



✦ Danila Botha and Nicola Solvinic on learning from other writers (and genres) and trusting the process (and yourself!) ✦

Danila and Nicola talk about overcoming writer's block and recognizing that sometimes you're not blocked, you're "percolating", and we share some great opportunities you don't want to miss!

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Hello dearest friends!

Spring just keeps getting springier and there's nothing like it to get those creative juices flowing. We hope you've all got ideas popping up everywhere like weeds—and that you remember to go outside once in a while to help keep that creative well full (but then get your bum back in your chair and get to work. Those books we can't wait to see from you aren't going to write themselves)!

Speaking of spring...How is the writing process like building a nest? No, that's not the set-up for a joke, it's part of a wise bit of writing advice from debut author **Nicola Solvinic** that feels especially timely right now. We've also got some words of wisdom in this issue from short-story writer **Danila Botha** on why writing what you're passionate about—not what others tell you will sell—can be the secret to success.

Q&A with author Danila Botha ☺ 🌸



Danila Botha is a Canadian fiction writer based in Toronto, Canada. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, she studied Creative Writing at York University in Toronto, and at Humber's School for Writers. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from University of Guelph. Danila's first collection of short stories, Got No Secrets, was published in 2010 and praised by the Globe and Mail, the Chronicle Herald and the Cape Town Times. Her debut novel, Too Much on the Inside, which was published in 2015, was shortlisted for the 2016 ReLit award, and won a Book Excellence Award for Contemporary Novel. It was optioned for film by Pelee Entertainment in 2023.

Danila's third collection of short stories, Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness, was published this April and stories from the collection have been widely published in Canadian publications.

TSNOTYAW: Do you have a go-to mantra or pep talk for the days when writing feels hard?

Danila Botha: I try to remind myself that it's normal for writing to feel hard sometimes, and I try to either figure out why this particular scene or section is hard, what about it isn't working, or I move onto a different paragraph or section and come back to it when I have a little more distance. I also sometimes dive more deeply into research, whether that's reading creative non-fiction for research, or for example, reading other literary fiction or short fiction. I find it so generative and inspiring to read other people's work (I write short stories, for example and I have nine bookshelves and counting with nothing but short fiction). Sometimes I reread work I love to remind myself of technique or craft or just the feeling of being transported by the absolute magic of someone's writing. Above all, I try to remind myself to be patient. Sometimes a story needs many drafts, or a chapter in a novel needs a lot of rewriting to work, but that's just part of the process.

TSNOTYAW: Were you ever close to giving up on writing and, if so, what stopped you?

DB: To be honest, I've definitely felt frustrated, or temporarily crushed by rejection, which happens at all levels of one's career. Sometimes there are people who don't love or like or understand a story or a novel, but these experiences are thankfully balanced by readers or editors or writers or publishers who really do, and who are enthusiastic and supportive. I always think—though it's hard to see it in the moment—that these things can provide such perspective and appreciation for the moments when things do work out. If every writer is willing to persevere enough, the things we want and dream of do happen. I've definitely been frustrated with myself also for not being able to execute an idea, or pull something off convincingly, from when I was a younger student in writing workshops to any kind of professional rejection. But thankfully it's never felt so strong that I've reconsidered being a writer. Being a writer is such a big part of who I am, how I think and express myself. Even with the challenges, I enjoy writing so much, and I love talking about writing, and reading. Most of the time, I feel incredibly privileged to be able to do this.

TSNOTYAW: How do you ensure you have enough time to write amidst so many obligations competing for your time?

DB: Great question. You have to make the time, there's no substitute for it. I allocate certain days and time for teaching and marking, and certain days and times for writing. I have to have a schedule otherwise I do fall behind. I love writing, especially writing short fiction so much. I start to feel a lack of balance if I'm not writing enough. I also love research and I love drawing and painting. I've been working on my first graphic novel, and I always sketch and draw panels for every piece of writing I do, to work out description and location and body language and those kinds of things. I make sure that I make time for the whole process, including rereading and close editing as much as I can.

