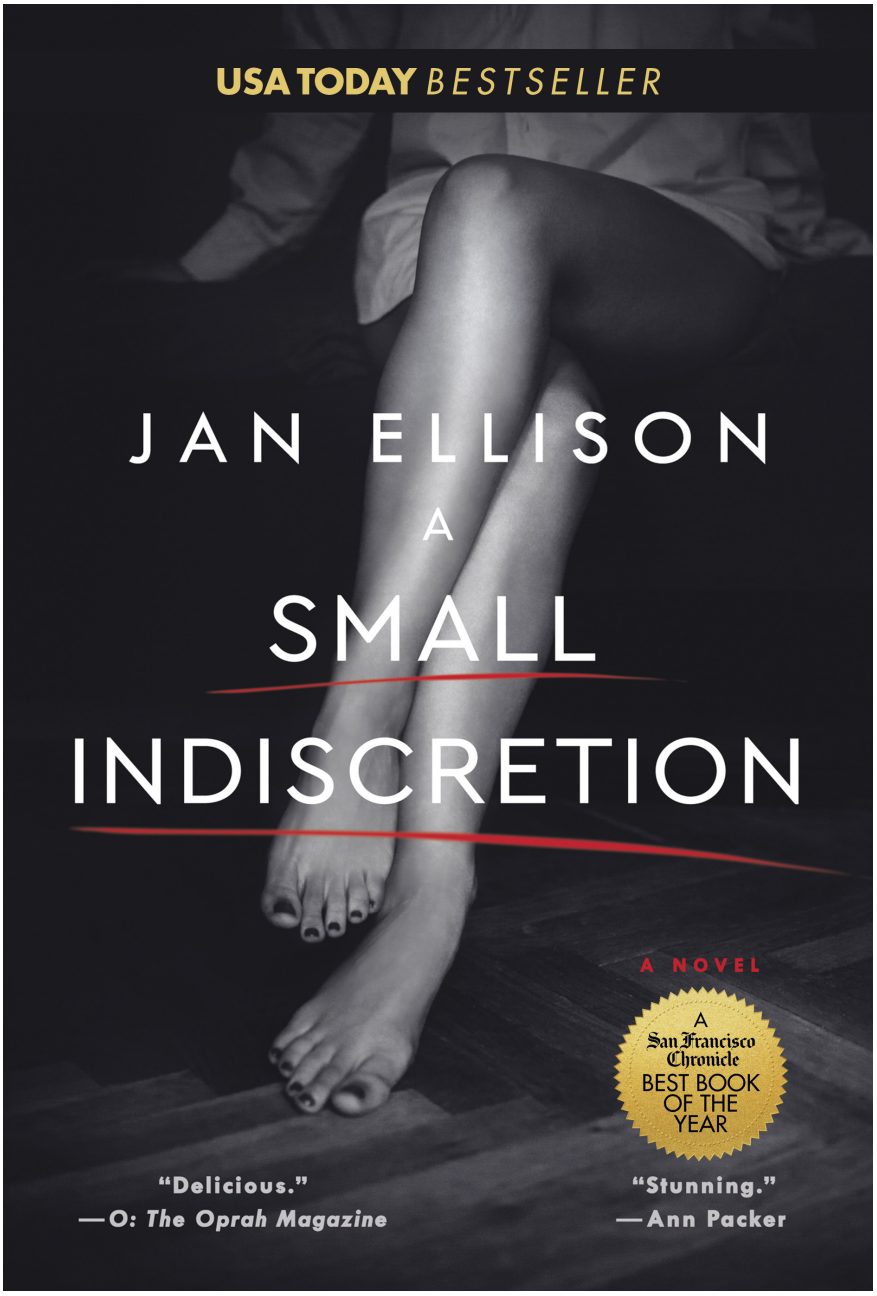

The conversation between Jan Ellison and Ann Packer that follows is part of the Bonus Content/Reader's Guide for the trade paperback edition of A Small Indiscretion.

A Conversation Between Jan Ellison and Ann Packer

Ann Packer is the acclaimed author of two collections of short fiction, *Swim Back to Me* and *Mendocino and Other Stories*, and three novels, *Songs Without Words*, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*, and *The Children's Crusade*. Her short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker* and in the O. Henry Prize Stories anthologies, and her novels have been published around the world. Ann Packer interviewed Jan Ellison in January 2015 at Kepler's Books, in the Bay Area of California, which both writers call home. The following is an edited and revised version of their conversation.

