



Drastic

By Maud Casey
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Introduction

In this sparkling, daring collection of stories, Maud Casey explores how we survive modern crises of love and loss through the lives of emotional and geographic nomads. Some teeter on the brink of sanity and a netherworld of delirium, some grappling with a grief so tempestuous it threatens to paralyze them. Others simply want a sign that they have left their mark somewhere, on someone, and that someone is better for it.

Each character flirts with madness and self-destruction while compulsively, gently, or haphazardly reaching toward life. It's this optimism that makes *Drastic* a mesmerizing read. Revealing universal truths about longing, escape, rage, and belonging, *Drastic* reacquaints us with a writer driving herself and her stories to their often painful but always absorbing and poetic limits.

Discussion Questions

1. These stories are filled with odd characters -- misfits: Lucy in "Trespassing" who plays unappreciated practical jokes on her coworker and tells the same unfunny joke again and again; the residents in the women's shelter in "Rules to Live," as some contemplate returning to their husbands and boyfriends for more abuse; Flora in "Relief" and her ill-fated dealings with her neighbors; even young Irene in the opening story "Seaworthy." Are these characters reminiscent of people in real life? What aspects of the characters throughout *Drastic* remind you of yourself? Is everyone a "misfit" but we just don't show it?
2. Many of the characters are trapped, not by circumstance but by the ways in which their minds work: Josephine's oncoming birthday and fear of following her mother's descent in "Drastic," in "Aspects of Motherhood," Tanya's reluctance for a baby, Flora's inability to take action in "Relief," and Rita's talk show ruse in "Talk Show Lady." Do these characters escape their self-imposed prisons? Can we change the way in which our minds perceive our lives?
3. In "Trespassing," Lucy is waiting for some event in life to happen to her: looking for her interior world to be shook. Do most people need something to happen to them to make changes? Do you believe an earthquake would truly reveal anything to Lucy or transform her life or would she continue to dream about something happening?
4. In "Indulgence," two old friends -- the narrator and Clarissa -- are at a beauty salon getting highlights in their hair. Clarissa has always been the wild one, moving away from their small town and dating extensively, but with no long-term commitments, except to her friend, the narrator, who seems content to wait for Clarissa to show up. Now, however, Clarissa has a lump in her breast. How does this knowledge change their time together? Or does it? How will they handle Clarissa's illness as it progresses? Why do you think this story is called "Indulgence?" Does this seem ironic in the face of Clarissa's cancer?
5. "Relief," 39-year-old Flora is in love with her 18-year-old landlord Rock, who she fantasizes will understand when she asks, "How old were you when you realized that life didn't necessarily get better?" Her love manifests itself in complaints, juvenile-like, like a girl who hits the boy she likes. When they talk, they talk at each other, not quite connecting, but communicating obliquely -- they are the sort of people who don't "need another person to carry on a conversation she imagines." When Flora dumps the flower bulbs and dirt through the hole in her floor through to Rock's kitchen, is she telling him she loves him or that she's over him? Does this mean she will begin to "achieve" something in her life because she has finally taken action?
6. In "Talk Show Lady," "Misery has turned out to be a fairly profitable business," discloses Rita. She has played a woman who slept with her son, a woman raised by wolves, and numerous other unsavory roles on the local talk show as a way of reliving her grief and keeping her dead mother alive. "I am grief personified in a mask turned inside out a million times. I'm a reminder to us all." Does Rita succeed in keeping her mother alive? How does her evoking grief and superiority ("At least I wasn't raised by wolves...") in the audience connect her to the world? Is she more connected to the world than before her mother died? Do you know of any talk show "scams" where guests are actors, not people with genuine problems to share? Why are people fascinated with other people's hardship? Do talk shows help people?
7. Why was the title of the short story "Drastic" chosen as the title for the collection of stories? Are there particular elements that are more prominent in this story but that typify the rest? "Then slowly, reluctantly, the outline of the world emerged from the black." Do you find the ending of this story hopeful?
8. In "Aspects of Motherhood," Tanya the narrator is resistant to getting pregnant. She miscarried several years ago and she has just found out that her husband donated his sperm so his ex-girlfriend and her husband could have a child. In the meantime, many of Tanya's friends are getting pregnant and having children. Discuss why Tanya's miscarriage and husband's secret donation might keep her from wanting children. Is there peer pressure to have children even now in the 21st century? While on the job, Tanya thinks, "I realized, not for the first time, that there are countless details in my day that I don't tell Willie." From this passage and others throughout *Drastic*, do you think the author believes it is possible for two people to truly "know" each other? Is it necessary?
9. In "The Arrangement of the Night Office in Summer," Harriet's sister, Lanie, has just been stood up at the altar and the family has stayed to comfort her. Throughout the story, characters exclaim "Jesus Christ." Their aunt's name is Bernadette, the name of a saint. Harriet, who studies the history of monks, "baptizes" herself in the neighbor's fountain. At the end, Lanie lifts her arms like "wings" and her foot making contact with the earth "is how we will survive." Discuss how religious imagery affects the tone of the story. Is Lanie this family's Jesus? Is this a story of rebirth for Lanie or Harriet? Does "The Arrangement..." remind you of specific

stories from the Bible? What do you think of Harriet's relationship with the professor Elliot?

About the Author:

Maud Casey's stories have been published in *The Threepenny Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *The Georgia Review*, *Confrontation*, *Shenandoah*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She received a Pushcart Prize Special Mention. Her debut novel *The Shape of Things to Come* was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. Casey received her B.A. from Wesleyan University and her M.F.A. in fiction from the University of Arizona. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.