

# Writer-in-Residence A Conversation with Anne Simpson

By Valerie Poulin

Anne Simpson's first collection of poetry was awarded the Gerald Lampert Award and the Atlantic Poetry Prize in 2001. Her most recent poetry book was a finalist for the Governor-General's Award in 2003 and awarded the Griffin Prize in 2004. Anne has lived in Nova Scotia for almost 20 years and was the 2002-2003 writer-in-residence at UNB in Fredericton. Freelance writer, Valerie Poulin, interviewed Anne about the challenges and opportunities involved in residency.

**Valerie:** Writers who do not send their best work likely make the process a little daunting. What can emerging writers do to make the experience a successful one for everyone involved?

**Anne:** The best advice would be to get emerging writers to send a sample of nearly finished work, but a greater proportion of the submission should be work they are still doing. It helps the writer-in-residence if the emerging writer makes a brief list of the problems in the work he or she is showing. This way the writer-in-residence can help by offering solutions to some of these problems.

The key here is that the writer-in-residence should not be overwhelmed with a lot of writing for a given session, unless this is how things have been set up (at the Banff Writing Studio, for instance, writers send entire manuscripts). Writers tend to want to show everything, and this is not the best approach. I used to ask writers to bring in only five poems or only one or two chapters of a novel at a

given time. I also used to ask that writers would bring a submission and then give me time to read it (usually a week or so) before we met. I remember being completely worn out when a writer brought me an entire manuscript and wanted me to read it in a couple of days, and then go over it in a two hour session. This way of doing things is as difficult for the writer as it is for the writer-in-residence because the combing-through process is hard work: it's a lot of constructive criticism for a writer to digest at one time.

**Valerie:** How does sending their best, followed by works-in-progress, or first drafts, help you see the extent of the writer's ability?

**Anne:** As I said, only a very little of the best or finished work should be shown. (One of the problems in showing "best" or "finished" work to a writer-in-residence is that the latter has a job to do, and may point to problems in the emerging writer's finished work. This may not be what the emerging writer intended to have happen. Do you see the potential for difficulties in communication here?) The emerging writer usually wants help with a work-in-progress. Having said that, the writer should have already spent a fair amount of time with a work-in-progress (it shouldn't be work that is hot off the press). If the work is too fresh, the writer can't step back from it, and so can't see the potential problems.

**Valerie:** Do you approach the work of emerging writers and more established writers the same?

**Anne:** I always try to meet the writer—any writer—at the



Award-winning author Anne Simpson's latest novel *Falling* was published in February, 2008. (Photo by John Berridge.)

point at which he or she is writing. In other words, I respect the stage at which any writer finds himself or herself. Nonetheless, I'm more cautious with less established writers, because they may not quite know how to deal with criticism. Often they have not learned to distance themselves from their work, so I take this into consideration. But I'm always looking for much the same things in any work.

**Valerie:** How does a list of interests (including favourite authors), writing experiences and goals, help you with the evaluation process?

**Anne:** It's always intriguing to know something about a writer, but my main work is always to deal with the writing itself. Sometimes I'd rather not know which authors a writer likes, because then I begin to see how the writing has been influenced.

**Valerie:** What's the best experience you had as a writer-in-residence? The worst?

**Anne:** Some of the best experiences I had were seeing

the writers begin to really flourish afterwards; they had taken the criticism and actually used it to make the work better. This is always wonderful, because then you know they will begin to do it on their own. The more difficult experiences were when writers were "in love" with what they'd written and so weren't interested in changing or improving it.

**Valerie:** Is there anything that makes the process frustrating for you?

**Anne:** The most frustrating thing for me was when I had to deal with, and comment on, an overwhelming amount of writing at any one time: it's a lot to ask.



Although she lives outside the region, writer and poet Valerie Poulin loves her many east coast friends for their warmth and their sense of family and home; she especially admires their optimistic outlook on life in general.