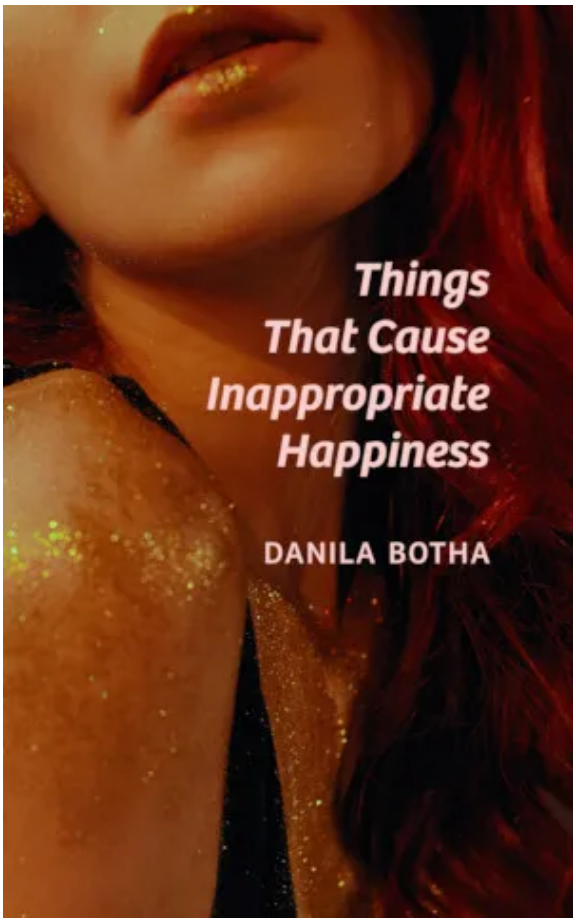
THE ARTISANAL WRITER

Exploring the Craft of Writing

BOOK DISCUSSIONS, FICTION

Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness



Paul Dhillon talks to Toronto writer Danila Botha about her latest story collection Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness, Guernica Editions, 2024

Paul Dhillon (PD): Congratulations on the new collection! The title is striking. Can you explain the genesis of it?

Danila Botha (DB): Thank you so much, I really appreciate it. The title story, *Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness* was inspired by a few things, but the title itself came from a real reported side effect of the drug Prednisone. Like Lielle, the protagonist in the story, I have rheumatoid arthritis, and at different times, have had to take Prednisone. Prednisone has a lot of unexpected side effects, but this one in particular seemed especially strange. Can you imagine trying to measure and evaluate that, or trying to report it to a rheumatologist?

I had thought about writing about RA, but once I happened upon that strange fact, the story just started flowing. There was a lot of different things that unexpectedly worked their way in there too: my love of visual art, my love of Leonard Cohen and his work, the different ways people identify with Jewish culture, and a flashback to the 90's, which was really fun to write, and was inspired by Emma Straub's beautiful novel *This Time Tomorrow*. I like the idea of revisiting aspects of the past with an entirely different perspective, and with the hindsight of knowing what's possible, or what's going to happen.

PD: The story, "The Name Game," has a wonderful constraint of dropping the reader into moments of naming and the origin of nicknames of those they encountered in school. How did this story come to be? How do you see nicknames and their influence on identity and how we carry ourselves in the world, especially in our coming-of-age years?

DB: Thank you so much, I really appreciate it. The Name Game was actually inspired by two things: the song Names by Cat Power, which is deeply moving and comes

from her gorgeous 2003 album You Are Free, and the amazing short story, Of Course, I Remember Your Name, by one of my favourite writers of all time, Heather O'Neill. Both pieces made me deeply consider names and the way they affect a person's identity and sense of self. I thought about stories I'd heard at that age, and I collected stories from a cross-section of people more recently. I wondered how many people's sense of self comes from external sources, how much control we have over how we're perceived, and how to refute narratives even for ourselves, that are obviously untrue. I've also written other stories in the collection like Born, Not Made, about someone who had been badly bullied, and I wanted to write a story from the perspective of someone who was not necessarily a bully but was definitely complicit. I like to try to tell stories from as many sides as possible, just to understand things better.

