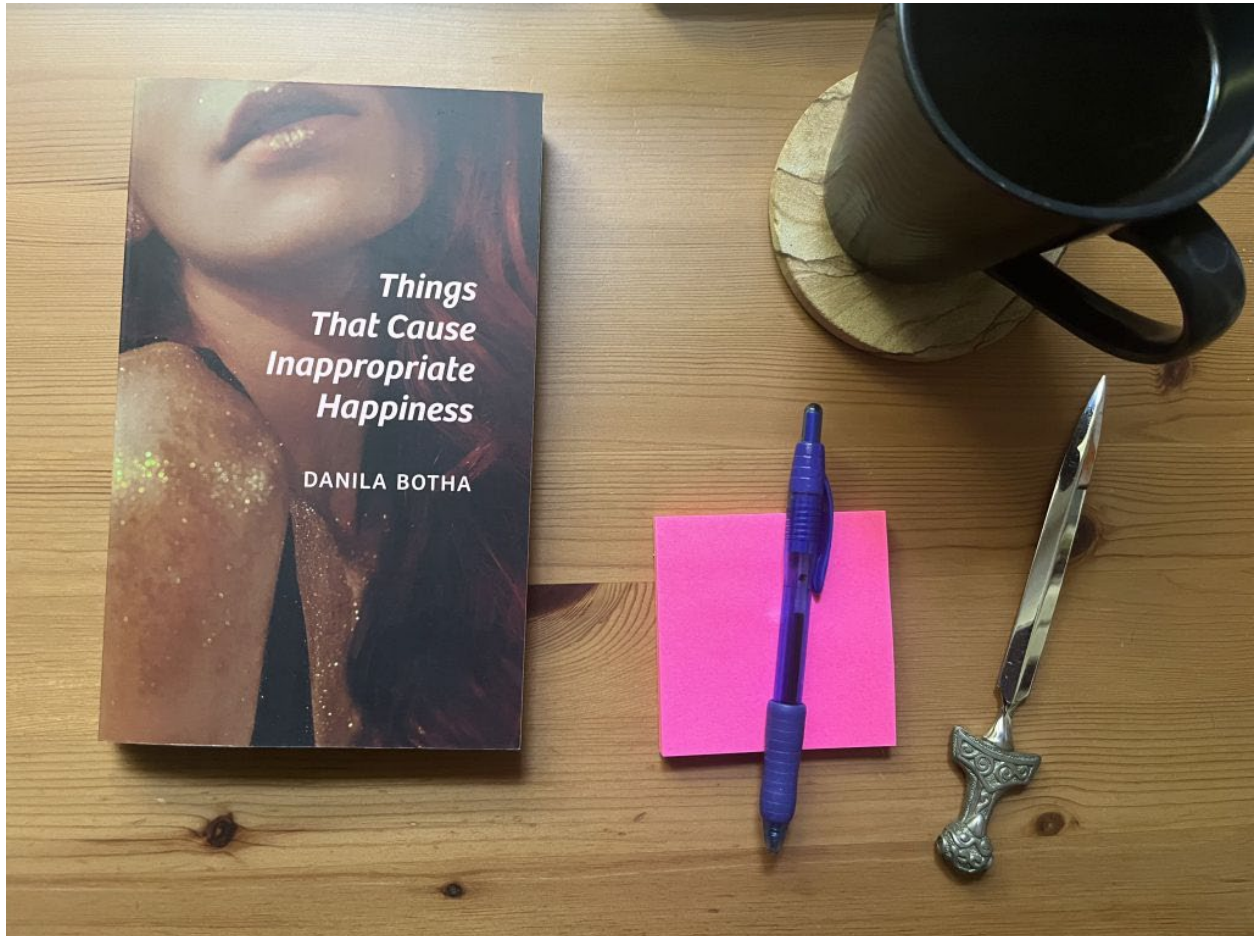


Short story month 2024: Danila Botha's third collection mines persistent subjects and charts new ground

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BY [STEVEN BEATTIE](#)



Danila Botha has a couple of reasons to celebrate new life in 2024. In April, her third short fiction collection, *Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness*, was published by Guernica Editions. Also this spring, Botha gave birth to her third child, a son.

This was not the first time Botha has found herself in the position of having to promote a new work of fiction while also dealing with a newborn. Six weeks after Botha's son was born in 2015, she had to tour her debut novel, *Too Much on the Inside*; she took her newborn son on tour with her. "He saw a lot of Canada before he was one," she says.

Travelling to events and give readings with a baby in tow is more taxing on the body and brain than touring while pregnant, which she has also done. "It's definitely easier to do it before than after," Botha says. She credits her husband, who is on paternity leave, with helping alleviate much of the strain in this regard.

