

# In the Shadow of the Ark

Anne Provoost

Information and excerpts below taken from Anne Provoost's website  
[www.anneprovoost.com](http://www.anneprovoost.com)

## Note from the editor, Arthur A. Levine

Dear Reader,

The enduring image I carry from the Biblical tale of Noah is a parade of animals - a benign procession that is easy to illustrate and simple to convey to young children.

But as we grow to adulthood the story gets more complex, doesn't it? This is, after all, the tale of how all life on earth was destroyed. How, because of "pervasive wickedness" and a world "filled with violence," God sought to start over. The Bible tells how God identified one family, gave detailed instructions for an ark, and then opened up "the windows of heaven" to a flood that took all life. We know this part as well as the more child-friendly bit about the paired animals, but we think about it less.

And here is the part we mostly don't think about: What must this incredible sequence of events have looked like to a person living at that time? A young woman, for instance, forced from her family's home in the marshes by rising waters. Think of this family arriving in the middle of the desert to a din of construction, the stink of pitch, and the shell of a giant ship. Think of the rumors of the mighty boat's purpose. Think of the disbelief.

Then think of the young woman, Re Jana, falling in love with Ham, one of the Builder's sons, their passion against this backdrop of disaster. And wait for the moment when the rains come in earnest, and panic begins to spread. For only the chosen few will board the ark and be rescued.

This is a beautiful literary novel. But it's also an incredible romance, and a suspense story to boot. I guess it's a little like watching a Biblical Titanic - where you as the audience know how the story ends, but this only increases your concern for the characters you've grown to love and makes you hope against hope that they will come through alive.

This book surely follows in the tradition of *The Red Tent* and other fine novels with Biblical settings. But I think it has a particular power and resonance for the violent times we live in.

Please read it and tell me what you think.

Yours truly,

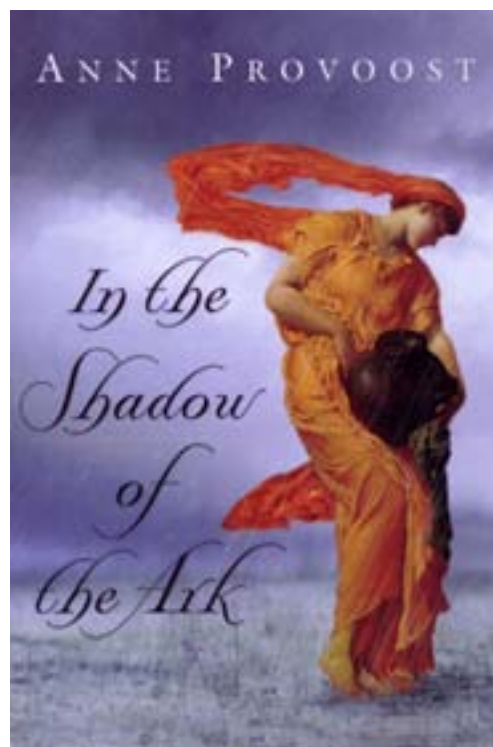
Arthur Levine, Editor

## Anne Provoost - Author Biography

Anne Provoost (1964) debuted in 1990 with the novel, *My Aunt is a Pilot Whale*, in which incest and communication problems are approached from various points of view, sometimes implicitly, at others explicitly. *My Aunt is a Pilot Whale* was awarded with the *Book Lion 1991* and the *Interprovincial Prize for Children's and Youth Literature, 1991*, two main Belgian Awards. The novel was translated in English, German, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Portuguese.

The author uses a similar construction in her most highly praised book, *Falling* (1994), in which the pitfalls and allurements of extreme right-wing rhetoric are dealt with extensively. The book received five major awards in Belgium and the Netherlands, and was made into an English spoken feature film that came out in the fall of 2001, starring Jill Clayburgh and Alice Krige: [www.falling.be](http://www.falling.be). *Falling* has been translated in nine languages and was selected for the honor list of IBBY.

