

2026 Nobel Prize in Literature

Anne Carson, poet who redraws boundaries of literature



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PERSPECTIVE
EXCLUSIVE

Canadian poet, translator, essayist, and scholar Anne Carson has won the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature. Over four decades, by interweaving contemporary poetry with mythology, philosophy, classical literature, and personal experience, she has fashioned one of the most distinctive voices in English literature.

The Swedish Academy announced Anne Carson as the recipient of the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature on October 8. The selection once again demonstrated that the Nobel Prize in Literature does not necessarily go to a writer who works within the familiar conventions of the novel or classical poetry. Carson is, fundamentally, a writer who eludes formal constraints. Poetry, essays, translation, academic research, drama, memoir, images, and even silence and absence converge in her work.

Carson was born on June 21, 1950, in Toronto, Canada. Her fascination with classical literature took shape during her adolescence, when she encountered the works of Sappho, the great poet of ancient Greece, and began learning Ancient Greek. This interest subsequently determined the course of her professional life.

Carson studied Classics at the University of Toronto, earning her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the field.

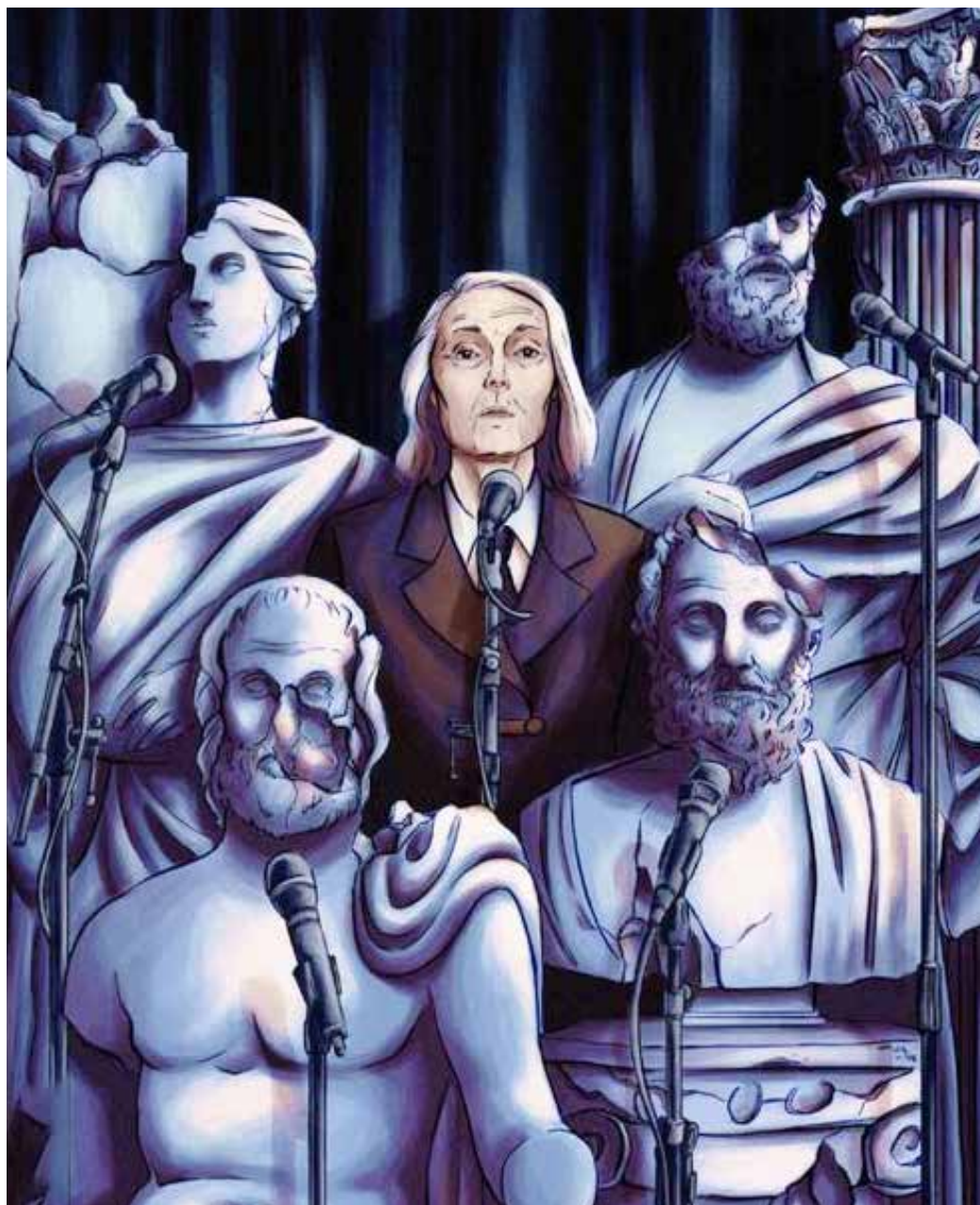
For Carson, however, classical scholarship has never been merely an academic specialization. Ancient Greece is not a remote, historically petrified realm for her, but a world that can still speak to contemporary humanity about love, loss, desire, violence, jealousy, loneliness, and death. This perspective is one of the most salient characteristics of her work.

