

Interview with Carleigh Baker *Author of ‘Bad Endings’* *a short story collective*

Interview by Tamanna T

In ‘Bad Endings’, Baker stories dives into stories that aren’t always tragic, but are often uncomfortable. Throughout this interview we get an inside scoop on Carleigh Baker writing process.

Tamanna: What inspired you to write ‘Bad Endings’ and how did you come up with the stories in the collection?

Carleigh: When I was in my early thirties, I found myself in a bit of a situation—I was recovering from drug abuse and my marriage was essentially apocalyptic. One thing about these situations is obviously there’s a lot of drama but sometimes when [my] back [was] against the wall, that is, when [I had] nothing to lose, I found myself asking, “what would you do if you could do anything?” and writing was the answer to that. So, I had to go back to school. I chose Douglas college, and I honestly didn’t know anything about the writing program but it was just down the street so there was no, “oh I can’t go to class today. I don’t want

to take the bus.” I learnt many things, Wade Compton is the chair now, although he wasn’t at the time, it’s just an amazing department. I felt ancient compared to the students, especially as I was ten years older. I was very aware of my maturity as a student, which made me have this expectation that I knew everything. I was keenly aware that I knew nothing. And when we got into writing, the first thing I noticed is that I wasn’t good at it right away, because no one ever is.

With writing I felt that I am not very good at this, and I’m really excited about the prospect of getting better. [Afterwards] I found this program in the writer’s studio at SFU and that was a really good certificate program that sort of was a bridge because it had been a long time since I’ve been in university.



The Barricade by Daniel Cheung

My life start[ed] to fall apart for me [soon after] that point so the stories [I wrote] made the most sense to me as far as where they came from.

My plan was always to write fiction. And I would be making these decisions not to include those darkest part. Yet, what I also found is that I started to laugh at myself for my own ridiculousness. For the most part these [stories] are anywhere from lightly fictionalized to fairly heavy fictionalized stories about my life, and about mistakes and bad endings. My mom always used to say to me, “you’re bad at endings, you don’t end things when you should, and you’re bad at knowing when something is over.”

T: How did you build up your style of writing short stories from theatre-

writing, which is a big jump, and how did you work on your storylines and what influenced them?

C: I love that you brought up theatre because a big influence that came from my theatre background was dialogue. Plays are entirely dialogue and dialogue is a tough thing to get the hang of in writing. When you’re writing a play, it’s easier to understand when a character says something with subtext. So, if they are dripping with sarcasm, it’s very obvious. It is not obvious with writing, so you must work harder but playwriting assisted with that. Secondly, voice was really important for me, and I wanted to write in my own voice, so I get to be my best self in stories. I don’t rip off with these clever one liners that I have had six months or a year to

assemble. I want to write the way that I speak, with its imperfect grammar, and its dangling modifiers and I wanted that to be a part of the character's voice - just a cleaned-up version. A theatrical sort of style is very challenging to write so it took quite a long time to learn and I'm still refining it.

T: What was the biggest inspiration that made an impact on your work?

C: It was trying to work out times in my life where a relationship has gone wrong and I don't always mean a romantic relationship. Even where friendship had gone wrong or times where I had done something wrong like mistakes or when I faced the unknown. Sometimes if a friend or a loved one breaks up with you, they don't always tell you why. I'm also aware that my truth is not the absolute truth. My main reason for writing is that I wanted to work through that. Writing gave me a chance to work out times when I felt bad, or I felt upset about something and I got to create a scenario that explained it. The second thing is climate change. It was factoring into a part of my early stories and now it's factoring in really heavy, so it's wanting to wrestle with that. I can also say going forward dealing with the anger and frustration at the state of the

world, and again there's dark humour. I personally don't understand what's going on in the world. I've never been so keenly aware of how little I know, and so writing gives me an opportunity to explore it. It is a bit controlling and I think writers like to create worlds because we can. It is a chance to simultaneously escape from life and engage with it and we could all use that right now.

T: The title 'Bad Endings' sets the reader to expect a disastrous ending in the stories, but for most of them that is not the case. Yet they still don't follow the typical linear trajectory of a story line. In other words, the stories don't have a disastrous ending, but they also don't have a happy one. So, what made you write stories in this way and how do you feel about these stories, not that the book is a few years old?

