

Q + A

Eminent Domain
An Interview with Antonya Nelson

Antonya Nelson teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston and is the author of four short story collections and three novels. Her work has appeared in The New Yorker, Harper's, and anthologies such as the O. Henry Awards and Best American Short Stories. The following excerpt is from a conversation between Nelson and a writing class at the University of Houston's Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture taught by Raj Mankad and Thomas Colbert.

RAJ MANKAD: Many of the faculty at the UH Creative Writing Program teach here, but they set their writing in Los Angeles or New York. You've written extraordinary Houston stories. How did that come about?

ANTONYA NELSON: I've lived in a few different places. And obviously setting means something to a story, but I don't use the term "setting" when I'm talking about fiction. You can say a story is set in Houston, but for me it is more useful to say "atmosphere." Any number of stories center on New York City and Los Angeles as a physical place but are atmospherically different for each writer in terms of investment in that city or space. For me, it was useful to be an outsider in Houston, to have arrived and see it as a completely alien landscape, to come into it and say, "Holy cow, this is such a weird place." Another useful position is as a deep insider where you have been in a place so long you have an authority that is unquestionable. You have to provide very little in the way of establishing shots because you know exactly what will nail it for you.

I like either of those positions very much. The less enviable position is the one I'm in now—someone who has not been here long enough to claim authority but so long that it's not looking novel. I have to create characters who reflect that sensibility.

RM: In your story "Eminent Domain," the homeless adolescent seems to be an insider and the narrator an outsider.

AN: That story was written the first year I was in Houston. I did have a teenage girl who was giving

us a run for our money. I wanted to create a character, Paolo—you know in a lot of ways his position in the city reflected my own. He was there at the request of an organization that was interested in the arts. Though I'm not like him at all, his access to the city, his approach to the city, very much reflected my own at that time.

RM: When I read "Eminent Domain," I think of the 59 Spur construction near Main and Alabama. The ramp that went into nowhere.

AN: Yes. The 59 Spur construction was exactly what was going on when I was writing that story. That's one of the most frightening things to encounter in the landscape. You are driving along, driving along... oh wait a minute, the highway ended!

The first year we were here, some teenagers had moved construction cones, maybe on 59 or 610. A prank was played and somebody was killed. That really stuck with me. The stuff of nightmares.

THOMAS COLBERT: I understood the nightmare in "Eminent Domain" as being on the receiving end of the freeway. The city was about to crunch the church, the girl, and the neighborhood... it's just about to happen.

AN: At the time for me, being here and living in Montrose and having a teenager whose future looked a little uncertain some days, the landscape was not innocent. Anything that seemed half done and crumbling, whether it was a church crumbling or a road unfinished, was frightening in some fashion. Also just being in a place where we did not have a support system in any way—everybody was as kind as they could possibly be—but if you don't have longstanding friends or attachments, it's difficult to call on people. "Have you seen my daughter?" So everything looked terrible to me. You can wander through the city in any kind of mood. That's what I mean by atmosphere. I

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This neighborhood was called "transitional." The church was being destroyed to accommodate a new freeway, and a ramp jutted raggedly into the sky above it, a road to nowhere: eminent domain. Paolo drove past it on his way to the theatre for rehearsals. Every day, the girl balanced on the church steps, surrounded by a shifting group of men. Always the only female, and, as a result, the center of a kind of stunned, stoned, possessive attention.



can wander through quite happily now, and it's just charming.

RM: In the ending of "Eminent Domain," the girl is back with her wealthy family and gets married. The narrator is relieved. But that highway crunching the church—and the name of the short story—suggest that we should not read the ending as happy.

TC: The girl is balanced on the church steps. She's in front of a church that's deteriorating and the city is leaning over... it's about to grab her, about to grab this sort of wild thing. The city is exerting this culture over her.

AN: Well I think a lot of my stories have characters in them whose problems or issues turn out to be phases. The kid has turned out to be ordinary rather than extraordinary. You want the kid to survive and be fine. Any parent wants a kid to be healthy, good, and fine, but something about the notion of being absorbed into all of the ordinary is paradoxically disappointing.

TC: So is that what the term "eminent domain" is about?

AN: For me it is. Yeah, I like that expression. It's not for me limited to what a city can do with property or about private property being taken. It's about private individuals overrun by public averageness.