

Web Exclusive Interview: Daisy Johnson



April's Web Exclusive, ["A Bruise the Size and Shape of a Door Handle,"](#) is a haunting story whose slow, creeping tension evokes the likes of Edgar Allen Poe and Shirley Jackson. And yet it is so thoroughly modern, an enlightened study of unhinged, potent adolescent-female sexuality. Its author, Daisy Johnson, is surely destined for great things, so we're thrilled to have her story and interview [here](#).

Erin McReynolds: The collection from which this story comes is called, *FEN*, referring presumably to East Anglia's sort of long-uninhabited marshland. What about this location inspires you?

Daisy Johnson: I grew up there, in the British Fens, and when I started writing short stories it was a landscape which—without my much meaning it to—came back to me. The land there is completely flat, with long Roman roads set above the fields, which are mostly peat. It's striking: the white grey sky; the black land, the grey sea not far away. It seemed to me a land which could contain strangeness, a land which had a voice. This is a place which was underwater, which perhaps still dreams about being underwater.

EM: That sounds deeply appealing for a writer. Sometimes we want a landscape that is visually silent, so our imaginations can fill things in, and sometimes we need "noise" to report or work off of. Do you prefer one over the other?

DJ: That's a really interesting thought. I've never yet been able to write cities, and I like the idea that this is perhaps because they already have their own noise, their own loud logic. Writers who do cities really well seem, somehow, to tame this noise, to somehow channel it. I'm thinking here of *The Satanic Verses* or *Midnight's Children*, which are such loud, bustling

books just like the cities they are portraying.

Someone once described *FEN* to me in a visual way, as bands of color (sky, land, water), which is reflected in the stories — the ordinary cut through with strong moments of strangeness. I like the idea of that translated into sound. The Fen, like most rural places, is so quiet until it's not. You are woken in the night by foxes hunting or muntjac deer mating. It's quiet enough [that] you can hear what you might not normally hear: pylons, cars along straight roads. Maybe that is the landscape I like writing about: where's it's so quiet you can hear the strangeness you might not in other places notice.

I think a lot of the landscapes I love writing about are made of what you can't see. The Fen is such an empty landscape. The novel I'm currently working on is partly set on canals which, I think, drew me in because of how murky they are: anything could be hiding beneath. This, perhaps, gave me the space to fill that emptiness.

EM: Who/what were your influences when writing this collection?

DJ: I was, while writing *FEN*, fanatically reading short story collections, everything I could get my hands on but particularly collections by women. A few books are very ripped and dirty because I was carrying them around in my bag, returning again and again to them, unpicking stories. Sarah Hall's *The Beautiful Indifference*, Kelly Link's *Magic for Beginners*, Claire Vaye Watkins' *Battleborn*, everything Karen Russell writes, Jessie Greengrass, Mary Gaitskill, Lucia Berlin.

FEN is a collection of linked short stories, so I hunted down and read a lot of other books like that. Sam Thompson's *Communion Town*, Jim Crace's *The Devil's Larder*, all of Junot Diaz's collections.

There are also some writers, in different genres, that I return to for everything I write. They are my staple, and they save me whenever I am stuck. Stephen King is one of them but also Evie Wyld, Helen Oyeyemi, Robin Robertson, John Burnside, Sharon Olds.

EM: Do any of the characters in "A Bruise" show up elsewhere in *FEN*? What are the connective tissues between the stories?

DJ: Throughout, there are a couple of repeating images. The pub in "A Bruise" is one which reappears over and over again, as is the pregnant barmaid, who is the protagonist of her own story later on. January Hargrave, the filmmaker, is also in another story. I wanted there to be just enough connective tissue, as you say, to make it feel as if this was the same world. I loved the idea of the characters seeing one another and not realizing they were all experiencing these very strange things. It makes you think about the people you run into on the street.

EM: For being so young, you write with the emotional intelligence and keenness of a person who has spent a lot of time on the planet, observing themselves and others. Were you always a writer? A reader?

DJ: I'm glad! Every writer I know was a reader first in an obsessive sort of way. Writing for me came naturally from the hunger of that. How do they do that? Can I do that? How do they make the reader feel that way? There was a sense of jealous wonder which spurred me on. I've been a writer since I was maybe fourteen and it seemed accidental, just something I was doing. Perhaps that's the thing to do: trick yourself into it. I learned how to observe and record before I knew I was doing it. At that point I didn't know about editing. I was very happy!

I was born on Halloween so quite a few of my formative film experiences also involved lots of girls in a room screaming for my birthday . . . These pretty much made me the sort of writer I am today.

EM: Ah, yes, the blessed time before editing. It seems we spend all this time learning how to read critically and write knowingly and then must try very hard to forget it, to "find the fun" again, as George Saunders put it. How do you stay in touch with "the fun" while you write?

DJ: For me those early moments of writing without direction—of word vomiting—are always fun. I love the excitement of a barely formed idea, the blank document not yet filled. It's later that I find difficult. Which means that I try and have a couple of thoughts rolling at the same time. This has, at the moment, seemed to mean that I'm working on a novel with some short stories rocking around in the background. So those days where the novel fights you every step of the way, where you despair, there is always something else to turn to.

