

# **Vermont Arts Council**

## **Transcript**

### **Vermont Made, Episode 9**

#### **“Children’s Lit for a Changing Vermont with Ann Dávila Cardinal”**

##### **Desmond Peeples:**

This is Vermont Made, the show where Vermont creatives tell me, Desmond Peeples, all about one thing they've made. In this episode I speak with novelist Ann Davila Cardinal, who last year received a Vermont Arts Council Creation Grant to support her first novel for Middle Grade readers, a horror story called Dry Bones which is now on submission to publishers.

Ann writes prolifically for all ages, so we wound up talking about a number of other books she's written including The Storyteller's Death, a novel for adults that's hitting shelves this year on

October 4. Ann treats us to a brief reading from *The Storyteller's Death* at the end of the show, but first we discuss writing across age groups, the appeal of horror to the grieving, and the importance of representing Vermont's changing communities in stories for young people.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Well, it's about a young girl named Mara from Queens, New York. Her father has just died and she lives with her mother, her brother, and their dog, and they can't afford to live in New York City anymore so they inherit a house in Vermont from an uncle of the father that they never knew. So they're going to move to Vermont and Mara would be okay with this, except for there's a stipulation that there're no dogs. So she has to give up her beloved dog, Ezekiel, when she gets into Vermont and when they're bringing him to the pound, he gets loose. So she doesn't know where he is, her

life is up heaved and they move to the house in Morrisville, Vermont, which is slightly creepy. So she's adjusting to ... she has to go to a new school, she has no friends there. So she's going through this adjustment while grieving for her father and her dog.

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

But she makes a friend with a student named Maverick, nonbinary, a grade above her, and they sort of find solace in each other and then weird things start happening in the house. So Mara and Maverick have to solve sort of the mystery because there's a demon who had used to live in the house and if his bones are all put together, he comes back to life and is going to take his revenge on the town. So it all sort of began with stories in my own house in Morrisville, like a tombstone we found in the walkway, and there's this ... Vermont basements are terrible, and so there's this horrible

hole dug under the extension of our house that I call Shelob's cave, from Lord of the Rings, the huge spider. Yes.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

So these were all sort of things I brought into this novel, but I really wanted to deal with grief when you're a child, my father died when I was eight, and you're trying to figure out what that all means and that's sort of the age when you start to realize that these things are ... your family's not always going to be there. But I also wanted to show friendship and her love for ... dogs are very important to me and so they play an important part in this book. But also the adjustment of a Puerto Rican girl from Queens sort of adjusting to rural Vermont. So I had a really good time writing it. It was a wonderful experience.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Are you originally from Queens?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

No. Actually, I'm from Manhattan.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Manhattan. Okay. My father is originally from long Island City, moved to rural Vermont.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah. I'm from there. I'm from New York.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Okay. Well, when did you come here?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah, somebody said to me, what brings you to Vermont? I said a big U Haul. Let's get some coffee. No, I've been here 30 years so I'm adjusted, but I wanted to sort of address that through a child's eyes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, yeah, you've raised children here, you are yourself a Puerto Rican of mixed heritage, like the main character in this book. So these parallels and it also, this book parallels your own experience, as you said, with grief. Your father died when you were very young. You've spoken in previous conversations with me about how, for you, the book is more about that part of this character's life, about grief and how to recover from grief rather than about the other elements of her everyday life, who she is, where she is and the complexities of being a different person in a new community. So can you talk about how you decided to balance those elements of the story and why?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure. I mean, I think all of my books have some element of myself in them. I think you write what

you know, and then you sort of expand from there. I did not see myself in books when I was a kid straddling these two worlds and dealing with this loss, and my mother was an alcoholic. That's another thing I sort of often write about are the things that influenced me as a kid and that I had to overcome. I wanted kids to be able to see themselves in my work. So that's the big hope when you're writing for kids is that you can ... but to bring it into a modern context is fun because otherwise it's memoir. So Charlotte's Web was very, very important to me. I said to my friend Will Alexander, he actually was a recipient a couple years ago, He's amazing. He's also Cuban so we have a lot of things in common.