I love the way Heather O'Neill writes about the effect of being things by strangers or people who hardly know her. ("For a long time my middle name was who" is such a wonderful line.

Something that struck me about Cat Power's song was the final line, where she sings, "I have no idea where they are" It's so heartbreaking because she's deeply invested in their well-being and has no idea how to find out what happened to them.

I hope I've expressed the complexity of these ideas with as much depth and sensitivity as they have.

PB: Without giving too much of the story away, in "Like an Alligator Eyeing a Small Fish," the protagonist overdoses and meets an adult Anne Frank. How did you navigate representing Anne Frank in a new and surprising light on the page? Especially considering the totem she has come to represent in many people's interaction and understanding of the events of the Holocaust through reading, "The Diary of a Young Girl." Was there any reservation? Hesitation? Struggles? Joy?

DB: This is such a great question, Paul, thanks so much for asking. As a Jewish writer, I've definitely read a lot of Holocaust literature, and the range, as you can imagine, in

terms of style, subject, approach and experience, is so vast. I was very moved by Anne Frank's diary and by a lot of young diarists of the time, including this amazing collection, *Salvaged Pages*, edited by Alexandra Zapruder (another story in the collection, *Proteksiye and Mazel*, was inspired by Ilya Garber's diary, which is found in Zapruder's incredible collection)

Anne Frank really wanted to become a writer, had such an effervescence and charisma on the page, and did so much revision and editing (which was really impressive given her age) It's always struck me as sad that she never had a chance to develop her writing more, and that she became so well known for something that could have just been a footnote in an amazing career. It's impossible to know of course, what would have happened if she'd survived, how she would have processed her trauma, what she would have wanted to do or be after witnessing such horrors. But when you read her work, it really felt like she had more to express, more thoughts, more observations, more emotions and it would have been fascinating to see what she would have done, if she could have. The writer Dara Horn, wrote an amazing essay, including a eulogy for Anne, which inspired me too. I imagined Anne becoming an artist and intellectual, being wry and brilliant in her older age. I also wanted to write about the opiate crisis, and somehow the two came together in ways that were unexpected, even for me, in this story.

PD: Characters' dignity remaining intact is vital to many characters in the collection. But their grief is enormous. As if each character is screaming to be heard and seen, especially for their art ("A Good Story to Tell" & "When You Play With Fire" to name a few), this all converges with the narrator in the final story, "There's Something I've Been Meaning to Say To You," who given the state of the world and their own health, takes a unique approach to reveal their pain, but also hopes for being seen for the things they do offer and give, rather than their lack. What is it about art, that allows someone to be seen more authentically than other ways of expression?

DB: Wow, thanks so much for saying that. I'd never noticed that before. What a great question. I think there's freedom with creative expression, artists and writers have the space to process their feelings, and to say things that they may feel that they can't say directly to people, as much as they may want or need to.

In *A Good Story to Tell*, the character desperately wants an audience for her music, she wants to be respected and heard because her music is such a true expression of her identity. Her best friend and cousin, Hila and the guy she is dating, Omri are mentioned throughout the story by name, but we never learn her name. It's really hard for her when her ambition is judged harshly, instead of being immediately understood or respected.

When You Play with Fire is an interesting one because it's always fascinating to write a story from the perspective of the antagonist, but I hope I did it with compassion and understanding. Both characters in that story are serious about their art but show it very differently.

In the final story in the collection, *There's Something I've Been Meaning to Say To You*, I was walking my dogs during one of the lockdowns, because I had to, and I noticed all kinds of signs in people's windows, thanking first responders, shouting out to specific communities, made by kids or adults who were bored or felt trapped and isolated and I wanted to take it a few steps further. I thought, what if people said everything they'd ever wanted to communicate right now? What if they did it in interesting ways? What if the most vulnerable people could use their voices in a way they'd never been able to until now? How would people receive it? And would it help? I think there's an urgency that a lot of people felt then to communicate and connect on a deeper level with people, and I hope the story conveys some of those complex feelings and thoughts.

PB: What constraints did you use in crafting the collection?

