

Ana Cotham  
Interview by Sue Staats

Ana Cotham has been greeting you and taking your money at Stories on Stage Sacramento since 2009, when we were just a baby reading series housed at the Sacramento Poetry Center and the bank account was crumpled \$5 bills stuffed in a shoebox. We've grown a lot since then, but a couple of things haven't changed: we still present the best writers and writing read by actors, and Ana's still saying hello and checking your name off the list. So, it's a treat to present her in a different role, one she quietly excels at — that of a writer. Four of her flash fiction pieces are featured at our next event, all new writing, all a big, exciting surprise to me when I read them for the first time. I couldn't wait to talk to her about them.

*Edited for length and clarity.*

**Sue:** I want to start right in talking about your writing — your new writing, the four very short pieces to be read at September's Stories on Stage event. They're so different from your previous work and from the short story we previously featured at SOSS. What's prompting this new direction in your writing?

**Ana:** Honestly, sometimes I just want to capture a moment in time. And then be done. I've always felt that the shorter you write, the more challenging it is. I have friends who write and write and write and all of a sudden, it's a novel. Now, I also write novels — or try to, as you know — but sometimes that makes me kind of tired. Flash fiction is something that opens up a world, opens up characterization, opens up, hopefully, an interesting plot. It's digestible in a really short amount of time. Over the past several years, I've been enjoying reading them and trying to create my own. Also, it's good to shake things up a little bit and to test different parts of your brain. And sometimes I find that working on one helps the other and vice versa.

**Sue:** Oh, now I'm really relating to the part about writing and writing and writing and being tired.

**Ana:** Sometimes you've captured the moment and want to move on.

**Sue:** So, we have four very different pieces you've given us. One is about a woman who knit a blanket belonging to a missing person being questioned by police. Another, "Driving by Moonlight," is about, well, two people driving in the moonlight. "Untethered" is about a conjoined twin, and "Chicken Skin" is about, well, chicken skin used in a very creative way, and revenge and maybe fear. I'm wondering if there's a pattern in these stories, a common theme you're exploring.

**Ana:** I think with each I was exploring something slightly different, but all of those, particularly "Driving by Moonlight" and "Untethered," touch on the moment of losing someone, the moment of grief. And the anticipation of grief. They all feel connected to me, they all came from some sort of inspiration I found.

It's also interesting to hear your perspective on what they are about and how you perceive them because everyone brings their own perspective and their own bias to what they're reading. Which is why it's so great when you have a group or a reader that you trust and you hear what they think and you're like, Oh, I didn't see that. But I see how you got that.

And maybe it was subconscious on my part, but all of them have that element of loss and the various ways that we can be connected with someone or something and experience that loss and the other emotions that might come along with that.

**Sue:** In your working life, you're also a writer and editor of technical material. I'm wondering if your fiction writing ever seeps into that work, or if your technical writing and editing ever influences your fiction writing?

**Ana:** I really hope not because my clients, who are also my colleagues, would probably look at it thinking, where did this come from? I do mostly technical editing for my work and I work for an engineering/planning/environmental company. What I read, what I edit and write, is very technical and a lot of it is very scientific. I mean, I wouldn't say it's all science-based, but it's all very factual. I produce work for companies that are trying to build bridges, transportation, cities and communities. So, there's not a lot of creativity, but you do need some when you're addressing these social and environmental issues.

But I really do try to keep them separate. And as far as bringing my work life into my personal writing, it would probably be just using some of the facts. Like, if I'm trying to create a world, something I learned about the planning industry I might use. Something in the water industry might be brought into another story, if it's a little more factual and contemporary-world based. I figure the more I learn, the more I can use.

**Sue:** As somebody said, it's all material.

**Ana:** That's a much better answer. I should have just said that.

**Sue:** Actually, I stole it from Nora Ephron, who admitted she stole it from her mother. We're all thieves! So, outside of work and writing, you're a devoted volunteer, not just to Stories on Stage Sacramento but also to the pet rescue organization Happy Tails, and you're also a devoted cat owner. But I don't see any animals in your writing ... How come?

**Ana:** Well, let me think about that. They do show up in my novels in various ways — sometimes they're secondary characters. Sometimes they play a more primary role. I guess I haven't introduced animals in shorter fiction for some reason, and now I'm going to think on that. I'm going to try and figure out why. Oh, wait — a very early draft of a novel many, many years ago was very animal-centric, about an underground vengeance group that would go after people who had been harming animals in any way. That was a lot of fun to write. Probably wish-fulfillment, but maybe I'll go back to it someday.

**Sue:** You're probably the longest tenured Stories on Stage volunteer. In fact, you've been here from the very beginning, in 2009. What keeps you coming back?