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

But I said to him one day, he said, "why don't you want to write middle grade?" And I said, "Well, I'm afraid because ..." and what I said to him was, "I

was clutching my copy of Charlotte's Web when they took my father's body out of the house," and he was jolted and he said, "Oh my God, you need to write about this." So Charlotte's Web is a like manual of how to deal with death. I didn't know why I was reading it over and over again, but I was. So the idea of being able to write a story for kids at that age was daunting to me. It's like, "This is such an important time for them." That's when they fall in love with reading, that's when they realize that everything isn't so safe, so the idea of speaking to them was intimidating. But this book and the grant enabled me to do that.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

You have also spoken about how this mode of writing for middle grade, that age, is a new age group for you. You've written mostly for young adults and also you have a book for adults coming out soon, which we'll talk about in a bit, but let's



talk about how the middle grade writing process has been different than writing for other age groups for you.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

It's an interesting group to reach and they're not going to handle a lot of pontification, and no morals. People think children's books are supposed to teach you something. Those kids can see that a mile away and they're gone. So you want a pure ... it's a pure story. You got to start just getting right to the heart of the story. I like that. I've always been a spare writer. And so I sort of took to that form. But it was completely new for me and I did say to somebody in the MFA in Writing for Children program when I was there, I said, "I'm never going to write middle grade," and they said, "Well, be careful what you say." I told Will I wouldn't do it and then I heard about the grant and then I

said, "Okay, if I do this, I want it to support something new."

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Because I'm a midcareer writer, I wanted it to try some different form because writing is a muscle and the best thing you can do for a muscle is work the ones around it when you're not working the main muscle. So I said, "Okay, I will apply for this grant." I wrote a plot idea for this book and I said, "If I get it, I'll write it, and if I don't, I never will." So I got it and I said, "Okay, clearly I meant to write this book." I took to the form like I couldn't ... I mean, it just came out almost fully formed and the 11 year old voice came very smoothly. So I'm thinking I might have found a new thing for me because I enjoyed it so much, and actually this book ends with a hint of a second so we'll see what happens with that.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, okay. All right. Sequel in the works. Okay. Well, I'm interested in how it connected to your experience as a child in grief. How is it looking back on grief from so long ago? What was it like to try and create something out of it for the very same age that you were when you were experiencing that grief?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Right. You know what's interesting is that I chose to do that through horror and the reason is because when I was that age, horror got me through and I have a theory of why. Because my life was ... I had no control over it and it was going to hell in a hand basket and when I read horror or when I watched horror movies, it was like, "Oh, well, my life might suck, but at least there's no zombies and there's no evil clowns today banging on the window." So it made me feel better. It's like

you see these people in these impossible situations with these horrible creatures and situations like War of the World. They're harvesting their blood for fertilizer. It's like, "Oh, well, okay. My life is better than that."

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

So it brought me comfort in a weird way. I would go down to Puerto Rico in the summer and I would have a pile of horror comics and my aunt, "Ay, Annie. This is horrible. Does your mother know you're reading this?" I said, "Who do you think bought them for me?" So those comforted me and so I think it makes sense for me to tell my first middle grade story through that genre because ... and there are still kids out there, kids like me out there who love it. Actually Stranger Things is what put middle grade horror on the map.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, really?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Okay. So it's the perfect timing.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah. Because that's the age group when they started and everybody thinks they want to protect kids and teach them something. Like I said before, they don't want that. So they like being scared. It reminds them they're safe.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, I don't recall Charlotte's Web being a horror.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

It gets pretty intense. That rat freaked me out, okay? That rat freaked me out. No, Charlotte's

Web, I was a little younger because when Mara's father died, she's eight or nine. But after that it was like ... and I had three brothers, older brothers, and they would watch all those monster movies. I slept with the blanket around my neck to protect from vampires until I was like 14.

**Desmond Peeples:**

If you had to be trapped in a horror movie, in one horror movie, which one do you think it would be?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Boy, that's a really good question. Something with a lot of weapons. I don't know the answer. I mean, I think any of the ones from the '80s because those people were so stupid. It's like, you're yelling, "Don't go in the basement!" I mean, I wouldn't go in the basement. I wouldn't go.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, you think you wouldn't be subject to the same...