C: Some of the early stories that I wrote did have an unhappy ending. The first time that I wrote a story with the progressive trajectory character, where the character goes backwards. It's a story where the character deals with an addiction problem relapse. So, in that case, it was a bad ending for that character but there's a couple of other reasons why I called it that.

One big one was that when I started writing I remembered reading stories with endings like mine and what I mean by that is that they cut off pretty snippily— like when it's time when I decide that the story is done and it's usually at a point where a character is on the precipice of change. I really like that because that's more what life is like. In my experience, that's more what the last several years have been like. It feels like we're standing on a precipice looking out over where change could happen. And you know something is going to happen, and I really like those moments. I remembered reading those stories when I was a younger reader thinking, "What is the end game?" and being so angry. Now it's funny to me that I am writing these stories and not only writing them, but I felt like this absolutely is the way — this is where the story needs to end. When you're a writer you've always got to be open editorial but there are a few things that I stuck to, and that was deciding when the story ends. It's a bit of a joke in a way because I sort of suspected that some people would read the book and be like, "I hate these endings", and it's the reviewers were very generous and the reviews were positive but that was the thing that came up, that these stories need to be longer. The way I see

it is that if a reader thinks about what happens next, such as 'where does this character end up', that's the end goal.

T: The short stories are set in Vancouver or BC in some of them and many stories have a natural element in them, as well as hinting towards climate change and how is the setting of stories important in your storytelling and you also have magical realism in your stories — how did these themes come to be?

C: Writing in Vancouver was just a given for me since it involved less imagination. I could certainly be a person who wants to write about Chicago in this day and age. This was before Google would produce accurate images of the streets and places, so it was just a no brainer for me that I would write locally. I do admit it was a bit ridiculous that everything is so American focused here. I get why people would want to set a story in Chicago because of the history but I just didn't want to do that. Setting is really important to me; I am a watcher — I watch people and I look around at stuff and as it turns out describing setting a lot was something that was important to me. The nature element part — I love animals, bees, and fish

and perhaps not the kind of animals that people find cute but they're really cute up close. So, when I was in the process of recovery, I didn't go to a detox, I just stopped using and the first thing that I wanted to do is go to work at a honey farm. While I was detoxing, I was connecting with nature in a certain way and seeing these bees and how hard they work and the way that they work together as a whole. I went from being afraid of them early on, to thinking of them as my coworkers after. At a time when I was pretty vulnerable and pretty tender still, these animals had a big impact on me. My next book has more animal elements in it. There's a story where the woman is taking care of the bees and their hives, and we get a glimpse of a camera moving inside the hive and see the honeybee's work.

I think sometimes you reach an inevitable conclusion based on everything you set-up and what I found even more so with my stories this time around is that the world is impossible to understand in so many ways.

T: How did 'Bad Endings' depict variety? and not only characters but also culture, nature and the city so how do themes impact your story according to you and how can it change the story?

C: A lot of those come from the

way that I think, When when I was younger the way it manifested was a very common feeling that a lot of people have, where it feels like you're in a movie all the time and have those 'main character moments', like if I was sitting way off in the back of something there were times where I felt that I was watching other people. Seeing people and trying to figure out what they were doing, or observing a conversation between two people. I wondered if they're going to hook up and that is what makes these stories special for me. Secondly, the themes in my stories sort of build on themselves. I have an idea of what the story is about but I often don't know ahead of time what where the story is going to go. I know what I want to write and then they start to present themselves to me.

Yeah I think that's what this is about I'm working on the story right now that again was I called up in memory but it was a memory that it was else I guess kind of painful like there was too much drama in that memory I'll shall say it lightly rather than and and also it involved a person who I'm not in contact with anymore and I didn't feel comfortable even under the veil of fiction representing a time in that person's life that was obviously very

very dramatic but I thought I could still start the story the way the evening began and turn it into something else and here's talk about demystification of process I started watching Netflix specials about multi level marketing schemes then I just got totally hooked on con man and multi level marketing and Lula Roe and and so I just decided like these characters some few folks have shown up at the apartment of some people they don't know and the main characters not really sure why they've been invited just not sure if this was hitting on her on her partner or what's going on and I thought yes these people that have been invited over because this couple is going to pitch a multi level marketing scheme to them so there was no like flow to this I am totally like inserting jamming another theme into a story that was completely different yeah and there's more revision in that case that means that I'll get to the end and be like yeah this is really working but but that's my choice so I have to revise until it's ready.

