Canadian poet and translator Anne Carson wins Nobel Prize in literature

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Last month, the Swedish Academy in Stockholm awarded Canadian poet and translator Anne Carson the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature "for her bold and inventive oeuvre that, in playful dialogue with the classical tradition, has created new forms for contemporary literature."

Carson, a classicist by training, is widely known for her translations of the archaic Greek poet Sappho and of fifth-century BC Athenian tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. She is equally esteemed for her original poetry and hybrid essays, which continually weave classical myth and translation into contemporary themes.

Born in Toronto in 1950 to a homemaker mother and a banker father, Carson grew up in a Catholic household across a series of small towns in rural Ontario as her father's job required frequent moves. While attending a Catholic high school, she discovered a bilingual edition of Sappho's poems in a bookstore and persuaded a teacher to tutor her in ancient Greek during their lunch hour. She went on to earn her BA, MA and PhD in Classics from the University of Toronto, and spent decades teaching ancient Greek and comparative literature at Princeton, McGill University and the University of Michigan.

Carson has published more than 20 books, received MacArthur and Guggenheim fellowships, and won major honors including the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Griffin Poetry Prize and the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature. Throughout her career, she has done an enormous amount to interpret and popularize ancient Greek literature for modern readers.

Her doctoral work became *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), a critical study of desire in early Greek lyric poetry featuring original translations of Sappho and her contemporaries. Her verse novel *Autobiography of Red* (1998) was prefaced by her translation of surviving fragments from the sixth-century BC poet Stesichorus' *Geryoneis*, while *Economy of the Unlost* (1999) paired the archaic lyric poet Simonides of Keos with modern Romanian-Jewish poet Paul Celan. She followed these with Sophocles' *Electra* (2001) and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002), bringing the arresting lyric fragments of the poet from Lesbos to a wide contemporary audience.

Carson has also repeatedly turned to classical drama to confront war and its aftermath. In her introduction to *Grief Lessons* (2006)—translations of four plays by Euripides (480–406 BC)—she notes that much of the Athenian dramatist's career unfolded during the Peloponnesian War, and that he used ancient Trojan War myths as a means through which to refract the corruption, decay and despair of contemporary wartime.

Similarly, *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (2019) draws on Euripides' Helen—in which the real Helen is spirited away to Egypt while Greeks and Trojans slaughter one another over a cloud "phantom"—to braid ancient myth with 1950s Cold War America. Set in a 1960s New York office following Marilyn Monroe's death, the play weaves together Monroe's 1954 USO tour for troops in Korea with Arthur Miller, Harry Truman and the McCarthyite hearings to show how modern governments manufacture ideological phantoms ("containment," "national honor," celebrity icons) to send men to die.

Two years later, in *H of H Playbook* (2021), Carson returned to Euripides' *Herakles*—a play she had translated in *Grief Lessons* in which the returning warrior-hero murders his own family—recasting Herakles as a modern special-ops mercenary struggling with PTSD. Across her recent work, one encounters a palpable revulsion at the last thirty years of war.

In "Dear Krito," a prose poem (in the form of an imaginary letter from Socrates to a friend) included in the collection *Wrong Norma* (2024), she writes: "Remember the old days when they'd play Iggy Pop all night to break the prisoners down? That was when the war was on; the beast is dozing now"—an unmistakable allusion to the loud-music torture authorized under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at Guantánamo Bay, Bagram Airfield, Abu Ghraib and CIA "black sites."

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to call Carson a consistently political or even an anti-war poet. Her work spans love, solitude and personal grief, often joining them together with literary criticism—most notably in "The Glass Essay" (1994), which intertwines the life and poetry of *Wuthering Heights* author Emily Brontë with the speaker's own heartbreak and family caregiving.

Of her long poems, "The Glass Essay" is unusually cohesive in narrative and theme. More often, the defining quality of Carson's poetry is its fragmentation and refusal to follow a

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single line of thought—or even, seemingly, to acknowledge that a single coherent reality exists. This outlook reflects nearly four decades spent inside an academy dominated by postmodernism, which refuses to "privilege" one narrative or historical interpretation over another, that is, which denies that there is any underlying truth to be discovered at all.

As the WSWS has noted, the postmodernists "declared the end of 'grand narratives' or 'master narratives.' What this really meant was the end to a search for fundamental causes; instead they refer to countless factors, none of them given precedence. There is no underlying truth to be discovered, simply one's impressions, one's narrative. … One is left with fragments and the celebration of fragments."

In "1=1," another prose poem in *Wrong Norma*, a woman takes a morning swim while reflecting on beauty, among other things:

> Perhaps involved is that commonplace struggle to know beauty, to know beauty exactly, to put oneself right in its path, to be in the perfect place to hear the nightingale sing, see the groom kiss the bride, clock the comet.

Returning home, she reads a newspaper report about refugees trapped in Europe:

> …a train car in Europe jammed floor to door with escaped victims of a war zone further south, people denied transit. Filthy families and souls in despair pressed flat against one another in the grip to survive, uncountable arms and legs, torn-open eyes, locked all night in a train waiting for dawn, a scene so much the antithesis of her own morning she cannot think it. What sense it makes for these two mornings to exist side by side—these things knocking against each other, not being able to live together—would not be answerable by philosophy or poetry or finance or the shallows or the deeps of her own mind, she fears.

The image is arresting, yet it remains an isolated flash in a poem that begins elsewhere and moves on without resolution; the coexistence of the swimmer's peaceful morning and the refugees' suffering is presented as inexplicable in or to art or philosophy.

Asked about this passage in a 2024 interview, Carson remarked: "It always seems to me to be a problem that doesn't resolve, if you think into it." Comparing her poem to the work of a fellow poet writing about police shootings, she added that the dilemma is that the poem ends without resolving anything—the two realities are "just there," knocking against each other. In the same conversation, Carson noted that "we live in doubt about whether we can be good people" and concluded: "You have no other story to tell, really, you have no other understanding of reality other than the one you've lived."

This is the point at which one wants to comment: Carson should speak for herself. Some realities about contemporary life are blindingly clear, in fact, to increasing numbers of people.

Hers is a variety of debilitating postmodern paralysis. The role that poetry—read by the right people at the right time—can play in fighting police violence or imperialist war, for example, is in fact enormous.

The above remark sums up the central limitation of her aesthetic. Shot through with postmodern skepticism toward "grand narratives," Carson's work—while sometimes spontaneous, witty and insightful—projects a radical doubt about our ability to know the world as a connected whole.

She carries this ethos into her approach to translation and form. While classical scholars have long edited Sappho's surviving papyrus fragments without claiming they form a complete book, Carson's *If Not, Winter* foregrounds the brackets and blank spaces on the page as an aesthetic statement about absence and unknowability. In *Autobiography of Red*, footnotes to Stesichorus's fragments become a central structural device; in *Nox* (2010), accordion-folded pages of faded photographs, letters, dictionary entries and a fragmented translation of Catullus reject linear biography in favor of an open-ended archive of grief.

Fragments, notes and gaps in her work become the only truth we can derive from the world. In this way, Carson articulates the crisis of contemporary poetry with unusual clarity. Her writing is intelligent, moving, humorous and sincere, capable of seizing a vivid image and holding it fast—yet it cannot nearly accommodate the great onrush of objective social and historical development. And it is precisely that capacity—to grasp the vastness and wholeness of life, to exercise "universal thought" as opposed to the non-committal, passive, fractured approach popular on campuses and in literary circles—that is most needed today, as historical problems and intense social forces and demands bear down on the lives of millions.

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