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Oh, hell no. I've been trained my whole life. Those people are stupid. So anyway, I don't know. As long as Nightmare On Elm Street doesn't come anywhere near me. Probably Creep Show because it's old school.

**Desmond Peeples:**

So Dry Bones, we've talked about how the main focus for the character is her grieving the loss of her father, but the story is also existing within this context of real world Vermont today, which is a quickly changing community. So I think we talked a little bit about this earlier. We talked about balancing between those elements of the story.

## **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

So in one sense, I honored my own story being half and sort of adapting and then I realized that story of not quite fitting in is universal. It still happens, especially when you're kids, you're trying to fit in and whatever. But Vermont is ... my son's 25 and I raised him in Morrisville and Vermont has changed a lot in his lifetime, not alone in mine. So watching that happen, first of all, I have great faith in Gen Z. I can't wait for them to run the country. I mean, seriously. They're a little bitter, but they have good reason to be. So I love writing stories for them because they're more accepting of things like diversity and gender as a spectrum and they have no problem with pronouns and they have no ... they just adapt. They're rolling with it. So their perspective is wise.



## **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

So I've been watching that in Vermont, our local library has a queer book group and I have brought friends to present to them. So I like the idea of representing who they are now, not what I grew up with, which was very different. So to capture the way Vermont is changing and how this young girl can adapt from an urban environment into rural Vermont and really how so many of the feelings you have are ... you're going to have them anywhere. But it was fun. It was especially fun to write it about my own house because I could bring in those true stories about the things we experienced. Except for late at night when I was working on it and I hear noises. But anyway, I love the idea of writing for that generation because I think they're very cool.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, there are not a lot of stories that show young Vermonters in their full diversity in their changing world, as it really appears. I think this could go for rural America in general because the same changes that are happening here are happening all over the country. So is this the first time you've written with that intent about your home community?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

No. I have a book coming out in January called *Breakup From Hell* and that is based in Stowe, Vermont and it is a trip. It's a horror romcom and I had a blast with that one too. But I said to my husband, "I opened a hell mouth in downtown Stowe," and he said, "How is that different from foliage season?" I was like, "Yes, I understand that." Because we lived in Stowe for probably 15 years and to be able to do it, that was the first

time I wrote in Vermont. Usually I write about Puerto Rico because that, to me, is incredibly important and it isn't written about enough. It's a very small island, but I wanted to do this YA based in Stowe and sort of deal with the things that teenagers deal with. My son grew up in Stowe and in Morrisville and so he helped a lot with that and I broke all the stereotypes with that one.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

I have a queer redneck with a black skier boyfriend. I just decided to just ... any Vermont stereotypes, I blew up. But that is a blast and that was the first time I did that. Then it felt like, "Okay, now I can do a middle grade," and it's darker, it doesn't have the humor because that other one was a romcom, but I sort of liked it. To drive through Stowe and think about what happens there or to be in my house and think about Mara

and her story. So I think this'll be a new thing for me, is writing based in Vermont.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Interesting. I also really appreciate the practice of publicly breaking these Vermont stereotypes.

You're an author with very wide reach and so people are going to be reading these books that are set in Vermont seeing these characters that ...

I mean, the last time I think there was a cover page about Vermont, it was the Rolling Stones Vermonter in the maple trees, the heroin guy.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Oh, god. The heroin.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Me, as a Vermonter of color who grew up here, I know that there are exactly those characters you're talking about. The queer redneck with the black skier boyfriend. I have three friends like that,

blah, blah, blah. So to share those stories and to share those stories from the kids' perspectives, the kids who are growing up, living those, I'm applauding.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

She's actually, Micah, the main character that's also Puerto Rican, she lives with her abuela. So like I said, I bring myself into it, but I also want to encompass the world as I see it now. Because honestly my next book is dealing with who we are as women after a certain age and when I googled cool grandmas, you get coastal grandma aesthetic, you don't get the punk rock grandma. I know a lot of punk rock grandmas, thank you very much. So I just think that the way we're represented in media needs to change and I hope that in my small way I can contribute.

## **Desmond Peeples:**

Can you tell us a little bit more about that next work?