Ann Packer: *A Small Indiscretion* is an insightful literary novel, but it's also incredibly suspenseful—a thriller in a way. The surprises come fast and furious, and it's hard to put down. Tell us how you came to write the book. What were some of the seeds and how did it grow?

Jan Ellison: When I was nineteen, I took a break from college to study French in Paris. I was supposed to be back in school by January, but I wasn't ready to come home. So I crossed the English Channel with a backpack and fifty dollars, and checked into a youth hostel in London and started looking for a job. This was before cellphones and Internet, of course, and I had this epiphany, and this incredible moment of euphoria, because nobody in the world could track me down. I was free of the care and concern of my loved ones. I was liberated from the demands and expectations of others. I could do anything. I could become anyone. That was really the moment I first felt my future as my own.

I found work in an office. I put in long hours, failed to forge friendships, and was often lonely. I drank in pubs. I took long walks across the city. I filled yellow legal notepads with terrible poems and bits of stories and overwrought descriptions of the city. Twenty years later, I tried to turn the impressions of those months into a coming-of-age novel set in London. I wrote for three or four years, but the novel only really took shape when the point of view shifted from a young Annie to an older one, and from first person to epistolary form. Once I knew that Annie's son had been in a terrible car accident, that became the other thread running through the novel—a life dramatically interrupted just as it approaches that moment of liberation I felt when I turned twenty.

AP: Was it immediately clear to you that this was the same character as the young woman you had been writing about all that time, but advanced twenty years?

JE: Yes, I knew it was Annie, but initially I didn't know enough about her to settle into her voice. I had some sense of where she'd ended up, but I didn't know what had happened between the weekend in Paris and her present life—married to Jonathan in San Francisco, a mother of three, a proprietor of a lighting shop. I couldn't settle into this new voice because I didn't yet know that story's arc, but this voice had become the only vehicle I had for finding that arc. It was this awful chicken and egg scenario that had me writing in circles for a long time. There were days—months—when I thought I simply was not smart enough to finish this book. I kept writing, though, and eventually I wrote my way out of the circles and got to the end.

AP: Some of the most beautiful passages in the book are when Annie is thinking about the function of memory and the way it's a mystery for us as we look back—

what really happened and what we've constructed in our minds. So alongside this incredible suspense are these very moving and wise meditations on memory and storytelling. How does memory function in your fictional universe? How do the ways your characters perceive the past inform the present?

JE: I suppose in a lot of my work there's a certain preoccupation with how the past and present operate, how the intoxication of being young, and the memory of that intoxication, bear on a life as it moves toward middle age. When we look back at our own youth, I think we tend to punch up the romance and forget the loneliness, the struggle, the hangovers, the despair. And we don't remember things with the same emotions with which we experienced them initially. This is something Annie confronts in the book: How reliable is her own memory of her own feelings?

AP: Sometimes we're in the present with Annie, when she is explaining herself to her son and looking back on the past and trying to understand how she got here. Other times we're fully in the present, and events are moving forward rapidly, and the past and present stories are unfolding and ultimately intersecting. How much of this was planned and how much came to you as you wrote?

JE: I didn't plan any of it. The two story lines sort of emerged independently, then they started fitting themselves together, but I wasn't sure how that would all work until the very end. I was reading Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* at the time, a novel that deals with time and multiple stories skillfully and beautifully. The material I was working with seemed to be demanding a similar back and forth, and I think Atwood's book gave me permission to see if it might work. Of course, permission is not the same as ability, and it took me a long time, with a lot of starts and stops and major revisions, to figure it out.

Although I should say that all along I knew Annie was writing to Robbie in absentia, and I knew he would never see what she wrote. The novel takes an epistolary form because if your child is in crisis, you must remain vigilant; you have to keep that child in your mind, you have to keep talking. But Robbie can't hear Annie, so instead of talking, she puts pen to paper; the act of writing is Annie's effort to understand and come to terms with her past, but even more than that, it's her way of keeping a vigil for her son.

AP: It took a decade to write and publish this book. How did you get from draft to draft and what were some of the challenges along the way?

JE: Back in 2005, when my fourth child turned one and I emerged from that fog, I set out to put together a collection of short stories. I'd published a few by then, and I had a bunch more in progress, and I thought that longish short stories might be my calling. I was working with the London material, trying to shape it into a short story, but within a few months, it blew past story length, then it blew past novella length, and I kept writing.

