

# READER'S GUIDE



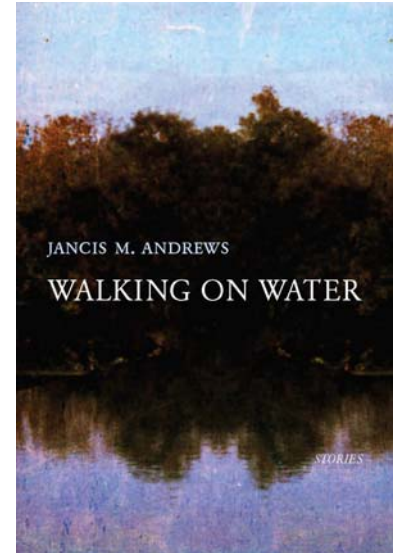
## *Walking on Water* by Jancis M. Andrews

*Cormorant Books Inc.*

### INTRODUCING *Walking on Water*

*Walking on Water*, the latest short story collection from award-winning author Jancis Andrews, searches for the intimate moments of life that reveal the fantastic amongst the mundane. From the jutting coasts and heaving mountains of British Columbia, through the poor communities of Vancouver, Andrews brings fully imagined characters to life with tender care and aplomb.

"Big Girl" is the story of Betsy, a pubescent girl growing up in the socially stifling 1950s. Barraged by conflicting ideals from her stringent mother and her voluptuous aunt, Betsy comes to understand the price a sexually mature woman sometimes has to pay. In "Balancing," destitute mother of two and abused wife Ann Gallagher must deal with her inner demons to find a release for the fear and frustration she faces at home. The title story centres on the elderly Lucy Gustavson and her depression after being denied the opportunity to sing in front of the Queen. As her frustration overwhelms her, she finds that a quick smile and sense of humour can be a greater gift than any royal sighting ever could. And in the chilling "Country of Evil," Andrews poses questions about the origin of evil as she leads the reader through a chaotic night during the London Blitz.



### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### *Maturity*

Several of the characters in this collection deal with either comings-of-age, like Betsy in "Big Girl," or coping with age, like Lucy in "Walking on Water." These stories feature characters who must deal with growing in one form or another, whether it is moving past a setback, or emerging with a better understanding of their identity.

#### *Womanhood*

Nearly all of the main characters in the stories are women who must face struggles particular to their gender. In "Big Girl," Betsy deals with the start of puberty as she watches her aunt slowly fall apart, seeing first-hand the struggles a mature woman must face. In "Balancing," Ann grapples with being a mother of two and her abusive husband, finding her own way of releasing the tension and frustration she faces.

#### *Strength*

It is through strength of will that many of the characters from these stories are able to persevere. In "Country of Evil," it takes a great deal of courage for the narrator, as a little girl, to hide in the bombed-out rubble. Also, in "Walking on Water," Lucy shows enormous strength in her decision to walk gracefully away from an embarrassing situation.

#### *Choice*

The most important theme in *Walking on Water*, which also links all of the other themes together, is choice. In every story, the characters face a significant turning point in which they are forced to make a choice about their lives, one that requires them to use their inner resources in order to make the right decision and move on with their lives.

## Q&A WITH JANCIS M. ANDREWS

**1. You worked for many years as a social activist, which is reflected in several of the stories in the collection. Did you pull inspiration for any of the stories or characters from people you met through your activism?**

Until the age of 18, when, thank God, I finally left home to join the Women's Royal Naval Service, I had an extremely violent, poverty-stricken childhood. My social activism on behalf of abused women and children stems from my terror and helplessness during that time, and from the fact that cruelty and injustice continue today. Yes, as with most writers, the stories come from my everyday experiences and observations of the people around me.

**2. Many of the stories deal with themes of maturity and womanhood, whether it is Betsy in "Big Girl" coming to terms with her pubescence, Ann from "Mooncalf" struggling with the image of the modern woman, or even the elderly Phoebe of "Phoenix Rising" contending with a sudden solitude. Would you be able to comment on them further out of the context of your fiction?**

What I'm very conscious of is the present uncertain status of women. We're leaving the time when women were merely chattels and sex objects, but we have not yet achieved full equality, in spite of the Charter, which glibly states that men and women are equal. Big Business makes damn sure that women continue to be regarded as sex objects — think of the frequency of rape, the proliferation of pornography, even the mind-bogglingly wide range of cosmetics for three-year-old girls. Unfortunately, too many women tamely accept the status quo.