## **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure. Right now it's titled *The Ecstasy of Terre Sanchez* and it's about a woman who ... she's 60. She retires from her academic job to be with her husband and he dies two months later and her kid's grown and she's like, "Well, who am I? I'm not an academic. I'm not a wife. My kid is grown." She starts sort of coming into her own and she starts levitating. The first line is, "The first time I levitated, I was in the garden." So she finds out, she was descended from St. Theresa of Avila who levitated and so she makes this pilgrimage to Avila Spain, and it's about her sort of exploration of who she is and who women are when society tells us we're invisible and useless. In fact, I am

supposedly descended from a sibling of St. Teresa of Avila, so this is...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Really?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, yes. Yeah. Davila?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yep. That means de Avila. Yeah.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Wow.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah. So I'd always heard that when I was a kid. I've wanted to go to Avila since I was five. It's another walled city in Spain. So I'm doing it. I'm

going by myself for three weeks in November for pilgrimage to sort of write this book. But again, it's bringing up things in ... I never really did this research into her and now I'm lost in that world. That's the thing about writing. When I wrote *Dry Bones*, I read every piece of middle grade horror I could find. I love that approach. I love just really enveloping yourself in a subject.

**Desmond Peeples:**

So *The Ecstasy of Terre Sanchez*, do you have any idea when that's going to come out or you're still...

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yes, in March of '24. But the title might change, we'll see, but this is sort of the early stages, but I'm lost. My tattoo artist turned me on to all this mysticism research and I have to put that in there. So now I'm sort of lost in that research. It's very interesting stuff. Again, I think if you're writing



about something that's important to you personally, it comes through in the work.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, yeah. I mean, the research process being so consuming, there's nothing like it I think. So there's this book coming out in 2024, but then there's also *The Storyteller's Death* and well then also *Dry Bones* and *Breakup From Hell*.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Well, *Dry Bones* I have to sell. It's on submission.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, right. That's on submission. But I mean, it's going to sell, really, so look out. Okay. That's a lot of books coming out in quick succession, not to mention it's been three books out in the past recent ... or just two?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Just two.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Two? Okay. Well, so let's talk about this moment in your career, it kind of overflowing with inspiration and opportunity to fulfill that inspiration. How did you get there?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

I started writing here at Vermont College and I started to get into it and I was afraid. Anything that's worth doing, I'm petrified of. So I was very afraid of it, but I did it in this sort of community with a support, and then I took to it. So I mean, I've written books that did not get sold, did not get finished. We all do it. You have these fits and starts and I toyed with magazine writing, but writing novels is joyous for me because I inhaled them my whole life, and so to be able to write

them is exciting. I came to it late. My career basically got started at 53 and then it took off. So what you're seeing is a combination of a lot of years, but I have a really strong community. My mentors, my most influential mentors, are ... I'm old enough to be their mother.

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Mentorship does not have to be somebody older than you and being open to learning is so important. So I have this continuum of mentors. I mentor the people, we help each other, this is what we do. So they helped give me the strength to do this, but I'm also incredibly stubborn and I refuse to get ... you deal with a lot of rejection and people like, "How can you deal with that much rejection?" I said, "Most of what you get is silence when you're on submission." But then you get some momentum and then it feeds itself, but you never get to sort sit. Luis Guzman, who's a friend

of mine who's another Vermonter, Puerto Rican, we were visiting during the pandemic and he said something. I asked what you're doing because you're not working on movies, and he said, "Well, I'm hustling," and he starts talking about all these projects he's working on.

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

I said, "No, no, wait a minute. You're one of the most successful character actors in the world. You don't get to coast?" He said, "Oh, no chica, you got to hustle. The hustle never ends." I was like, "Oh, man, it doesn't." So when I have a book that's out with my editor, it could be a couple months and so I can't just sit there and wait for it and immerse myself in one book. That would be lovely, but I can't. So I go to the next one and that's why it seems like there's so many happening at once is that I have several going at the same time and I can't afford to be precious about it because I really

would like to do this full time at some point before I'm 70.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, right. We're here in your office at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. You're the director of recruitment. Is that the title?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

How long have you been in this position?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