Botha's determination to tour with this book as a new mother is not just a result of her feminism or her daunting work ethic, though both factor into her dedication to her work and its promotion. There is also the fact that her new book is a collection of short fiction, a form that remains central to her approach and sensibility as a writer and a reader. "It's my greatest love as a writer. As much as I enjoy writing other things, I love reading [short fiction] and I love writing it," she says. "I love the economy of the form. I love the challenge of saying everything you need to say in a more deliberate container."

There are many reasons for this. One is that Botha finds it easier to enter different perspectives in her short fiction than might be the case with a novel, something that runs counter to the assumptions of many readers she encounters when on the road. Too frequently, Botha says, she is confronted with readers who assume that her work is more nakedly personal than it actually is. "I don't primarily write autobiographical stuff, although people have always assumed, since the beginning, that everything I write is true," she says. "If you write in the first person, especially if it's a kind of interior writing, there's always the assumption as a female writer that you're writing about your own life."

Perhaps as a result, Botha has consciously striven to write from different points of view, including perspectives she finds strange or uncomfortable. "Always an Angel, Never a God," from the new collection, is about a woman who sticks by her rock star boyfriend after he becomes the subject of a credible sexual assault accusation. The story is based on a real incident and arose out of Botha's initial inability to comprehend why the woman in question would not disavow her partner, instead trolling his female accusers online.

"I often write what I really can't understand," Botha says. "Internalized misogyny is fascinating to me. The cognitive dissonance fascinates me. The backlash that comes from women is fascinating to me."

The constraints of short fiction – both in terms of its length and the concentration of language it demands – allow for this kind of narrative exploration, Botha feels, because there is not room to get important information in via back story or excessive description, so the writer must find a different means to convey significant information. This almost naturally involves a kind of radical empathy on her part, an effort to incorporate as much understanding of a character as possible in a highly limited space.



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Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness pushes the constraints of the short form further than many other collections. The volume contains thirty-two pieces over 230 pages; these are not precisely microfictions of the type Diane Williams or Lydia Davis might produce, but they are nonetheless tight and compact, with some stories running to a scant three or four pages. "There is a trend in literary magazines and online publications toward telling the whole story in 100 or 150 words; by comparison, this is less challenging," Botha says. "I'd love to attempt that at some point, although that seems like a feat of magic to me."

Still, the short entries in the new collection represent a surfeit of riches for Botha's fans. The two earliest stories, "Sometimes I Like to Shoot Kids" (the title is a cutting pun centring on the protagonist, a photographer) and "Aloha State," were written several years ago; many other entries were completed after the collection was accepted for publication. "When I submitted it to [editor] Michael Mirolla at Guernica, it was half the length it is now," she says. "We started with much less and we ended up with thirty-two stories."

A good number of those stories deal with subjects and themes – female sexuality (including, in some cases here, bisexuality), drug use, and Jewish identity – that crop up elsewhere in Botha's output. New to the collection is a focus on history: this is the first time Botha has explicitly addressed the Holocaust in her fiction. One story, "Like an Alligator Eyeing a Small Fish," even includes an adult Anne Frank as a character the protagonist encounters in a drug-addled vision.

Botha refers to Dara Horn's 2021 book of essays, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, as an inspiration for her own story. "The general theme is that people are more comfortable celebrating Jews when they die tragically," Botha says. "In [Horn's] essay about Anne Frank, which is the opening essay in the collection, she eulogized her and imagined her surviving the camps and living a long life and publishing all kinds of interesting stuff. Which led me to think more about Anne Frank and what she would have been like and what life she would have wanted to live."

Even for a Jewish writer, this is fraught territory. When Philip Roth included Frank as a character in *The Ghost Writer*, he was excoriated for betraying or besmirching the memory of what many people view as a secular saint. It's typical of Botha to disregard such potential negative responses when crafting her own fiction. "I try not to worry about reception when I'm writing," Botha says. "The truth is you can't control how people are going to receive anything."

Sometimes, those reactions surprise even her. Botha refers to the story "Wolf Eyes," from her Trillium Book Award shortlisted collection *For All the Men (and Some of the Women) I've Known*, which resembles "Always an Angel, Never a God" in focusing on an unsympathetic female. "I've had women come up to me and say, 'I could really relate to the female narrator in that story.' And I always think, 'Good God.'"

But ultimately, what animates Botha in her fiction is an attempt to investigate characters and their motivations, even – perhaps especially – when those motivations appear strange or contradictory or obscure. "I've always been interested in why people make the choices they make," Botha says. "I'm

trying to explore things that I find really interesting and hopefully develop a sense of compassion that's not necessarily natural for me.”

Correction, May 31: An earlier version of this post misstated the gender of Botha's new child. It is a son, not a daughter.

[Danila BothaDara HornPhilip Roth](#)