The importance of knowledge of honest communications is dealt with in the fairytale treatment of *The Rose and the Swine*. This book was again selected for the honor list of IBBY. It received The Golden Kiss in the Netherlands and the Book Lion in



Belgium. It was translated in Danish, Swedish, German and Norwegian. It received the Luchs-award of *Die Zeit* in Germany and the Award of Young Readers in Austria (May 2001).

In 2000, Anne Provoost received the Nordrhein-Westfalen Award in Germany for her oeuvre. In December 2000 she received the Lavki Award for 'Falling'.

*In the Shadow the Ark*, her most recent novel, was published September 2001 at Querido Publishing House. It recounts the story of Noah and the ark, seen from the perspective of a teenage girl who was not 'chosen' to be on the ship. The Swedish, German and Danish translations came out in 2003. In 2004, the American, Australian and British version will be published.

With her outspoken view on the themes she broaches, her books seem to be wanting to bring across a message; the author, however, denies this vehemently: "If you have to talk about a message, then I would like to limit myself to one thing: stretching the reader's empathic abilities". In the course of her writing career, Provoost has received practically every major literary award for works in the Dutch language.

Anne Provoost lives with her husband and three children in Antwerp, Belgium. She studied Literature and Pedagogics at the University of Louvain and spent a year and a half in the United States after her studies. The language she writes in is Dutch.

Anne Provoost was elected a member of The Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature in 2003.



### Reading Group Questions

1. Read the book of Genesis, chapters 6-9. The narrator of the Biblical tale might be said to give us the Unnameable's viewpoint on events, while Re Jana presents the doomed peoples' perspective. What is the effect of such a radical shift in point of view from the story to the novel?
2. Re Jana comes up with several explanations for the construction of the ship before she fully understands its purpose. What are they? What finally convinces Re Jana and her father that they too must prepare for the deluge?
3. How do Re Jana and her family define righteousness? Noah and his family? Which definition seems more right to you?
4. Before he boards the ark, Ham studies music, tailoring, herbology, ceramics, metallurgy, astronomy, silkmaking, and many other subjects in order to preserve some of the knowledge of the old world. If the world today were threatened with a calamity like the flood, what knowledge would you consider essential to preserve? What knowledge might you allow to be lost?
5. *In The Shadow of the Ark* presents us with four mothers—Re Jana's mother, Zaza, Neelata's mother, and Re Jana herself—and two fathers—Noah and Re Jana's father. Compare and contrast these mothers and fathers. How do these parents react to the calamities with which they're faced? Do you recognise the parents in their children?
6. Who is finally blessed in the book? Who is cursed? Can you see these pronouncements in their fates?
7. The Biblical story of the flood ends with God's promise never to deluge the earth again. *In the Shadow of the Ark* concludes on a far less positive note. What, if anything, has changed since the beginning of the novel? Can you see any hope for humankind and for Re Jana?
8. Re Jana and her father are constantly comparing the Rrattika with their own people, saying, for example, "[Their god] is fed up with this roaming people... [who] hardly show any progress." (p. 150) The Rrattika always come out on the worse end. Why does the author set up these two "camps" (Re Jana's family and the Rrattika) as opposites, and why do the Rrattika always fare so badly?
9. In Chapter 32 we learn Neelata's story. How does it compare to the greater story of the flood and the Ark? How can the Unnameable be compared to the King?
10. There are a number of different views of death in *In the Shadow of the Ark*—Alem's death, Re Jana's mother's death, the death of the masses trying to get on the Ark, Zaza's suicide. Are any of these deaths more noble or more tragic than the others?
11. Anne Provoost writes (p. 163): "For the sake of the children, the elderly, the sick, and the weak, it would be better not to talk about it," and "Because there was no new information to confirm the old, the usual happened: Messages of doom were forgotten." This motif of "messages of doom" being forgotten runs throughout the Hebrew Bible. Can you think of some examples? Why does this usually happen?
12. The chapter titled *The Incident in the Cave* contains the most significant theological discussion in the novel. Re Jana's father challenges the Builder with rational arguments and the Builder responds with faith-based arguments. Which argument seems more valid to you, and why?

