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"Flavours of meaning" : an interview with Tamas Dobozy

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“Flavours of Meaning”

An interview with Tamas Dobozy

“Les saveur de sens”

Entretien avec Tamas Dobozy

Interviewed by / Entrevinté par Jason Blake

JB Your book *5 Mishaps* is gorgeous, curious and hard to get. Can you tell me a little about the background to this illustrated volume?

TD A friend mentioned to me the curator of School Gallery, Michael Hall, who was seeking contributors for a series of limited-edition art books pairing an author and illustrator, and I made a pitch. Allan Kausch, the illustrator for the volume, created the cover image of my book *Siege 13*, and I wanted to do something more with him because his work is so original and spectacular. So I sent him some of these short squibs I've been writing – really off the cuff work that gives me a break from the more architectural headaches of the longer stories – and he paired them with images he'd created, and we sent them off to Michael. Yeah, the books are hard to get, but I think that might be Michael's point, I guess, given they're not really conventional books but rather art objects. Or that's how I think about them, anyhow.

JB Each of your collections to date has a superb cover. *When X Equals Marylou* looks like an accident waiting to happen, yet it's somehow fun; *Last Notes* has echoes of Magritte; *Siege 13* is visually impressive. Do you have much say in the matter?

TD Well, don't forget *Ghost Geographies*, which has an amazing cover also (though I wish it wasn't on that cardstock paper, which wears out so quickly – not that it matters, I guess, because we'll all be dead and forgotten soon enough anyhow). I've loved all the covers on my short stories. Publishers almost always get it right, which is maybe why all their contracts refuse to let authors have final say on what the design will be (there's always some clause in there about us “being consulted,” which means they'll show you two or three variants, take some feedback, and then use the one they want). One of the things Phyllis Bruce said to me when she accepted *Last Notes*



for HarperCollins was, "Authors always have some image or design they want for the cover, usually a photograph taken by a friend, and they're always wrong." I loved that "always wrong." So theological!

JB Moving from covers to content... slipping non-English words into an English-language story can't be easy. A writer can sound pretentious if they opt for, say, a French or Italian word that has a perfectly fine English equivalent; the reader can sniff out when they're bluffing (especially if a word is misspelled or an accent is dropped); the writer can sound like they're out for easy exoticism or ten-cent local colour; they can clog up the narrative by spending another sentence explaining the term, and so on.

And yet... many of your stories include delightful dashes of German (I love the line in "Ray Electric" [from *Ghost Geographies*] about "the monotony of *Grüß Gott* from smiling mouths, the undifferentiated plenitude of markets, stores, street vendors") and, of course, plenty of Hungarian – from foods to localities to insults. How do you decide when to reach for the *pálinka*?

TD The only thing worse than being pretentious is being boring, so, you know, if you have to choose... I wish I had a more programmatic answer for you, but I tend to work with intuition here. There's a spiciness to Hungarian or German or French or whatever put in just at the right moment, with just the right meaning, and you have to know when it will have that effect without making it sound as if you're showing off or being cute (being cute is maybe even worse than being boring, now that I think about it). I do sometimes get the spelling wrong, which sucks, and embarrasses me, though it's a human emotion, so I guess that's appropriate. I never explain anything, never translate, never offer a footnote – it's a huge trap to fall into! – given that everyone now has access to Google translate, and can stand to do a bit of work, as the Naturalists insisted that readers do, or just ignore it. I don't use these languages for "local colour" but because I know what these words mean, and they mean something quite different (or they have a different flavour of meaning, more accurately) from what I might be able to put down in English, so that's why I use them; there's always an honest intention to convey something in using these words, not just offer up a bit of decoration, and the same is true of characters' names, actually. I think if I were forced to be programmatic here, I'd say: Write in good faith. Hard to go wrong if you approach it that way.

JB Superb comment about the dangers of being "cute." That makes me wonder about how you deal with a single line or phrase so lively it could stand as a billboard. With some writers you feel like the storyline is a slack container for a series of one-liners – that is, whether by design or bad luck, a swell phrase's cuteness wipes out the surrounding words.