TSNOTYAW: What's one writing "rule" or commonly followed piece of advice that you decidedly break?

DB: I was told since the beginning of my career that short fiction doesn't sell, that it's considered less serious than novel writing, that I should get it out of the

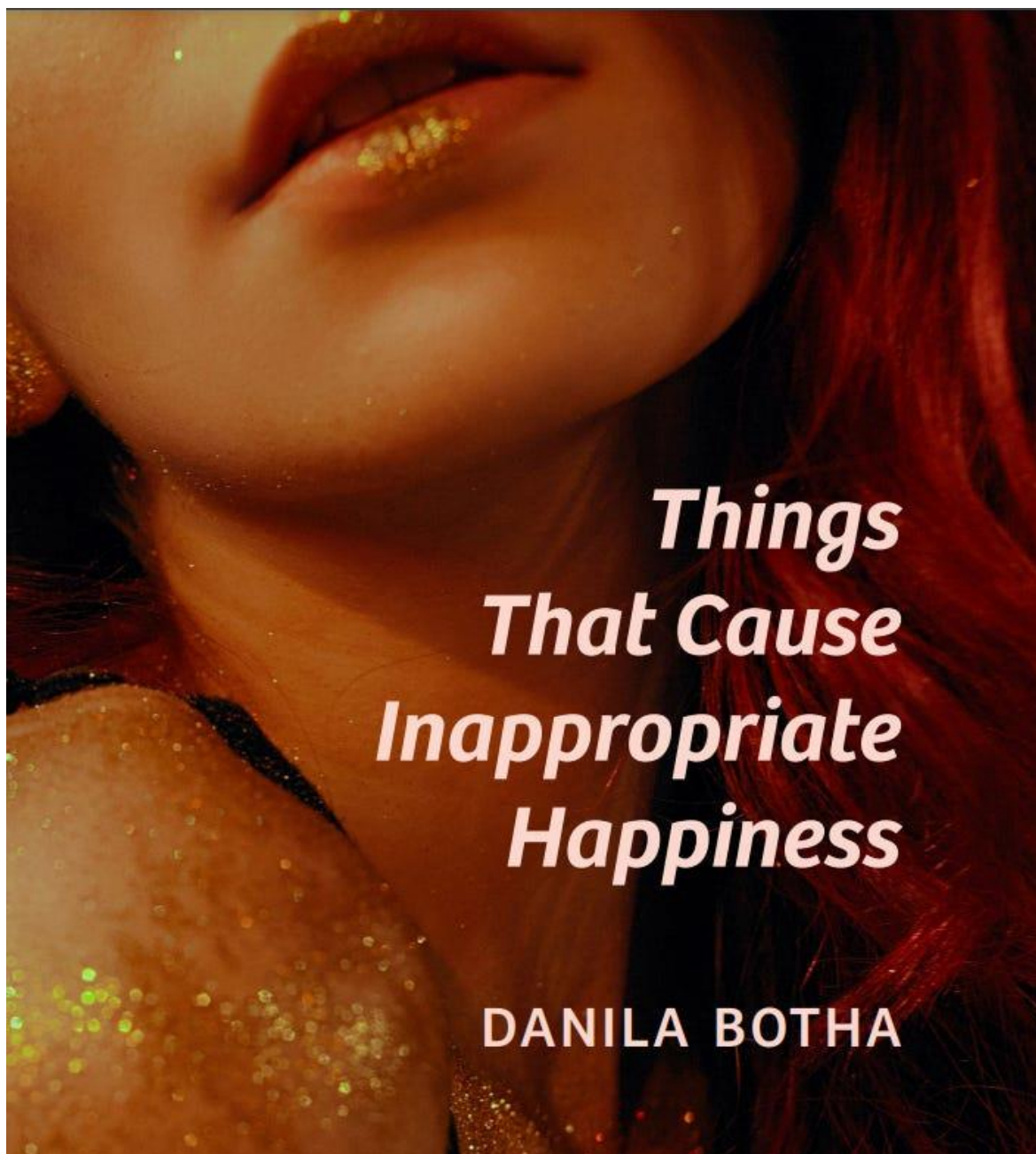
way so I can focus on writing novels. I do enjoy writing novels, but short fiction is my first and truest love. I really believe that what writers are most passionate about, and most willing to work on, can be their best and most commercial work. They're just so immensely enjoyable as a form—the brevity, the concision, the challenge of the economy of form. We also live in a country that has produced some of the best short fiction writers in the world—from Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood to David Bezmosgis, Lisa Moore, Heather O'Neill, Rawi Hage, Anosh Irani, Alexander Mcleod, Rebecca Rosenblum, Tea Mutonji, Zalika Reid Benta, Carleigh Baker, Souvankham Thammavongsa, Ivan Coyote, Ayelet Tsabari, Madeleine Thein, Leesa Dean, to name just a few. I remember being shocked at the good reviews that my first book, *Got No Secrets*, received, my expectations were so low. And then when I finished my second collection, *For All the Men (and Some of the Women) I've Known*, I was advised to shelve it until I'd written another novel. I just knew in my gut that this was wrong—and I'm so grateful to have been right. That book went on to be a finalist for the Trillium Book Award, The Vine Awards for Canadian Jewish Literature and ReLit. It had multiple printings, which I'd never experienced. I'm still so grateful today. It gave me confidence when writing my new collection, *Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness*. I think of myself as primarily a short fiction writer first now, and I'm grateful because it's truly what I love to write most.

