

# Debut volume tells dozen tales from the dark side

By **STEPHEN PATRICK CLARE**

After reading Danila Botha's first collection of short stories, *Got No Secrets*, one might be forgiven for approaching the Halifax-based author with some sense of caution.

The book's 12 torrid tales are teeming with some of the seedier slices of life: sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, rape, abuse, divorce, disease, depression, wrist slashing and suicide all rear their roaring heads in this dark and disquieting debut.

Ironically, the South African-born Botha would appear to be the person least likely to pen tales of this sort.

Unlike the 12 core characters in *Got No Secrets*, the 20-something writer has a sunny disposition: warm, friendly, outgoing and, from the outside anyway, well adjusted.

"It was challenging to write about experiences that were not necessarily my own, and to make them sound authentic and believable," she said in a recent email interview. "It was important for me to nail down all of those tiny details that can make a character in a book seem like a real person; getting the dialogue right, adding enough physical description, etc."

Botha — who is no relation to former South African president P.W. Botha ("Botha is the South African version of Smith or Jones," she said) — began piecing the work together while studying creative writing in Toronto at both York University and at Humber College for Writers.

"Doing the research on drug addiction was an amazing part of the process for me," she noted. "I interviewed addicts at the places I volunteered at,

spoke to dealers who helped me fix my language so that it sounded authentic and I spoke to addicts' families as well. Everyone was very open and willing to share their stories and I am grateful for their help and honesty."

Judging by the initial response to the book, her investigations have paid off.

"I am gratified and deeply moved by people's positive reactions," said Botha, who moved to Nova Scotia from Ontario just over a year ago to attend university. "I have heard from former addicts who connected with my characters. It shocks me how many people have experienced that kind of thing. I had no idea. I hope it makes people feel less alone. I know that hearing their stories has done that for me."

She admits that process has helped heal many of her own wounds.

"Much of my motivation to understand addiction and the lifestyle that accompanies it came from my own experiences as an angry and depressed teenager.

"I wanted to better appreciate why, given some of the things that I went through as a young person, I managed to bypass some of these horrific experiences while others did not. What was it about my set of circumstances that was so different from other people? Why do some people merely dabble in these things, while others feel the need go all the way? And why are some never tempted at all?"

The answers, she acknowledges, came over time.

"I learned how important external factors such as family, friends and lovers can be to a person's self-esteem, and how these things can affect the choices that they make."



ot.no.secrets

## *Got No Secrets*

By Danila Botha

(Tightrope Books, 144, pages, \$18.95)

Along with the writings of Heather O'Neill, Amy Jones, Zoe Whittall, Russell Smith, Chad Pelley and Ryan Turner, Botha cites her new surroundings as a positive influence as she finishes the finishing touches upon both a collection of poetry and her sophomore narrative.

"Nova Scotia is a great place to be a writer," she said. "The natural beauty, openness and warmth of the people, and the lack of distraction lend itself well to reflection.

"There is also a genuine sense of camaraderie and community among creative people here. Everyone knows each other, or knows of each other, and supports and encourage one another. That is very inspiring and I am excited to be in on it."

On the web: [www.danilabotha.blogspot.com](http://www.danilabotha.blogspot.com)

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