TD Well, there's the whole "kill all your darlings" cliché, which, like most clichés, is a kind of stillborn truth. For me, a line of prose, as much as I love it, has to function, it can't just be showing off. Rob Allan, a fiction prof. I had, said in a workshop long ago, "The problem with a tour de force is that often that's all it is." It took me a long time to understand what he meant, but I get it now: work whose sole purpose seems to be show off a writer's prowess – Look at me! Look what I can do! Don't you wish you were as good as I am? – drawing attention to their ability at the expense of leaving nothing for the reader other than a vague feeling of, Uh, remind me, why am I reading this again? Like most writers I frequently fall into the trap of writing something I think is way cool, and I know it's not good to leave it in there, but I can't let go of it in the heat of my narcissistic episode. So what I do is just walk away from the piece for a week or three. By the time I come back, I don't care about it anymore, I look at it and think, "Meh, it sticks out; it doesn't belong," and then pare it down to what's needed or cut it altogether. That being said, you also don't want stuff in there that's functional but ugly, so you sometimes have to go around the other way, and say, "Okay, yeah, that's what I mean, but, shit, that is just terrible writing." Back and forth, back and forth, if it's not one problem – a pathological failing, a subpar workday – then it's another, in endless tedium.

JB You know, you've made me finally understand why "good stylist" can be a job rather than a compliment. As a lead-in to the next question, let me quote from the "Acknowledgements" to *Ghost Geographies*: "Many of these stories appeared in earlier versions in literary journals. I can't say enough about how important these places are for keeping me writing and in touch with what's current in the world of literary publishing. Their editors, especially those who've published multiple stories, have my eternal gratitude." Two mini-questions here: Did you revise much between the journal versions and the book version? (Oh, and "Palais Royale" appeared in *Best Canadian Stories 2023*, after appearing in *The Fiddlehead*. Do the editors give you a chance to revise?) Also, do you have many stories that have appeared in journals but not made the cut for a collection?

TD Long question, long answer. Style is important, but it needs to be allied to generosity toward the readers (and that doesn't mean pandering, only that there has to be a payoff for them at the end of all that reading). As to the issue of literary journals, they've always been what's kept me alive in this business, and in their sum much more satisfying to me than putting out books. I've not had a healthy experience with book publishers or book editors or publicists or agents, starting from my very first book, which was accepted and rejected by the same publisher three times – you can imagine what that does to the psyche of a young writer! – and from there on in it seemed like a repeat of that pattern, a lot of uncertainty and dishonesty/manipulation and ego, some experiences being worse than others, of course. But it's never ever been up front (apart from the rejections – haw-haw! – those are very clear, and in some way I appreciate that: at least



you know for sure where you stand). Publishing in journals, by contrast, has never been anything but transparent: they like the work, they want it to appear, and that's that, no issues. So I'm really grateful. For a minor writer like me (*Siege 13* was very much an anomaly, fortune's wheel somehow spinning me for a second to the top), having that support is pretty critical. I will note, however, that there used to be a lot more editing in journals twenty, thirty years ago, where stories would get pretty heavily processed (and in my experience always improved) before being published, whereas now they pretty much take the story (or not) as is and print it, which makes me think there's now so much material out there they don't have to buy the jalopy that needs repairs, which I guess is good for the people putting together the journals, but probably a disaster for the culture in terms of producing the next generation of talented editors (and the really best ones, I think, are artists in equal measure to writers, even if they don't get the same glory), who will miss out on that hands-on apprenticeship. If it hadn't been for Pei-Ling Lue at One Story, who forced me to break down and completely overhaul "The Restoration of the Villa Where Tibor Kalman Once Lived," I would never have won an O. Henry Prize, so this talent, recognizing the potential in a story, and helping a writer work to get it there, is so important! We need to cultivate it.