Carson mines the old texts for what they know about the predicaments of contemporary humanity. She does not merely translate Sappho; she also explores the concept of loss. Carson does not merely recount Greek myths but interlaces them with contemporary human experience. Consequently, her works can be simultaneously profoundly scholarly and intensely personal.

A writer who defies classification

Any attempt to confine Carson's work to a single genre would probably prove futile. She is a poet, yet many of her works do not conform to conventional poetic structures. She is an essayist, yet her essays frequently depart from academic logic. She is a translator, yet her translations are sometimes so inventive that they become autonomous literary creations.

Even in the nomenclature of her works, she disregards conventional boundaries. For example, she has titled one of her notable



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works "The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos". Why tango? Because, in Carson's view, a romantic relationship and its disintegration resemble a dance: the perpetual movement of two people toward and away from each other.

This formal experimentation has made Carson one of the most significant figures in contemporary experimental literature.

Her first major book, "Eros the Bittersweet," was published in 1986. In this work, Carson examines the concepts of love and desire in ancient Greek literature, demonstrating from the outset that literature and philosophi-

cal thought are not separate domains for her.

Carson's international renown, however, took shape more than a decade later, with the publication of "Autobiography of Red" in 1998.

When mythology comes alive again

"Autobiography of Red" is one of Carson's most significant works. In it, the story of Geryon, a red creature in Greek mythology, intertwines with the story of Heracles. Carson, however, does not confine herself to retelling the myth. She transposes the narrative into the contemporary

world, constructing from it an account of love, desire, identity, and loneliness.

In Carson's universe, mythology is not something relegated to the past. Ancient characters can still fall in love, suffer defeat, experience jealousy, and endure loss. This is the juncture at which classical literature becomes modern literature.

Carson suggests to readers that the distance between a Greek myth and the life of contemporary humanity is not nearly as great as it might appear. The form of life has changed, but many of humanity's fundamental anxieties persist.



The selection of Anne Carson for the 2026 Nobel Prize in Literature can be interpreted as a renewed acknowledgment of literature's evolving boundaries. Contemporary literature is no longer necessarily defined by the novel, short story, or classical poetry. She has demonstrated that poetry can constitute research, research can become poetry, translation can be literary creation, and an ancient myth can speak to the life of contemporary humanity.

Love, betrayal, and 'The Beauty of the Husband'

In "The Beauty of the Husband," Carson addresses a far more personal subject: marriage, infidelity, and the disintegration of love. Even here, however, she departs from conventional linear narration. The book comprises 29 sections, and, as its title indicates, its structure resembles a sequence of tangos.

Love in Carson's works is rarely simple or tranquil. It is accompanied by loss, distance, and pain. That which a person desires becomes alluring precisely because it remains unattainable. In this work, Carson also renders beauty a complex problem. Beauty can engender desire, but simultaneously, it can become a source of suffering.

Sappho, the lost poet

One of the most important figures in Carson's literary universe is Sappho, a poet who lived on the island of Lesbos approximately 2,500 years ago and whose oeuvre has largely vanished over the course of history. In "If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho," Carson turns to Sappho's surviving poems. What matters to Carson, however, is not merely the poems themselves, but their absence.

Many of Sappho's poems survive in only a few lines or even a handful of words. Portions of them have disappeared over time. Readers therefore encounter incomplete texts, fragments of a voice that was once whole. Carson transforms this absence into an integral component of the reading experience. Perhaps this is one of the keys to understanding her literary universe: what has vanished sometimes matters as much as what remains.

'Nox' and the experience of grief

This perspective becomes an intensely personal experience in another of Carson's major works, "Nox". It concerns Carson's deceased brother. The book, however, is not merely a collection of elegiac poems. Letters, photographs, translations, images, notes, and poetry are juxtaposed to reconstruct the experience of grief. Here, death is not a complete narrative. On the contrary, death is something that renders narrative incomplete.

Rather than attempting to explain loss, Carson brings the form of the work itself into proximity with the experience of loss. Readers encounter fragments that they must assemble, much like a person who, following the death of a loved one, lives amid the scattered photographs, letters, and memories that remain.

From Helen to Marilyn Monroe

Even when confronting the most celebrated women of mythology, Carson explores the relationship between past and present.

In "Norma Jeane Baker of Troy," the story of Helen of Troy intertwines with the life of Marilyn Monroe. The two women



The photo shows several of Anne Carson's most famous books on display on a table.
● JONATHAN NACKSTRAND/AFP