DB: I think what can seem like constraints are actually wonderful things. There are length and word restrictions with short fiction that encourage brevity and specificity,

which I really love. There's less room for back story, for example, so the writer has to choose the details they use more carefully, and description for example, and dialogue, has to be very deliberate, but it's a challenge I love. I actually find novel writing much more challenging. It's always felt a lot less intuitive and less natural to me.

PD: What craft elements do you think are your strong suit, and what would you like to continue to develop or try?

DB: It's so hard to evaluate these things about your own work, but I find characterization and voice the most enjoyable. I discover so much about who the character is from the way they speak, the way they think, and how they perceive things, their turns of phrase, their specific interests. I really like writing dialogue too, although it definitely can be challenging to develop voices for characters that are completely distinct from each other. I've always found description more challenging, so I hope I get better at it with every book. In my initial early drafts, there are a lot of thoughts and feelings and ideas, and not enough of a sense of place, which I always add in and edit and re-edit later.

I also love to try new subjects and to challenge myself to understand perspectives and experiences that are really different from my own, and different from anyone I know. For example, in *All Good Things Take Time*, or *Always an Angel, Never A God*, or in *Black Market Encounters*, I'd heard stories about people who'd experienced versions of these events, but I tried really hard to imagine how they happened, what the details were, how the characters justified their choices to themselves, how they felt in the moment, how they perceived everything, etc. I tried to always come from a place of compassion.

PD: What makes the short story such a special form? What can it reveal or showcase that other writing can't?

DB: Short fiction is my absolutely my favourite form. I love the idea of something relatively small containing multitudes. I love how concise it has to be, how precise in

its detail. I love how much impact a short story can have, and I love that it doesn't have to be conclusive, that you can end without revealing to the reader exactly how things will turn out. I love that feeling of not quite knowing, of still wondering. When I think of some of my favourite short fiction writers, from Etgar Keret, to Nathan Englander, Denis Johnson, Grace Paley, Mary Gaitskill, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, Carver and Cheever, Cynthia Ozick, Chava Rosenfarb, Heather O'Neill, Zoe Whittall, Banana Yoshimoto, Lauren Groff, Lorrie Moore, Cherie Dimaline, Ayelet Tsabari, Anosh Irani, Zalika Reid Benta, Carmella Gray Cosgrove, Lisa Moore and Tea Mutonji, to name just a few- and I think of all they can pack into a single story, how evocative and brilliant, funny and smart and moving their work is, it's so inspiring and exciting to try.

PD: What was the best piece of writing advice you received? What advice would you give a new or emerging writer?

DB: Some of the best advice I've been given is to try not to judge myself or the story. If I'm really invested and excited about something, I try to get it all on paper first, (outlining even with a short story can be very helpful, just to remind myself of roughly where I want to go) and I try not to judge the quality or consistency or evaluate what works or doesn't work until later. I also try not to question why I'm really interested in a strange or bizarre detail, or story. I think a deep interest in the subject is so important, however strange it may be. I try to treat research and reading like an essential part of the process, and I try to trust that it's going somewhere, even if I'm not always sure exactly where. I know some writers who try to write a publishable page a day, but I don't always find it realistic. I would rather feel less pressure in earlier drafts and enjoy the process of discovery as much as I can before I dig into all the important logistics and details, which is enjoyable too but can be hard to tackle in a first draft.

My biggest recommendation to any writer is to trust yourself. Trust your interests and follow them as far as they can take you. Read as much as possible and be open to

edits and workshops. I've learned so much that way, and I learn so much from editors and early readers.

PD: Being the author of five books, how do you continue to generate new ideas for stories? What other forms of art provide sustenance for your creativity? What does your creative practice look like between projects?

DB: That's a great question, too. I read as much as I can, I read a lot of short fiction, as many novels as I can, and as much creative nonfiction that relates to whatever I'm researching and writing about as much as I can.

I draw and paint a lot, not just as part of the graphic novel I'm working on, but as part of my writing process. Drawing and painting have always helped me to embody my characters, to learn their mannerisms and to remind myself of where they are physically, how they'd perceive things, how things would look to them and why, for example. In between projects I'm often writing short fiction and reading and drawing a lot.

