

read on for some

special features

on **kathy stinson** and *101 ways to dance*

about kathy stinson

After graduating from school, Kathy Stinson waited tables, taught school, and often thought “Maybe someday I will write.” Growing up in Toronto, Kathy had read books by authors such as Beverly Cleary, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Eleanor Estes, and Arthur Ransome. Of those years she says, “All the books I was reading were turning me into a writer.” But it wasn’t until she was almost thirty years old that Kathy began writing. As she says, “Writing crept up on me.”

In 1981, inspired by her toddler, she wrote *Red is Best*, a picture book that won the Toronto Chapter IODE Award, received many great reviews, and became a Canadian kidlit classic.

Kathy has served as Writer-in-Residence with four library systems and has worked online with student writers through the Writers in Electronic Residence program. In 1987, she participated in the Canadian-British exchange of children’s writers organized by the Canadian Children’s Book Centre.

about kathy stinson

To date, Stinson has written over twenty books, published in Canada and abroad. These include several acclaimed novels for young adults, such as *One Year Commencing*, nominated for British Columbia's Red Cedar Award, and *Becoming Ruby*, nominated for Ontario Library Association and Canadian Library Association Awards. She has also written picture books, fiction, and non-fiction.

Her children grown, Kathy lives with her husband, Peter Carver, and their puppy, Keisha, near Guelph, Ontario, where she continues to write.

You can visit Kathy Stinson online at www.kathystinson.com. For more information about the Writers in Electronic Residence program, visit www.wier.ca.

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

about kathy stinson

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?

about kathy stinson

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. ★

discussion questions

general

1. Kathy Stinson believes that there are many ways for human beings to be different from each other — through gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities — but that what makes human beings alike is more profoundly important than any of these differences. Do you agree or disagree? Can you articulate why?
2. Why do you think some people are attracted to the opposite sex, some to the same sex, and some to both? Do you live in a community where a person would feel comfortable being open about her or his sexual orientation?
3. Kathy Stinson recalls her teen years as being an acutely sensual time. Can you find evidence of this in the sensual imagery in these stories (i.e., images evoking any of the five senses)?

discussion questions

talking to brooksville

The characters in this story are very excited about their plans, but keep them secret. How much do you censor your thoughts around other people? Does this happen in particular when it comes to sex? Why or why not?

between mars and venus

Were you rooting for Susan and Melina to get together? At what point(s) in the story might one of the girls have said or done something that would have changed its outcome?

chicken

Nothing actually “happens” in this story, and yet some people think it’s one of the most erotic stories they’ve read. How do you account for this?

everybody loves a clown

If you expected to die within the next year, what would you want to experience?

waiting for brian

Do you think Jenn was right to do what she did for Aimee? What do you think might have happened to Jenn and Aimee afterwards?

on flagpole hill

Have you, like Sarah, ever felt attracted to someone that other people considered inappropriate? How did you handle it?

101 ways to dance

diving

Do you feel your name fits who you are? If so, why? If not, what name would you choose for yourself? Why?

micheline and renée

Why do you think some adults try to keep young people from reading certain books (perhaps even this one)? Visit www.freedomtoread.ca or www.ala.org/ala/ourassociation/other-groups/ftrf/freedomtoreadfoundation.htm to find out more about books that teens have been banned from reading.

nika

In the space of just a few minutes, Nika feels her love for Brett turn to hate. Has this — or the reverse — ever happened to you? What do you think triggers these changes, both in this story and in your own experiences?

ferris wheel

Do you think it's possible to be "just friends" with someone you're sexually attracted to, male or female, whatever your sexual orientation?

getting lucky

Mark has a lot of hope about his relationship with Amy; a hope that he finds in the end is founded on very shaky ground. If you were Mark's best friend, what advice would you offer him? Similarly, what if you were Amy's best friend? What would you suggest she do next?

discussion questions

101 ways to dance

This story grew out of a writing exercise. Just for fun, do one of Miss Wortley's writing assignments. Who knows, you might just get a story you like out of it, too.

itchy

How do you hope to be like — and unlike — either or both of your parents?

all you need is a song

Many people would not consider Leslie and Simon "intelligent" in the way the word is usually used. Are there not, however, some ways in which they seem more intelligent than the (supposedly) more intelligent adults in the story? How do you account for this?

acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Ontario Arts Council and Second Story Press for support through the Writers' Reserve program.

"Diving" — originally part of a long short story which grew into a novel — has been previously published as the opening scene of *Becoming Ruby*, Penguin Books Canada 2003.

The medley of show tunes in "All You Need Is A Song" was the 1983 creation of Jerry Chadwick, teacher for the Scarborough Board of Education in Ontario. He revised it for the 1992 production (in which my daughter played the roles of Glinda, Good Witch of the North, and the social worker in the "Officer Krupke" number). Jerry, inching towards retirement, is currently principal at Highcastle Public School.

A number of people offered feedback and encouragement on various parts of this collection and I gratefully acknowledge their contributions: Peter Carver, Kelly Stinson, Anne Carter, Lena Coakley, Hadley Dyer, Sarah Ellis, Ann Goldring, Camilla Gryski, Jo-Ann Jacques, Wendy Lewis, Erin Noteboom, Teresa Toten, Paula Wing, Jenna Charlton, Kelley England, Bill McAskill, June Orrell, Justin Anisman, Laura Cordero, Maria Garber, Andy Gherga, Lauren Herzog, Liat Iankelevik, Elena Krasteva, Anjali Lobo, Renee Monteith-Blair, Giulio Pontello, Carolyn Jackson, Jessica Westhead, Margie Wolfe, and Carolyn Wood. Thanks to all. ★