

Web Exclusive Interview: Anton DiSclafani

In our December Web Exclusive story, "[Flight](#)," author Anton DiSclafani freezes a moment in the life of an aged John J. Audubon. It's a moment that allows us a bird's-eye view of the famed ornithologist/artist's exotic origins, his loss and his passion, and his rivalry with Alexander Wilson. It's elegiac without being mawkish, and you walk away feeling as though you've just been up close with a rare and brilliant specimen.



Erin McReynolds: What drew you to Audubon, as a character?

Anton DiSclafani: At first I was drawn to Wilson, Audubon's rival. They were both naturalists, and as I allude to in the story, the rivalry weighed on Audubon's mind. Of course, history remembers Audubon, not Wilson, and that perspective—the reader knows what Audubon could not—intrigued me.

Audubon was a showman, which I did not know. He was deeply charismatic and traveled the world talking about birds. He was deeply talented, too—if you look at an Audubon print versus a Wilson print, the difference is shocking. Wilson's are flat, two-dimensional. In Audubon's work, the birds come alive. So his personality, for me, seemed to drive the way he portrayed birds in his art. I liked that.

EM: I love that Audubon has an obvious affection for Wilson, as well, which you put at

odds with the woman at the gathering who needles him, as if she'd prefer a little scandal to peace. Did you create this affection or was it true?

AD: I created it. It might have existed, but I certainly didn't read about anything except their rivalry. Audubon was obsessed with Wilson (as anyone is obsessed with any rival) and I imagine he thought about him constantly, at least during the height of their relationship, when they were accused of copying each other. Anyway, it makes sense to me that one would develop intimacy and affection for someone who occupies so much of their thoughts. And Wilson loved birds. Audubon could respect that.

EM: Did you know this was going to be a first-person perspective, set in his later years? Or did you try other versions of his story before this one?

AD: I said above that Audubon was a showman; I wasn't interested in that perspective. I was interested in the tired Audubon, the Audubon who had spent his life in service of birds, in service of fame and fortune, and who now wanted to rest. The quiet Audubon, if you will. I'd also recently had a baby, and that Audubon had two daughters who died in infancy stuck with me. Children died all the time in this country before modern medicine; your child was, in fact, as likely to live as to die, and all those bereaved parents carried on, because they had to. It was commonplace, but it changed you. So I wanted to explore that facet of Audubon's personality; what grief did to him.

EM: Do you think his renderings of birds were so much more beautiful than Wilson's because he'd suffered the sensitizing of great pain?

AD: I hadn't thought about it like that, but perhaps. I'm not very sentimental when it comes to the creation of great art; I think Audubon was talented, and talented in a way that no one had seen before, and whether or not the death of his daughters influenced his art—that's a mystery.

EM: Your novels, *The After Party* and *The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls* take place in the 1930s and 1950s, respectively. What sort of research does it entail for you to so fully inhabit bygone eras like these and Audubon's?

AD: I'm not a meticulous researcher. There are some writers of historical fiction who spend a lot of time in the archives; I do not. I find what I need to know and write. It interested me that Audubon and Wilson met in Kentucky, so I put that in the story. It interested me that Audubon was, in that day's parlance, a bastard, so I put that in the story. For my novels, I work the same way. I'm surrounded by books, but I dip in and out of them. For me, fact always serves at the pleasure of fiction. I also write about domestic worlds, not wars and Big Events, so I can skirt the facts. I'm much more interested in the customs of a time. How children interacted with their parents, whether or not a woman could be alone with a man she was not related to, etc. . .

EM: What are you working on or most interested in now?

AD: A Southern Gothic ghost story (it's a novel). I'm almost finished! With a first draft—there will be a lot of revision. I'm also finding myself writing very short stories, like "Flight." You have to

pay so much attention to language and cadence and white space—qualities I pay less attention to when writing a novel.

EM: How do you know what to leave out in order to create the right amount of white space?

AD: Trial and error. Writing a paragraph and then deleting it. Doing that dozens of times, to see how little scaffolding a story actually requires.

EM: Of course I have to ask: Do you have a favorite bird?

AD: I like hawks. In my old neighborhood, I once saw one drop from the sky and eviscerate a squirrel in like twenty seconds. It impressed me. There's one (or maybe more than one) in my neighborhood now, and I can see it from my writing desk, and when I take walks. I like to imagine we're friends, though hawks probably don't have friends.

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Anton DiSclafani is the author of two novels, *The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls* and *The After Party*, both of which were Indienext Picks and Amazon Best Books of the Month. She was a finalist for the Flaherty-Dunn first novel prize, and her fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Washington Square Review*, the *Washington Post*, *Electric Literature*, and *This American Life*, among other places. She lives in Alabama with her husband and son, where she teaches at Auburn University.