PD: How do you know when a piece is finished?

DB: I think when you've exhausted something so that you have nothing more to add, nothing more than you could possibly think of, it's at least complete enough to submit to a literary journal.

I was really lucky to work with some spectacular editors at different literary magazines for many of the thirty-two stories in this collection. Gal Slonim, for example, at the European magazine Beyond Words, helped me to fundamentally change and fix the original ending for the story *Able To Pass*, and I feel so indebted to him. *Proteksiye and Mazel* was edited by both Clarissa Hurley and Mark Anthony Jarman of Camel Magazine, and wow, were they meticulous about every single detail and possibility? It was like a masterclass in editing short fiction, a true privilege. Sharon Bala edited *Dark and Lilac Fairies* for Grain Magazine, and she was amazing and so sensitive to the details. Nora Gold at Jewishfiction.net edited *Don't Look Back*

and helped me to clarify details I'd almost entirely missed. (these are just a few among many, but I have such immense respect for editors and all that they do, especially all the editors I got to work with)

My editor for the whole collection Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness (who is also my publisher at Guernica Editions) Michael Mirolla, was truly amazing. He didn't miss a thing, and his notes and questions were so insightful, encouraging and deeply thoughtful. He was amazing to work with, in every sense of the term. I felt so lucky that my stories were in such amazing hands.

PD: How does teaching influence your writing practice? What is something you have learned from your students that continues to nurture your writing practice?

DB: My students work so hard. They're so talented, they're so willing to read and edit and rewrite, and they write across so many genres, which encourages me to read more widely so that I can recommend more books to them that they haven't read yet. They often approach writing and craft in unique ways, and their energy and fearlessness is so inspiring. I feel very lucky that I get to teach writing.

PD: What is something you wish you were asked about your work? Please answer too.

DB: Honestly, I'm grateful when people read my writing closely. I'm grateful when people ask about the characters or storylines, or anything craft related. It's amazing when people speak about characters or storylines as if they really happened. I think all any writer wants is to know that people are reading and engaging with their work. I'm so grateful that people want to read my work, and ask such great questions.

PD: What piece of art could you not imagine having in your life?

DB: Aside from my ten shelves of short story collections, shelves of novels and non fiction books, I'd have to say my collection of graphic novels. I get so inspired by graphic novel art- from Marjane Satrapi to Ken Krimstein, Tillie Walden and Katie

Green, Rutu Modan, Kate Beaton, Vesper Stamper, Art Spiegelman, Anaele Hermans, Mariko Tamaki, Jillian Tamaki, Liana Finck, Alison Bechdel, Miriam Katin, Sarah Lightman, Kristen Radke (my list goes on and on)

During the process of writing Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness, I was really inspired by Charlotte Salomon's art, and by this incredible visual diary of Frida Kahlo's called An Intimate Self Portrait, with an introduction by Carlos Fuentes. I also listen to a lot of different kinds of music which I always find really emotionally evocative and inspiring.

PD: What is your favourite writing snack?

DB: Anything that's easy to grab when you're writing, that won't make a huge mess if I spill it all over my desk 😊 I love edamame (steamed or roasted) and I love nuts, especially almonds (natural, roasted, flavoured in any way) and carrot sticks or apple slices. Anything you that tastes great, that gives you mental fuel without having to get up and make something 😊 I also drink a lot of water and lately, flavoured Perrier.

Author

Danila Botha is the author of three short story collections, Got No Secrets and For All the Men (and Some of the Women I've Known) which was a finalist for the Trillium Book Award, The Vine Awards and the ReLit Award. Her new collection, Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness will be published in April by Guernica Editions.

Stories from the collection have been published widely throughout Canada, the US and Europe. The title story, Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is also the author of the award-winning novel Too Much on the Inside which was recently optioned for film. Her new novel, A Place for People Like Us will be published by Guernica in 2025. She is part of the faculty at Humber School for Writers and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies. She is currently working on her first graphic novel and on a new short story collection.

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