T: What made you write Short stories and not a novel for your first book?

C: I absolutely love short stories. They just crackle and they are manageable from a pragmatic perspective. You make

a change in the novel and it just echoes through the entire theme - short stories are always more manageable. I can keep a whole short story in my head but also, I think of them like floating poems. There is of course narrative poetry, but short stories generally function as narrative so there's an opportunity of writing more compacted, because you're dealing with seven to fifteen page short stories that you can dig into the language. With novels there are often unnecessary details that the reader probably doesn't need at times, such as events being explained in great detail and length. Now having worked on a novel, which will eventually be done, it feels out of control sometimes. The novel, it's so big and it feels like I'll never get it the way exactly that I want it whereas with the story I do there's a lot more control. There's that word again — control, but you can just really dig into the story when it's shorter. [Short stories] don't sell as much, you don't make as much money for a short story collection as you do as a novel from the business end of things and that I completely understand why people want to immerse themselves in a lengthy novel. But some people want to immerse themselves into something for 15 minutes and then pull out of that world and enter a new world.

I understand that so for me, I love reading them and I love writing them. They are the most exciting genre for such readers.

T: The theme for this year's issue is 'found in translation' which could be any sort of translation of the soul translation, of the body translation, of literal like language - it is a world literature magazine. How do you tackle language and its interpretations, as well as how has translation affected your writing?

C: Language for me works around communication or the translation of how bad endings came from within. I want to write the way that I speak.

I want to write in my most honest voice but also like, I said, keeping my best self. I think a lot of what I don't understand comes out in my writing, so you could look at it in waves— like translating my confusion about things I don't understand about people, social interactions or relationships, and the world onto the pages. This means that while things that would normally sort of create frustration, honestly, create the same frustration anger in me, yet there's an opportunity to use language to work that out on the page. I remember once a

student saying I want to write this story about a South Asian woman and asking whether they need to put a bunch of South Asian food in it so that people know it's a South Asian story and I said well if it's a story and you're writing it.

T: what comes next for you and is there a novel in the future?

C: When the stories are done, yes. At this time I've been working on a novel, which is taking seven years to write! I remember thinking I'll never take that long to write a book again and I seriously think that the novel is going to clock in at about seven years but I'm jamming in a short story collection in between there as well. It's coming together. I've been working on it for a long time, and I've been very intimidated by the process. It's funny, being a creative writing teacher, because you say things all the time, like with short stories— it doesn't need to do everything. Keep the scope narrow. Yes, novels are bigger but I think I fell into the very common first novelists trap of this book. I was going to do everything possible in this novel. I was going to save the world! It was going to fix racism, it was going to solve climate change.

I was going to go deep into my identity

in the novel. It was called the matriarchs before it was called mud lockers because I also wanted to confront my relationship with my mom. How does one person not try to do all of that in a book?

I've been told, "Your first novel probably won't work very well", so I had to take myself down from the high horse of my novel that was going to save the world and my fear that if there wasn't so much going on that I wouldn't be able to fill that number of readers. That took a while to digest, I really was not prepared to let that go and so there's that.

Now, I'll just focus on answering this question, that the novel is based on a true story and it was actually going to be a memoir first which is about a canoe trip through the Yukon and northwest territories. A lot happens but there are 10 or I guess nine other people on that trip. I think there were twelve of us in total on the trip — real people, real lives, real things happened.

There were mental health issues, there were personal issues, there were breakdowns. I felt different about everything as a more emergent writer as I was a little bit younger. It's really hard,

if not impossible, to be in someone else's body and write from their perspective, see the world through their eyes and do it justice. I wanted to add another theme on an already full boat! I mean my friends and my partner Shaun asked me over and over again to step away from what actually happened and just write a story, so that's what's happening now. There are 60,000 words sitting in the draft. I've wanted to throw it in the trash a million times, as every writer does, but it needs to be revised and revised. I have time to put it together to make it look as understandable and as clear as possible and then my editor is going to take a look at it and then we're going to discuss the process after that, so that editors have different functions — some are willing to guide you through the process. While others or like go through chapter one rewrite it. We got to learn how we work, we got to know each other in general, and to also trust each other. It's hard to step outside your comfort zone, but it is essential to do so at times, and this is one of those times for me. My comfort zone will come back though, in the form of a honey farm story I really want to write, which will happen sooner or later. So that is what comes next for me!