In the fall of 2010, I'd probably amassed four hundred pages or so of material. I was at this moms' getaway weekend with some friends, and at dinner, a mom I'd just met told me a really moving story about confronting her ex-in-laws many years after her first marriage ended. Her story seemed to have a perfect short-story arc, and I wanted to write it down. When I got back home, I decided I'd take a week's break from the novel to bang it out. But in a repeat of history, a week of work on that "short story" turned into a month, which turned into a year and a half. Twenty pages grew to eighty, then to four hundred, and I was knee-deep in a brand-new novel. *A Small Indiscretion* became the boyfriend I pushed aside because I fell in love with someone new.

AP: You committed a small indiscretion.

JE: Yes! Or a large one, depending on your perspective.

But then, a few years later, a friend encouraged me to join her at the 2012 Taos Summer Writer's Conference. Manuscripts were due in June. In March, my mother and my husband took over my household and sent me to the mountains for ten days to finish a first draft of the new novel. Somewhere around day four, I remembered a paragraph that I wanted to use, from what I had begun to think of as my "novel in the drawer." I

started reading what became *A Small Indiscretion*—which I hadn't touched in a year and half—not as a writer but as a reader, and I found that the story engaged me. I wanted to know how it ended. I have a clear memory of lying in bed that night in the rented cabin in the mountains, trying to resolve the complex plot I'd unintentionally laid down. In the morning, I opened the file again and took up where I'd left off. Within ten months, I had finished it and sold it to Random House.

AP: What happened in the writing of four hundred pages of a second novel that enabled you to come back and finish this book? Do you think its content informed your ability to take that step back and bring *A Small Indiscretion* to closure?

JE: I don't think it was the content so much as the process. I didn't question myself with the second book in the same way I had with the first. I trusted a little more. I drove forward and tried to avoid rewriting sentences, paragraphs, chapters before I knew how—or if—they serviced the story. It was almost as if I needed to start a second novel to learn how to finish the first. Which is a really backward way of doing things, and one I hope not to repeat.

AP: There's a lot of conversation out there about likable characters, and whether or not we should try to create characters that are relatable, and what that means. Annie is a complicated character. She makes some choices that are maybe not wise, maybe not even good. What kinds of challenges did you face in creating this character?

JE: This comes up a lot in conversations I've been having with book clubs. A reader will take issue with some of Annie's actions and motives—but immediately, another reader will jump in and defend her. They're not talking about whether I've succeeded, as a writer, in creating a realistic character; they're talking about whether she's sympathetic, whether she's a good person or not. And readers disagree, sometimes violently. This reinforces what we all already know, but which you sort of forget—you have to forget—when you're writing a book. Reading is subjective. Not everybody connects in the same way with the characters in a novel, just as not everybody connects with the same people in real life.

I felt about Annie as I might feel about a best friend about to do something self-destructive. I'm standing there trying to tell her not to do it, but I already know she can't help herself, and she knows it, too, though neither of us is really saying that out loud. I felt loyal to Annie the way I would feel toward a friend. I wasn't going to abandon her in her hour of need; I was going to stand by her and try to help her climb her way back out of the hole she'd dug for herself.

AP: It would have made for a pretty short book if she hadn't made some of those decisions, and dug that hole.

JE: Exactly. It's hard to write literary realism if your characters are perfect, because perfect people don't exist in the real world. I think the question readers are asking is the question I was trying to answer in the book, maybe the same question many writers are trying to answer: Why do people do the crazy things they do?

AP: So once you had finished your first draft, gotten your agent, and sold it, what kinds of changes did the book go through before it came to print?

JE: I did go back and forth with my editors at Random House for a few months after we sold the book, and I really loved working with them on those final revisions. But the biggest overhaul was actually after I signed with my agent, PJ Mark. PJ wrote me this beautiful letter about how much he loved the book, then after I signed, he wrote me a much longer letter with his thoughts about the next draft. My mother came to help with the kids again, and I went to the mountains. That was a pivotal week. I had the whole book in my head, and I basically tore apart the second half and put it together again. I was almost afraid to leave my chair, because every change had a tremendous ripple effect, and I had to keep track of all those ripples. When that week was done—and I was nearly eight years in by then—I finally felt like I had something.

AP: Have there been any particular literary influences on this book, or on your writing in general?

JE: I already mentioned Margaret Atwood, and there are two other writers, two other Canadian women writers, actually—Carol Shields and Alice Munro—who have been tremendously important to me. In *The Stone Diaries*, Shields takes a lot of liberties with point of view. In the first scene of that novel, the narrator is watching her mother die during her own birth. It's a really beautiful scene—it's a beautiful book—and I think reading it, studying it, liberated me to consider point of view in a new light.