13. When Re Jana is hidden in the dodoes' cage on the Ark, she says at one point that the voyage "felt like an imprisonment, like a trial or a trick." Interestingly, at no point does she call the journey a salvation. Consider which one of these (imprisonment, trial, trick, or salvation) each of the voyagers would use to describe his or her experience. How does the attitude behind that choice affect the character's destiny?
14. Re Jana hangs from a rope off the Ark and begs her father to take her on to his papyrus boat, but he refuses. Why, ultimately, do you think he turns her down?
15. The flood is only ever referred to in the novel as a calamity, not a miracle. Why?
16. Re Jana has a number of guesses as to the purpose of the Ark before she learns its true function. All of these guesses assume, in some way or another, that the contents of the Ark are meant to be a sacrifice to the Unnameable. In the end, is she right?
17. The second-to-last sentence of the novel is: "The flood did not wipe out evil." What kind of statement is the author making? Do you agree?

## Character

18. The Builder calls Re Jana "the dwarf in a new shape" (p. 335). What does he mean by that? How has Re Jana's role changed, in the Builder's eyes, from the time when she was dressed as a boy and first questioned his actions until the moment when he tells Ham to leave her behind with him?
19. Re Jana's mother and the Unnameable are two characters who do not speak and yet make their wants known—Re Jana's mother to Re Jana and her father, and the Unnameable to the Builder. How are their wishes understood? Are they always understood accurately?
20. Of the central characters in the novel, there are three mothers and three fathers: Re Jana's mother, Zaza, and Re Jana herself; and Re Jana's father, Alem, and the Builder. What sacrifices do each of them make for their children? Which do you think is the greatest sacrifice?
21. Ham is very different from his brothers Shem and Japheth and he is the one the novel treats the most sympathetically. How? What actions or words sway the reader to his side?
22. When there is tension between Re Jana's parents it has "an unexpected effect on Put... He behaved like a cornered animal" (p.194). Compare his actions in this passage to the descriptions of him at the end of the Ark's voyage.
23. Neelata, Zedebab, and Taneses—three different women, three different wives. Why are they chosen as helpmates to the Builder's three sons and mothers to the future generations?
24. Compare the descriptions of the Builder when we first encounter him (p. 79) and after Zaza's suicide (p. 332). What is the reader's perception of him by the first description? Does it change over the course of the novel?
25. Aside from the main characters, the book describes very few people among the masses working on and living near the Ark. There is one notable exception, however: Camia, to whom a whole chapter (albeit a short one) is dedicated. Why her?
26. The Builder addresses the people in two very short speeches on pages 135 and 273. They aren't very explanatory, and yet the Builder seems to think they're sufficient. Does this indicate a disconnection between the Builder and the people? The Unnameable One and the people? If you were one of the people there hearing these speeches, what would you think was going to happen?
27. In most works of fiction one can argue that the setting acts as a character in addition to the rest of the characters in the work. Here the narrative begins in the marshes, moves to the desert, settles on the Ark, and then ends in the "paradise" where the Ark lands. In what way does the setting as character affect the rest of the characters in the novel?

## Themes

### Water

28. The Unnameable One chooses to "cleanse" the Earth with water, and the author chooses in Re Jana a character who knows how to find water with a "divining rod" and who uses water to cleanse the Builder's family. Is the author suggesting a comparison between the Unnameable and Re Jana? Is her likeness to the Unnameable perhaps why Re Jana is saved? How does this comparison play out in other respects regarding Re Jana's fate?
29. On page 34, Re Jana's father states that to the Rrattika, "A woman's quality is judged by the taste of the water she brings." And so it would seem that Re Jana would be judged well. But Re Jana's father goes on to condemn her for

sharing her water with the Rrattika, saying it will make Re Jana the “slave of a thirsty man.” Does his prediction come true in the end?