I also try and have a lot of reminders around my desk that it once—if not at this moment—was fun. There's a little framed sign which my partner made for me which says, "I think this novel is going to be fucking amazing." Which is, inconceivably, something I once said, and which he, sick of my moaning, wrote down and framed.

Reading also helps me. Whenever I'm stuck I pick up a book and, if it's good, after a couple of sentences I'll be back in the zone again.

EM: Almost right away, there's the line "Give a house half a chance and it'll answer back." And from there, without giving away too much, the house becomes increasingly humanoid, filled with desire, longing, jealousy. It reminds me of what a chef friend said about why he always closes his restaurant one day each week: "Or else it fights you." Have you personally experienced houses or other spaces with an anthropomorphic energy?

DJ: I'd lived in perhaps ten houses by the time I was fifteen. Most of them were rentals in the middle of nowhere, and all of them were strange in their own way. One was an old chapel, in another a back door opened out into the forest. A lot of them were strangely shaped. They felt full with everyone who'd ever been in them, as if all of that living had seeped into the walls. I'll never be comfortable in new builds. They have nothing to say yet, they seem passive, silent. I love what your friend says. All the houses I've lived in have their own personalities down to rooms having different feelings to them.

It was in these houses that I first started sleeping badly, having very intense dreams in which I woke to find myself out of bed, rushing around or trying to climb out of windows. When I stayed at a friend's house in Wales I had the worst I'd ever had, slept with the lights on all night. I always remember which dreams I've had where. It feels as if they have somehow come from the houses.

I'm interested, perhaps because of these things, in haunted house stories. For me there is nothing quite as uncanny or terrifying as the place you are living in deciding it's tired of you. I'm looking forward, one day, to writing a horror novel and scaring the socks off everybody.

EM: This story gives me chills every time I read it, so you 100% have to write a horror novel.

DJ: I'm laying the groundwork, and it's already scaring me quite a lot. I have to write by the back door so I have a clear exit strategy. The one I'm working on at the moment isn't horror, but it still has the same—I think—seeping feeling of dread that I've noticed in my writing. Everyone feels awfully, mythically doomed.

EM: You've managed to capture the onset of female adolescence with such fully realized details—like how we, at that age, glob on to certain music and art and let it identify us. In this case, the films of fictitious director January Hargrave, which are central to Salma's and Margot's meeting. What were some of your formative "January Hargrave" experiences?

DJ: That's a great question. One Christmas my parents bought me a box of videos of everything they thought I should watch. Perhaps that's where it started. The exhilaration when you first see *Pulp Fiction*, *Marathon Man*, *Leon*, *The Last of the Mohicans*. The feeling of talking to a friend about them, like a secret that everyone knows. It's like being initiated into something. I was born on Halloween, so quite a few of my formative film experiences also involved lots of girls in a room screaming for my birthday. *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *Carrie*. These pretty much made me the sort of writer I am today.

The first album I bought was Simon and Garfunkel's [*Bridge Over Troubled Water*]. The first book I couldn't believe someone had written was *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* by Peter Høeg. It's true, everything feels momentous at that age.

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EM: What do you think is missing from narratives involving female sexuality—in the media, in art?

DJ: A lot is missing. Sarah Hall was once asked why she only wrote female characters and, paraphrasing, said she would keep doing it until people stopped asking her that. It's true. No one would ever ask why everyone only writes male characters.

Doesn't it get tiring to do the Bechtel test with every film you watch and come up, again and again, short? Women, in films in particular, just don't exist beyond being appendages to men. They are often entirely lacking in personality besides being a relation or partner to a male character. Alternatively they are visual bait. Crime dramas are littered with murdered, vanished women. We don't let our women characters say anything. They are trapped in repetition.

EM: Preach, sister. If I see one more book marketed as "the next *Gone Girl*" or "*Girl on a Train* meets XYZ" . . .

DJ: So true, I'm not sure when it became fashionable to call women "girls" again. No wonder a lot of the protagonists go on killing sprees!

EM: What are you reading or what has your attention lately?

DJ: I've just read Anne Enright's *The Gathering*. I know I'm late to the party but it blew me away. There is something so organic and unlike any other writer about what she is doing with structure and language. I'm stealing all her ideas. I will not apologize.

I'm also reading a new collection of linked short stories, out over here in November, from a British writer Sam Guglani. It's called *Histories*, and it's set in a hospital. It's quiet and intensely drawn, quite wonderful.

EM: How long did it take you to write *FEN*? (Also, what's behind the all-caps of the title?)

DJ: It was maybe a year of writing and then a year of editing with my agent and publisher. I love the all capitals. It's what people write whenever they email me about *FEN* and I've taken it on. It reminds me of the opening of *The Exorcist* with that massive red writing. It's like a warning sign on a road. WATCH OUT.

[clear-line]

Daisy Johnson was born in 1990 and currently lives in Oxford. Her short fiction has appeared in *Boston Review* and the *Warwick Review*, among others. In 2014, she was the recipient of the A. M. Heath Prize. This story is from her collection [FEN](#), available May 2 from Graywolf Press.