TSNOTYAW: Writer's block: myth or unfortunate reality? If you experience it, how do you overcome it?

DB: It definitely can be real, unfortunately. One sentence at a time, one paragraph at a time. Alison Pick has this wonderful quote where she says, "remember that every book you've ever read that you've loved started with a bad first draft" and I love that so much. Just giving myself permission to write without, or with less judgement. Just getting it on paper, realizing that I can edit work later. Just appreciating the process- and remembering what I love about writing.

TSNOTYAW: What is something you've learned about yourself later in your writing career that would have surprised your younger self?

DB: Earlier in my career, I never considered writing about certain subjects because I worried that they weren't considered literary. For example, Denis Johnson and Raymond Carver and Cheever were huge influences, (as was Heather O'Neill's early work) and so I felt like I had a precedent for writing about addiction and grit, and discomfort in one's own skin, for example. But it wasn't until later that I got deeply into other Jewish writers like Etgar Keret, Nathan Englander and David Bezmozgis (and more recently, writers like Sidura Ludwig, Kathy Friedman, Chava Rosenfarb among many others), and started wanting to write about different aspects of the Jewish experience. It comes up a lot in *Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness*—from a character who realizes that she's attracted to her female best friend and tries to reconcile that with her Orthodox upbringing (*Soulmates*), to a writing student who overdoses and meets an adult Anne Frank (*Like An Alligator Eyeing a Small Fish*), to stories that deal with the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust (*Dark an Lilac Fairies*, *Able to Pass*, *Proteksiyе* and *Mazel*), casual antisemitism (*When You Play with Fire*) and an artist with rheumatoid arthritis who travels back to her teenage years, guided by a vision of Leonard Cohen (*Things that Cause Inappropriate Happiness*). I never, ever imagined when I was younger that I would write about these things, or go so deeply into them. I hope that as we get older and more experienced, our confidence grows, in terms of what we want to write and how we approach it (my younger writer self would definitely have been shocked by all of this. I hope she would have liked it though).



You can purchase *Things That Cause Inappropriate Happiness* on our Bookshop.org affiliate page [here](#). Buying books through this link supports a local indie bookstore, as well as The Shit No One Tells You About Writing 📖❤️