This position? I don't remember. I've been at the college for 24 years. I've had a lot of titles, worked in a lot of ... I became a writer on this campus. I built my community in this campus. It is an emotional ... it's family, but they all know that's sort of my goal. I mean, I'm 59 years old. I've

been balancing two careers for a long time and I will tell you that I'm tired. During the pandemic, I was writing and working from home full time, but I also had electrical heart failure and got a pacemaker and all of this was going at the same time and I did it and I feel great, but eventually I'd like to be able to just immerse myself in the writing, but that's a hard thing to do so we'll see. I'm hoping Dry Bones has something to do with that. A series would be lovely.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

The hustle comment got me thinking, because I know so many authors at every point in their career, they have to fill their non writing time with side hustles and getting their Patreon going, this kind of stuff. How much do you feel yourself dipping into that other part of the publishing world as your career has boomed like this?

## **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

I mean, I'll probably do freelance editing. I mean, I don't think you can ever really do it unless you get something that really hits, which is the ideal. But I also write screenplays with my son and we've had interest. I have a Hollywood meeting on Monday. Hollywood's even worse than publishing, though. I say it's like dating in my '20s. They're very handsome and flattering and they tell you they love you and you go to dinner and then the check comes and they don't pay it and they ghost you. It's like that sort of a ... anyway. So Hollywood is a challenge, but I also do ... I mean, Breakup from Hell was IP, meaning Harper Collins came up with a concept, they had authors, I auditioned, and then I won the audition and I was hired. But I had way more influence than I thought I was going to and I had a great time doing it. So IP is a great way to supplement.

**Desmond Peeples:**

What does IP stand for?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Intellectual property.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Okay. I've never heard of that process before. Will you, do you want to explain?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure. People don't talk about it. IP is essentially ... there are packaging companies who come up with concepts and then find a writer to do it and do a novel and then present it to a publisher. This one is owned by Harper Collins. So it's not owned by me. I get a portion of things that get sold or whatever, but they generally pay very well and you get ... like I said, people think you're doing what they tell you, but you really get much more input



than ... I'm the one who chose to base it in Stowe and make her Puerto Rican and deal with all that.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. I can't see them putting that in the criteria.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah, I know, it's so me. But it is a great way to supplement that income of when you're writing. The Santa Teresa book is one of the heart and that's going to take a lot more time than doing something where they hand you the concept. But they work different muscles. It's kind of fun. It's like a writing exercise on steroids. So there are ways to do that. And also workshops. I write podcasts, scripted podcasts. In fact, that's what the meeting on Monday is about. So I had a novel I started, I couldn't quite get it done. It was 80 pages. It was called Tidal Pool and it's a horror novel based in Puerto Rico. But I really liked the

concept and I heard about the scripted podcast and I did it as that and it took off.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Luis is already attached to act in that and so the hope is that now with that being so popular, it's different from audiobooks, because you're essentially telling the entire story through sound. It's another new form for me that I really like. So you can tell, I have my fingers in a lot of different pies and I'm trying to find the one that will work and make it happen.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Who are some of your influences right now, your favorite writers or creators of any kind?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

In terms of literary, Julia Alvarez, another Vermont writer is a huge influence of mine. She's also a

very elegant person and good human being.

Stephen Graham Jones.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, yeah.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Oh. Love his work. Gabino Iglesias, who actually just started teaching for us, who's a Puerto Rican writer in the west who's writing barrio noir, he calls it.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, cool.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Very dark horror. That's what I sort of read too, for me. I just finished Silvia Moreno Garcia. She wrote Mexican Gothic, which I loved. If you haven't read it, you should read it. Colonialism as fungus. It's wonderful. Her new book is called The Daughter of

Dr. Moreau, which is based on a movie I loved when I was a kid. So I have my reading list. I also switch from middle grade and YA to adult, I go back and forth. But the biggest influences of my writing I would say were Isabel Allende, Julia Alvarez, Marques, Garcia. That's why magical realism came into play with Storytellers Death, because that's what I was raised on; horror and magical realism.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yes. The Storyteller's Death, let's talk a bit about this book. It's coming out October 4th. Very nice. Okay. Will you give us a little summary of the plot?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure. It's about a girl called Isla. You're going to see patterns here. Her father dies and her mother's an alcoholic and she gets sent to her family in Puerto Rico every summer. Her mother

sort of sends her off so she can drink, which is basically what happened to me. So she would spend the summers in Bayamon, Puerto Rico and her family there would take care of her. Take her to the dentist, do the things that her mother didn't do. Her life in New Jersey is very difficult and she goes has these summers in Puerto Rico, but when she turns 18, when a storyteller in the family dies, she sees their stories as visions. So the only way to stop them is to write them down.