30. When the flood occurs, creation is undone: The waters of the Heaven and the Earth that were separated at the time of creation come together again (see pg. 273 and Genesis 1: 6-8). Are there other reversals that occur in *In the Shadow of the Ark*? (Note, for example, the description of the Ark, pg. 107, as “a city turned in on itself.”)

#### Faith

31. Compare the Builder’s unquestioning faith in the Unnameable’s plan to Ham’s faith. By the end of the novel, after the calamity of the flood, how has each man changed or stayed the same?
32. Re Jana observes the Builder and says, “He has been abandoned by his god” (p. 329). Soon after Neelata comments, “Anything the boys and their father cannot understand they’ve called the Unnameable” (p. 338). Have they correctly observed and judged the faith of others? What do their comments indicate about their own faith?
33. Re Jana’s father tells her: “Forget what I have taught you and abide by His wishes.” Is he the only one who recognizes the power of the god who brought the flood?

#### Reward

34. Re Jana’s mother wants her husband to finish his truss-boat and worries that time is running out. He tells her there’ll be time because “we earned it in the cave” (p. 231), referring to his conversation with the Builder. What does he mean? What does this say about the process of questioning the Unnameable’s commandments and actions?
35. The people believe their “obedience” in helping to build the ark will bring them “prosperity, not punishment” (p. 88). Why doesn’t it?
36. For Zaza the reward of salvation is not enough: “I am too tired for [the Builder’s] paradise” (p. 326). In fact, it seems, she doesn’t really believe they will arrive in paradise and only supported the Builder’s plan because “a dream is better than emptiness.” Does everyone on the ark view their place on it as a reward? What about Re Jana’s father and Put?

#### Women

37. In true Shakespearean fashion Re Jana disguises herself as a boy and then “becomes” a woman again later on. What benefits are there to her being a boy? What does she lose by agreeing to the deceit and disguise?
38. Compare Neelata and Re Jana, the two “wives” of Ham. How do they treat others? How do their interactions with the brothers and the Builder differ?
39. When Zaza dies, the text reads, “all knowledge of motherhood had been lost with her,” and yet by the end of the novel a new mother is “born”—Re Jana. How does Re Jana’s example of motherhood and womanhood differ from Zaza’s?

#### Deceit

40. Ham builds a secret niche for Re Jana on the ark, hoping to hide her from the Builder. But it’s the Unnameable who dictated the dimensions of the Ark and specified its occupants, not the Builder. Does Ham think he can hide the niche from the Unnameable One? What does this say about his faith? His deceit leads directly to the dwarf committing suicide—might that be Ham’s punishment?
41. Consider all the voyagers’ different kinds of deceit while on the Ark. Which ones, if any, come to a good end and which ones do not?
42. Re Jana and her father hide the truth of the calamity about to occur from Re Jana’s mother because they fear her reaction. Was this a good decision on their part? Why or why not?

#### Other books to compare and contrast

*The Red Tent*, by Anita Diamant.

*Queenmaker: A Novel of King David’s Queen*, by India Edghill.

*The Preservationist*, by David Maine.

## Chapter 45. The Rain

Places you could once easily run across were now slippery and inaccessible. You could not rely on rocks and boulders for support, because they had been loosened. All around, people were digging ditches as fast as they could, but to my surprise nobody built any footbridges. In the marshes, we'd had footbridges linking everything to everything. Here, all you would find was the occasional platform which soon sank into the mud. Everybody took to sleeping on platforms. Out of bamboo and scarce boards, stilt villages were constructed. Because the water was now running off the hillsides in streams, people moved back towards the ark: it did not matter much where you lived, you were going to get wet. We woke up with swollen throats. The little ones caught colds, their ears ran with pus, and they cried through the night. My father waded across the plots where his millet was rotting.