I've read most of what Alice Munro has written, certainly all of her earlier work, much of it more than once. What I love about her writing is her economy, as well as her ruthlessness in describing her character's emotions and motivations. Her stories are almost novel-like in their scope and impact, and there is a discipline, a precision, in the way she describes how people think and feel. She doesn't flinch; she doesn't look away; she doesn't apologize or moralize. She allows her characters the most outrageous longings and impulses. It all feels very much like real life, even though it's often quite shocking. She's a master of that blend of authenticity and surprise.

AP: And with Munro, those thoughts and emotions are sliced so finely. I feel that influence in these pages. Speaking of Alice Munro, you've also published prize-winning short stories. What are some of the challenges and differences writing in these forms—writing stories versus novels?

JE: You're using the same building blocks—images and dialog and setting and character. And in a short story, mostly, you still need plot. You're still telling a story. But it can be a piece of a world, instead of the whole world.

In short stories, I think you can allow yourself to be more lavish with the description and interiority. Stories can be a little denser, I think—or at least I find that my stories are. If you're writing a novel with a central mystery, you don't want language to get in the way of that unfolding—that plot—and you want the curiosity you've planted in the readers' minds to build during the reading experience.

It took a long time for the plot of this novel to arrive. I was working for years, and there were things happening—there were exotic settings and people misbehaving and unlikely foursomes dashing off to Paris—but all of that doesn't necessarily add up to plot. The way I think of plot now, which helps keep me honest as I move forward with the second novel, is in terms of a question: What is the urgent reason for telling this story right now? It was not until Robbie's accident entered the narrative that I had an answer to that question.

AP: How do you think getting this novel published and out into the world has affected you as a writer?

JE: This really hit home when I had to move out of the writing studio I'd rented for three years, because my landlady needed the space back. I was packing up my stuff, my desk, my stapler, my paper clips, my cup full of red pencils, and it was very, very difficult for me to think of leaving that place. I pulled the rug up to vacuum, and I found an old mint in a foil wrapper under a disgusting blanket of dust. It could have been there for years, and I thought, What else was keeping me company here without my knowing it? Cobwebs, spiders under the rug, dozens of dead sow bugs. But, mostly, my own innocence—the innocence of a first-time novelist. The freedom of imagining that what I wrote would never be read by anyone but me. The bliss of not knowing what it would mean to send a novel, unprotected, into the world.

I once heard Michael Cunningham speak about writing *The Hours*, and he said when he set out to write that book, he was certain it would be his little academic indulgence, that it would sell five thousand copies and that would be that. But he wrote it anyway, because it wouldn't leave him alone—and then there was this incredible, unexpected response to the book. His message was: There's no way to predict how anything we write will be received, so we may as well write what we want. But that's hard to remember, especially once you have a book in the world. You start worrying about your agent reading it, and your editor. And you start thinking of all the nice readers who've told you they can't wait for your next book, and you start worrying that they won't like the second as much as they liked the first.

I think it helps to be a bit selfish, a bit ruthless in your thinking. Being a mother of four is good training for this. You can do a lot for your kids, you can work really, really hard to try to attend to their needs and wants and keep things balanced and keep everybody happy. But no matter how much you do, you can't please all of them all the time, so you may as well step back, sometimes, and worry about pleasing yourself.

AP: So what's next? Are you now going to finish the second novel?

JE: I don't want to say much because as every writer knows, until the story is fully realized on the page, there's a chance it will never become the novel we imagine. You wrote beautifully, Ann, in an essay in *The New York Times*, about how characters are not ideas but "collections of sentences." How even if you were to "imagine them in certain situations, without the process of finding language for those situations, they—the characters and situations—would float away." That resonated with me.

What I love best in my writing life is to tinker with language, to fine-tune a paragraph or a sentence, or even a phrase, until the words finally live up to the hopes I have for them. But I had this epiphany years ago: You can't revise something until you've written it. So with this second novel, I'm trying very hard to drive forward to the end of the story. It's different from *A Small Indiscretion* in that it has several third-person narrators, including two male characters, and it's mostly set here in Silicon Valley. But it has many of the same preoccupations—the joyful and the dreadful of marriage and parenting, the divide between desire and duty, the many materials we find in the bucket we call love. I'm hoping it won't take a decade this time around. •