### **Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

They get progressively more interesting and then her great aunt dies and she sees the story of a murder and it won't go away when she writes it down. So she realizes she has to figure out the mystery her aunt is trying to tell her and in order to make them stop before it kills her. So she sort of digs into that. But it's sort of about why I identify so strongly with that half of me because

that family saved my life, took care of me at a time when adults weren't that reliable in my life. So it's my love letter to that as well.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Your first literary adult novel, let's say.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

What was it like writing in that voice as compared to for YA or for middle grade?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

I mean, you get to spend more time in scenes with descriptions and setting. Language, magical realism, one of the identifying factors is beautiful language, ornate, but not unnecessary. So I admired that when I was younger. Though I am a spare writer, this was an opportunity for me to

take time and to really inhabit a space. I think I managed to bring the setting of Puerto Rico, particularly in the '70s, which is when it takes place. I hope I bring that to the reader, because that was important to me, but it is a lush, incredible place and it was really wonderful to write about it. It allows you to do the beautiful language and explore relationships in a way you can in kids, but not quite as deeply.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

But again, she's dealing with very similar things, Tamara. It's just that she's older and it's in this writing ... it also is a retrospective narrator. You can't do that with kids or young adults. They're looking back on their life. Kids don't want to read adults talking to them. Wonder why. But it was fun.

**Desmond Peeples:**

I'm trying to think of retrospective narratives for children where it's like, "Oh, I'm 11 years old looking back on my life at six." It's hard to ...

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Yeah, they don't tend to do it. They want to inhabit the character and you can't inhabit the character if you're 50 and looking back. So it's just a little different writing for adults.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, would you like to read us a short passage?

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Thank you.



**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

Sure. I'll read the opening one. Okay. This is from the very opening. It's called Death in a Back Room, this chapter.

**Ann Dávila Cardinal:**

"There was always some old woman dying in the back room when I was a child. These women were just an expected part of the decor, like a lamp or a coffee table. I didn't know who most of them were, one ancient relative or another, and each summer I would usually find a new inhabitant. What I've come to understand in the twilight of my own life is that they were a nameless introduction to what would be my long and intimate relationship with death. They were also a doorway to a true understanding of my Puerto Rican family and the gifts and curses that came with them. I was eight years old in the summer of 1970 when I first encountered one of the inhabitants of the back

room. That particular day, my cousins and I were running through Tio Ramon's one story concrete house at top speed, sliding over the slick tiled floors as adult reprimands and rapid fired Spanish trailed behind us like a kite tail.

We had to pass through the last room, a bedroom, before breaking free of the building and barreling into the back courtyard, scattering chickens and dust in every direction. I remember I stopped short at the threshold, staring at the unexpected body on the shadowed bed. My cousins collided into me from behind and seeing my apprehensions said in English, 'Don't worry about her, prima,' as they pushed around me and pulled at my arms, coaxing me to follow them. 'She can't hear you. Vamos.' I wanted to follow them, to be so unafraid as to walk through life as if there weren't something horrible waiting for me just out of sight.

The smell hit me first, medicinal, antiseptic, stale, like my father's hospital room back in New Jersey, that chemical odor that reached down into my stomach and squeezed.

I pulled free of my cousins, my feet rooted to the door sill, their voices fading as they stamped out into the daylight. I looked down at the scrubbed white formica floor, the gray and blue dots forming moving patterns if I stared at them long enough, trying to pull me into their vortex to get me to tip over and fall in head first."

**Desmond Peeples:**

That's our show, folks. To learn more about Ann Davila Cardinal and her books, visit the show notes at [vermontartscouncil.org/podcast](http://vermontartscouncil.org/podcast).

Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is and has always been Abenaki land. Thank you for listening.