The wet did not come from the rain alone. It came from under us and from around us, it rose from everything. The earth slid away beneath us. Mosses grew in the fireplaces. Lakes and streams formed. Flowers bloomed in places where we had never seen any green before. The refuse that had been heaped up began to ferment, foodscraps, excrement, everything became one big mash. The flies stung. In the hills, the swallows seemed to hit the ground in full flight. The blackbirds huddled in the trees, smoothing their feathers. The chickens scabbled in the mud. The cattle stood at one end of the enclosure, their heads into the wind. Sometimes the rain caught us in the middle of the night. Then we lay, curled up, soaked, waiting for morning. It always came like treachery: it was yet more unbearable dampness.

Zaza blew the ram's horn. At first, we took no notice. It was a familiar sound which was lost amongst all the others, but it started things moving. Animals came down from the hills. They squelched closer, but then held back. They came to a halt in front of the gangplank. They snorted and panted, their fur tangled. Then those who lived in the shipyard realised that the call of the ram's horn had been the signal. The beginning of the end was there, the moment of truth had arrived. In their tens and hundreds, they gathered around the ark, carrying their possessions on their backs in bundles, beating off the cattle and the animals pressing around them with sticks. But the trapdoor did not open until after dark. By evening, they were standing in oozing dung.

When darkness had fallen, the Builder, Shem and Japheth appeared on the deck. They put out a gangplank, which only the animals were permitted to cross. Most of them entered the hold willingly enough. Because of the mud on their feet, they stepped along the gangplank carefully, even those animals who were used to climbing ledges. The warriors were stationed at the gangplank in order to prevent uninvited guests from getting on board. Those who were waiting were becoming tired, realising that they would be standing there for hours if the animals came first, and because Taneses and Zedebab were still sleeping in their tents, they, too, withdrew to rest. The animals, though, kept moving up the gangplank. The dark lent the embarkation a contrived air; it became an event such as you only hear about in stories. There was a solemn movement of paws on planks, careful and fearful, as if the rhythm it produced must never be forgotten. The composition of the boarding crowd was like an ancient recipe: seven clean animals, two unclean. They were distributed over the ship according to their weight. There were animals who panicked at the scent of others; they were kept apart. Some were refractory. The camel, for instance: Shem took hold of it by its halter, and the beast sprayed the contents of its stomach all over him. The snake was denied access to the ark. It had seduced one of the first ancestors of the Rrattika. Judging by its head, it had not really changed after all those years, and was still up to no good, so it was chased back with sticks.

It turned out there were not enough cages. Ham was called away from us to help. He dragged up stakes and bars and in great haste divided the cages up into smaller spaces. Japheth carried animals into the hold, the legless ones, the ones so small you had to keep them in a jar, the animals who were so lazy or slow that without his help it would have taken them half the night.

Of each species they took the biggest and strongest. They seemed not to comprehend that once they had taken the leaders on board, the whole herd was desperate to follow. They had to pull up the gangplank and wait for the animals to calm down before they could continue with the embarkation. From the little field on the slope, you could hear the shouting and, again and again, the counting.

Zaza shuffled across the shipyard. Till the very last moment, she kept shaking seeds out of flowers and putting dried fruits in straw-lined boxes. Neelata had handed her affairs over to her lady's maids. She now stayed in the ship day and night. She had spread out her carpets and wall hangings and made herself a nest. Taneses stayed in her tent while she still could, like Zedebab. Zedebab had strengthened hers with ropes and pegs and would admit no-one, except her twin sister whom she was going to have to leave behind.

We slept from sheer exhaustion, but not for long. We were woken by people shouting further down. Their mats had been lifted by the water. They were afloat. Quickly, they pulled up the flaps of their tents, hoping the water would run out. Only then did they notice that the water was coming from outside. All around them floated the remains of the shipyard, pieces of bamboo from the scaffolding, branches and jugs. The ark still stood, rock solid, at its landing stage. The water lapped gingerly at its keel. Towards morning, we tried to sleep some more. Lying close enough together, stopping any leaks in the cover we lay under and not getting wet seemed much more important than the embarkation going on below.