**3. What sort of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this book? How did this collection in particular alter your craft?**

Lack of money and losing my home! When he received his pension in 1997, my husband walked out and refused to give me a cent. We had been married forty-one years. I had literally no money to buy food, we lost our house to the bank, and our daughter had to take me in. I certainly couldn't afford to buy typing paper. In 1999 I applied for a divorce, chopped ten years off my age, my daughter paid my fare to the UK, and for ten months I worked as a live-in cleaning lady for minimum wage, saving every penny plus my pension, which I added to my share of the monies from the sale of our home. Voila! In January 2000 I was able to pay cash for a little house in Sechelt, which nobody will ever be able to take away from me. Also, I can once again afford typing paper! So I can't say this collection *altered* my craft, but that the *act of writing it* provided a refuge from the storms raging about me. I'm fine now. One can get through a crisis, as long as one keeps going, keeps going, keeps going ... Never give in, that's what I say!

**4. *Balancing* is an interesting title for a story about a woman dealing with verbal and emotional abuse. Could you explain why you chose this title and how it embodies the story?**

The title comes from the physical fact that West Vancouver, the richest suburb in Canada, lies at the northern end of the Lion's Gate bridge, and the Downtown Eastside, Canada's poorest suburb, lies at its southern end. To me, it resembled one of those old-fashioned weighing machines, or balances. I got the idea of someone finding relief making abusive telephone calls from an incident that happened to me — the same one as in the story. My anonymous female caller was obviously unbalanced. I laughed out loud, which shocked her — she had expected me to be intimidated — and she slammed down the phone and never bothered me again. But I wondered what was in the woman's life to make her abuse a complete stranger, and so this incident sowed the seeds for the story.



### ABOUT JANCIS

Jancis M. Andrews was born and raised in England amongst the deafening clamour of the Second World War. At fourteen, she ran away from a violent home, and did not return to school until she was thirty-seven.

Since then she has received her BFA from the University of British Columbia. She has won several awards for her short fiction and poetry. *Walking on Water* is her second collection of short stories. Jancis lives in British Columbia.

### 5. Was there any malicious intent on the part of Marjorie in *Johnny I Hardly Knew You*?

Marjorie has no malicious intent. Drawn by forces she cannot understand (the memory of Johnny), she is visiting her beloved childhood home for the last time before she immigrates to Australia with her husband, never to return. Several times over the years, Marjorie and Johnny (who also has a humdrum marriage) have been within speaking distance of each other and never knew it. What interests me is that we may meet, however briefly, with the person we SHOULD have married, and yet we either never know it, or realize it too late, as does Johnny when he realizes he has always been looking for Marjorie. Too late . . . this time she's gone forever.

### 6. Out of all of the characters in the book, who has changed you the most?

I can honestly say none of the characters have *changed* me. I've always felt like an outsider, even as a child, and this continues. Possibly many writers feel the same way. You are not part of the group, but are on the fringes, watching other people . . . including your characters.

### 7. The concept of this collection is that all of the main characters come to a turning point, and at this moment they are forced to either sink or swim. In several of the stories you indicate their decision but do not spell out their fate. Is there any desire to return to any of the characters? Have any of them stuck with you to the point that you wish to return to their stories?

No, I have no wish to return to any of the characters. Our lives touched, I wrote about them, and I wish them luck, but that's it. We have gone our separate ways.

### 8. What do you hope readers will take from this collection?

It is my greatest hope that after reading this collection, readers will be satisfied enough to say, "That was a damn good read!" What more could a writer ask for?

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss how issues of social activism appear in many of the stories and how they shape many of the characters.
2. What are the motivations behind Phoebe's trip in "Phoenix Rising"? How do they reflect on her character?
3. In "Big Girl," Betsy's mother becomes overly hostile and protective of Betsy when her aunt is around. Discuss the motivation behind this behaviour.
4. How must the various characters contend with identity in their individual stories?
5. "Scheherazade at Noon" is ultimately about Kathy's self-destruction. How did Susan's presence at her soiree affect her character? Did Kathy's storytelling become laboured as a result of Susan's appearance, or was she embellishing even more because of her?
6. Do you agree with the author's analysis of the origins of evil in "Country of Evil"? If not, why?
7. In "The Hour of Miss Frith," the title character exudes an anger and determination that she has never released previously. What were the emotions and motivations that led her to this act of defiance?
8. Discuss the role of men in the stories. Generally, how do they treat the female characters? How does this fit in with some of the major themes?