilling the vision that you had in mind?*

**Lambert:** **Théâtre Ouest End (TOE)** was launched in the spring of 2019 by me, my long-time friend and collaborator **Laura Mitchell**, my daughter **Alice Abracen**, and **Danielle Szydowski**. We have all been making theatre for years but we wanted to bring together an intergenerational community of experienced and emerging theatre artists who would bring timely and compelling work to people whose access to theatre is challenged by income, limited mobility, opportunity, and the perception that theatre is really about and for someone else.

We are committed to making vital theatrical experiences more accessible to communities who traditionally cannot or do not participate, and to mentoring young theatre professionals by giving them a place to begin practicing their craft and to encourage new work. This model of seniors and youth working together is evident in our founding members: we are two established theatre artists and two emerging theatre artists. We have recently added two more members to our team: **Anissah Vanhorn** and **Ayesha Hasan**.

We are thrilled that our latest full-length stage production, [\*The Covenant\*](#), recently premiered at the Segal Centre Studio and will run until December 3.

**WM:** *Teaching is a passion for you, having led the Playwriting Program at the National Theatre School of Canada and teaching English literature at Dawson College. Why is it important that you and your colleagues successfully*



~~install an appreciation for literature, poetry, and the theatre? To what extent have your efforts inspired aspiring playwrights, and how does that you make feel?~~

**Lambert:** Because this is the stuff of our lives. Books, plays and poems articulate what it is to be human. The vast universe of that experience. They put us in conversation. They open up the world. What would we be without our stories? Without the stories we tell to make meaning of our lives and the lives of others? I think we got a taste of that world in the early days of COVID. Maybe artists and writers and our other storytellers will be more appreciated?

Through all my years of teaching I hope I brought some students to an appreciation of literature and theatre who might otherwise have remained indifferent. When I was directing shows with the Dawson Theatre Collective I know that we created a wonderful community of people who wanted to share the experience of telling a story and bringing it to life on stage. Many of the students who were in the DTC are still friends and are still making theatre happen! What a gift to me that was.

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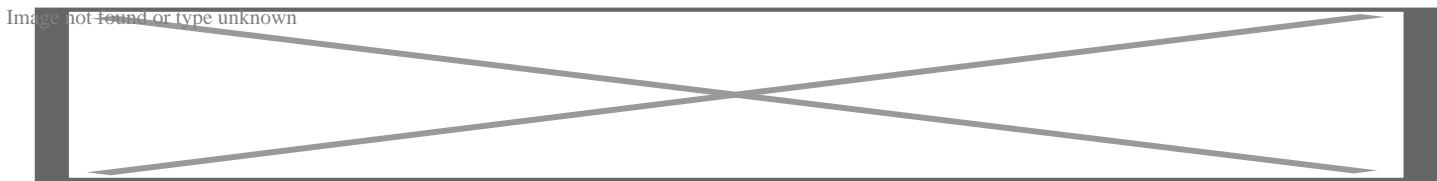
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