**Ana:** It's hard for me to say goodbye and I've always enjoyed it. I get to stand behind a counter and take people's money and say "Hi" to a lot of familiar faces, like all of our stalwart, steady fans, the people who come back to us every month. And, you know, I like being part of that community. And I'm very much a follower. I'm like a backstage crew member. I like to be in the background, to help keep things running. And Stories on Stage has been, and is, a very important part of this community. And an important part of my life.

**Sue:** Are there events that you particularly remember?

**Ana:** Oh, my gosh. It's hard to forget when Tobias Wolff was with us. I mean, we were in a venue (The Verge) that we were new to, but the line was out the door. And we'd had great publicity and it was just a great event, great readers. He's a wonderful writer and he was very engaging. It felt flawless to me. Also, when Pam Houston was with us, in January 2020. It was the first event of the year. Shelley (Blanton-Stroud) and Dorothy (Rice) were on board. Again, we had lines out the door, standing-room

only, the crowd waiting in the lobby. And there was just this ... this excitement! It was a brand-new year and we had new directors and we had this great season coming up, we're just doing all this great stuff. Hello, 2020, it's a new decade! And you know, nobody expected COVID. And then it all just collapsed after that. So that was kind of hard to forget. So many individual writers and individual performers over the past, what, 12 years?

**Sue:** More than that, I think, 14. And now you're going to be one of those writers with your work read — for the second time — by the wonderful Kellie Raines. As someone who likes to be backstage, how do you feel about being in the spotlight?

**Ana:** Well, I'm nervous, of course. I mean, Kellie is fantastic. She's always been amazing, so I have full trust in her. But I don't know how (the stories) sound being read aloud. I don't know how I'm going to react. I don't know, again, how she might interpret them. So that'll be really interesting. I'm looking forward to it. I am nervous. I'm all the things.

**Sue:** So, last question. I've known you a long time and read your work often. I'm really impressed by how you seem to be always looking forward, continuing to try new things and explore new ways of writing and seeing. And how you keep plugging away to try and find the thing that works. And you keep at it, like most of us who haven't found a big publisher, whose work hasn't been reviewed in *The New Yorker*. And I'm wondering what this has meant to you, personally. And why you keep at it.

**Ana:** Oh, gosh. Complicated. Because I'm a very good editor, I feel a lot of times like I'm almost literally writing in circles, in that I can look at my piece and just keep editing and editing and editing and find a better way to say something. I'm re-crafting the sentence, but I'm not moving the sentence forward in service of the story. I have struggled a lot with that.

**Sue:** But still, you continue, so it means something in your life. What is that, if you don't mind telling me?

**Ana:** I think a lot of it just feels like a challenge, trying to dig a little deeper into what I'm working on. And I can sense that there's a meaning to it. But I might not know exactly yet what the meaning is. There's also the challenge of trying to craft a story that will be meaningful to someone else, from beginning to finish. Will it impact someone, hopefully, positively?

It's just something I've always enjoyed. And I have had a number of smaller things published, but I don't know if I will ever have a novel published, unless I pursue publication on my own, which is a definite possibility. But, once, when we were sitting around at Fishtrap (an organization that offers writing programs), one of my cohorts was talking with her fiancé about how disillusioned she felt about publication and writing and someone said, "Well, if you knew that you never would be published, would you stop writing?" And she said, "No, I enjoy it. I just enjoy the process."

And I think that's something that I have come to terms with. Would I give it up? And I don't think I would because it's just something that I enjoy. Even if some people think of it as a hobby. I mean, my knitting isn't getting me anywhere, but it's not meant to, so maybe it's just something for me in the end. But if writing helps enlighten me a little bit, I don't see anything wrong with it.

**Sue:** Thanks for sharing that with me. My own reason for keeping at it is because I love puzzles, and writing is the hardest puzzle in the world, and unlike the *New York Times* Saturday crossword, you can't read the solution in Monday's paper. There's no key. It's all up to me.

**Ana:** And that's what it is — a constant challenge, that you might think you've solved the puzzle. Like in the novel I'm working on right now. There are puzzle pieces I'm trying to move around, to make the story make sense. And I think they make sense in my head and then my reading group says, "You're missing this corner piece. And you're missing this little piece in here." And I'm like, alright, we start over, but at some point, I hope the majority of readers think that I've made the whole puzzle complete and you know, screw the rest of the people who don't think so!

**Sue:** Exactly. Just jam that last piece in and the heck with it. There's always a new puzzle! Well, we've worked this metaphor to death, and why not? It's a writer's privilege. Ana, thank you so much for your time and your company and your devotion to Stories on Stage Sacramento.