There were no longer any clear periods between downpours, the rain was constant hour after hour. We became motionless, as if the raindrops had nailed us to the ground by the hems of the blankets we wore over our shoulders like mantles and which had become heavy as lead.

More and more tents were pulled down, mostly by labourers who were leaving. They left the shipyard, but were back after only a few days. 'The Builder is right,' they said. 'The water is covering the whole world.' They were terrified, those simple souls, they nursed no hopes of being among the elect. They were the poorest of the poor, the lowest in society, they knew they did not stand a chance. They tried as best they could to put up their tents again and keep their children dry. They did not complain. The women went on bathing their children every evening and did their best to see they did not catch cold in their damp clothes. They went on trying to cook millet. There is no point suffering hunger, not even if you know you are going to drown. You could not talk to them any longer. Their gaze had been turned inward, and they showed that waiting for death takes place in total solitude.

But even those who thought they would be admitted to the ark became suspicious, particularly when some thirty stowaways, who had hidden in different parts of the ship, were driven out with sticks and whips by the warriors. If so many animals were let in, there would be very little space left over for people. Was it possible they had been deceived all that time, and that only the sons and the nephews and those warriors in their woollen skirts were amongst the elect? The arrogance of the warriors, the impudence they showed when they chased the poor devils from the ship, made it clear there would be fighting for a place. That was what everyone was preparing for: pushing and shoving and fighting. People had another look at their possessions, throwing away anything superfluous, packing anything absolutely essential in even smaller bags. You wondered what these people thought they were going to do with bread that was soaked, with freshly washed clothes that were as wet as the ones on their backs, with small tools, with bags and packs that would make them sink to the bottom instantly. We could hear questions being raised all around the shipyard: 'Why are they letting the animals on first? Do they matter more than people?' When I passed by, some of them could not stop themselves saying, 'This is the revenge of the dead. Led on by strangers, we violated their burial place and stole their water. Now they are repaying us with water.'

Things were still being constantly loaded. The Builder insisted on taking our bath tub. The loading had to be done so fast that the contents of jars and baskets were no longer checked. At the most, Japheth saw to it that anyone who came on board left again. That is how it happened that someone brought some flat baskets on board. No-one heard or saw it happen, but afterwards the story got around: the carrier uttered curses as he entered the ark. In the baskets were the snakes who had been denied entry earlier. Apart from objects, only animals were admitted again that day. On the ground, near the entrance, their feet in the water, exhausted people stood where they could. They no longer dared leave their spots.

The next morning, the red tent had been pulled down. The pegs had been pulled up, the canvas lay on the ground like a dead bat. There were sounds, soft at first, rumbling like distant surf. The winds, coming from all four corners, carried the smells of storm and tempest. Then the rumbling swelled into a drumming full of fury, gods banging on the cages in which they were locked. The earth began to tremble. I saw it in the water in my jugs which took on a life of its own, rippling and splashing. From the hills sounded the hoof beats of rushing herds. Dripping tumbleweeds rolled ahead of the storm, kicked along like outcasts.

Put had been brave up to now. But in the fury of the storm he saw Neelata bring llamas and camels on board. 'I want to go with her,' he screamed. 'It's too scary here!' We let him go, his pockets filled with nuts and dates. We saw him run down the hill like a lost dog, his legs crooked under his body, his face twisted with fear. The Builder was nowhere to be seen. My father stretched the tarpaulin over our boat and shouted over the roaring, 'Why doesn't that man offer a sacrifice? Whoever his god is, now is the time to tender his offering!' He poured milk on the ground for our gods, in particular for the god of the storm with his immense wings. But the earth did not accept the milk. It was already saturated with liquid.

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