

# an interview with kathy stinson

*What inspired you to write these stories?*

Teaching writing, I often suggested to students that they mine their own experiences for story ideas. One day I realized I wasn't doing this myself, so I began remembering incidents from my own teen years and started to use them to create fiction.

As I always do, I also watched other people and listened to their stories. The story "All You Need Is a Song," for example, began when a relative, a high school teacher, told me that a couple of teens with Down Syndrome at her school were forbidden to hold hands. I imagined the great sense of injustice they would feel, not being allowed to express their affection for each other in any way when other couples were allowed to, and I explored that through my writing.

The story "101 Ways to Dance" began as a writing exercise that I was going to give a class one night. But I started playing around with it myself first, saw its potential to become a story, and decided not to give it to them. I would have hated

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to have someone write something similar to what I'd already done, and think later that I'd taken something from them.

*You read a lot. What does reading do for you?*

Reading matters most to me when I either get to see myself and my own realities reflected back to me or when a story takes me into someone else's reality and I get to live it for a while. That's what I hope I'm giving to readers through my writing — in any of my writing. In a book like this one, with its range of characters, I hope all kinds of people in the spectrum of queer and straight will see themselves reflected in some of the stories and feel validated, and that in other stories they will be taken into someone else's experiences in entertaining and enlightening ways.

Reading has shown me that although people may be different from one another in a lot of different ways (sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religious beliefs), our differences are superficial compared to what makes us similar — the core of our humanity that makes us need both to love and be loved.

*Why write a book about sex — or sexual anticipation?*

It wasn't my intention, but after I'd written a number of stories, I noticed that many of them had a similar theme. This was probably because when I started thinking about being a teenager, a lot of what I remembered had to do with being horny. I think sexual anticipation can be both a delicious and a troubling thing, so I thought, why not use it as the basis for a collection?

## 101 ways to dance

There may be adults who will prefer their kids not read the collection, who might say their kids aren't "ready" for such stories. But I think it's usually adults who aren't ready to accept that their kids are curious about sex, and about other people's experience of it, even if they aren't yet sexually active themselves. I think most teens (if not all) are sexually curious to some degree, and that those with access to stories about different experiences appreciate the safe context of a book in which to explore that curiosity. If they have an open and comfortable relationship with an adult, then the door will be open to talk about what they've read, if they feel the need.

*Did you have access to such books when you were growing up?*

Not much. But there was reading that I let my mom know I was doing, and there was — occasionally — reading I felt I'd best hide behind my history book. One book being passed around in high school was rather like the one in "Micheline and Renée." Called *Thérèse and Isabelle* (or something like that), it too was about lesbians. We didn't know any lesbians — at least we didn't *think* we did, but no one would have felt comfortable admitting it, so how would we have known? We found the book quite tantalizing anyway. I hope this collection has something of that tantalizing feeling. Maybe it will even be the kind of book kids will want to pass around, and perhaps (if they have to) hide behind their history books.

*How do you capture the feeling of being a teen when you haven't been one for a long time?*

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My experiences then were so intensely sensual that they laid down very solid tracks in my brain. I can remember entire conversations I had with a guy I was crazy about when I was fifteen, for example. I remember exactly where we were the first time he kissed me, what he smelled like, and I remember what it was like to touch my girlfriend.

I think there were a lot of times when I felt that the target of my longings was inappropriate in some way, which may be why some of the characters in this collection feel this way. (I shouldn't feel this way about my cousin. My teacher?!) But I think wanting someone we (perhaps) shouldn't, or who doesn't feel the same way we do, is just part of growing up — part of being human, really. And if we're lucky, we eventually long to be with someone, for all kinds of reasons, who shares those same feelings. ★