In terms of revisions between journal and book, I would say it depends on the story. Some stories are revised quite a bit, others not so much. There's never been a rule there. I do have a lot of stories that have appeared in journals that don't make it into a collection (I think I've published ninety-five so far, and I want to hit one hundred before I kick it or quit). Collections have a certain gravity to them that draws in certain kinds of material, and I wish, again, I had a more definite formula for you, but it's very intuitive how they come together, this piece with that, those two with this third one, and so on, and some stories just never really fit with the vibe of a book, though I think as individual pieces they might be just as good as the ones that make it.

JB I don't think I've ever heard someone praise editors as a species and sound like they actually mean it! I hope you'll let me shift gears and move to names. Your works are peppered with classic, accent-rich names, often from Hungarian and Hungarian history; some characters switch names (e.g., Esterházy in "Ghost Geographies"); some play with their own names – such as the musical Chip Chip Duo in "Palais Royale" or the guy who speaks of "Mow-zert" and "Batch" and "Bee-thoven..." Come to think of it, your own name appears in Mark Anthony Jarman's *Salvage King, Ya!* You're Dobozy the goalie or something like that... In any case, rumour has it your next book has a character called Todd D'Cunto. Where did that come from?

TD Yes, I'm Dobozy the sieve, a goalie of remarkable ineptitude in *Salvage King*. Even back then, Mark had me all figured out. I worked a summer for him transcribing that novel, and I guess I let too many mistakes through, and that's how I was rewarded.



D'Unto, believe it or not, is a real name. "Dacunto Name Meaning. Italian: patronymic from the personal name Acunto from Greek Akontēs borne by a minor Greek mythological figure, an Arcadian prince Acontes. Similar surnames: D'acunto, Jacinto, Facundo, Daunt, Gaunt, Taunton, Dacko, Cueto." That's from ancestry.com. There's also "de Cunto," for which forebears.io tells us, "The meaning of this surname is not listed." Not listed! There's also straight up "Cunto," which houseofnames.com tells us, "derives from the word 'conte,' which is itself derived from the Latin comes 'comitis,' which literally means companion and was then defined as a servant in the retinue of a king or emperor." There's also an actor, Enzo De Cunto, and I don't think I've ever wanted anyone to win an Oscar as much as him. Anyhow, for various reasons pertinent to that story I needed a last name starting with D, and came across that during my research. Sometimes reality gives you such bountiful gifts!

JB Is being bilingual helpful to you as a writer? (Though, come to think of it, you probably can't tell what it means not to be bilingual.)

TD Yes. I guess that's an obvious one. I wish I spoke more languages. There was an old saying in Hungarian my Uncle Bandi used to repeat when I was a kid. I can't remember the Hungarian version, but in English it went something like: "You are as many people as the languages you speak." I tend to agree. Thought is structured by language; thought might in fact be nothing more than language for the most part – I mean conscious thought here. The grammar of Hungarian presents me with another reality than English, and vice-versa. And we're not even talking about the words yet, which are also another world, not just in meaning and flavour, but even in sound. Sound is a worldview! Now, would I have learned English or Hungarian more fully if I'd never had another language interfering with it? Maybe. Maybe not. As you say, it's impossible to know that. But having a second language is such a huge resource as a writer.

TAMAS DOBOZY / is a professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. He has published four books of short fiction, *When X Equals Marylou*, *Last Notes and Other Stories*, *Siege 13: Stories*, and *Ghost Geographies: Fictions*, along with a limited-run collaborative work with artist Allan Kausch, *5 Mishaps*. *Siege 13* won the 2012 Rogers Writers Trust of Canada Fiction Prize, and was shortlisted for both the Governor General's Award and the 2013 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Dobozy has published over ninety short stories in journals such as *One Story*, *Fiction*, *Agni*, and *Granta*; won an O Henry Prize in 2011, the Gold Medal for Fiction at the National Magazine Awards in 2014, with a shortlisting and honourable mention again in 2022; and appeared in *The Best Canadian Short Stories* in 2017 and 2023. He has two forthcoming books, *Stasio* (Anvil Press), a novel, and *Ministry of Loss* (Quarter Press), an artistic collaboration with photographer Karl Griffiths-Fulton.