

And you know it don't come easy

Gartner
talks about
the writing life

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CALGARY HERALD

Zsuzsi Gartner's most recent collection of stories, *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives*, is shortlisted for the 2011 Scotiabank Giller Prize. She's worked as an editor or writer for *The Georgia Strait*, the *Globe & Mail*, *Saturday Night* and other magazines. The former Calgarian now lives in Vancouver.

Question: Where do you write?

Answer: The stories in this book were written in the basement office of my house; the window faces the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. I have a bright, new office now, in the garage facing the garden, but this book was written down there in the semi-gloom.

Q: What do you write on?

A: I do compose on the computer, on a PC and print everything out that I write in a day, and that night or the next morning go through and savagely annotate it with a black rollerball, writing in the changes. So there's something I start with every day — there's (always) some longhand (writing) going on.

Q: Where did this book come from?

A: Because it's not a novel, each story comes from a specific impetus. But generally speaking, all my writing comes from a place of fear and incredulity about life as we know it.

Q: Where did the title come from?

A: The title is the title of the last story — it (that story) took eight years to finish. It's about a recovering terrorist. I started on it a few months before 9/11, then 9/11 happened and I thought, you can't do satire about terrorism, so I put it away, and finally pulled it out again a few years ago. I couldn't come up with the perfect title for a long time.



Zsuzsi Gartner takes part in *Keepin' It Short* on Saturday at Vertigo, and *The Satirists* at the Banff Centre this Sunday in *WordFest*. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and wordfest.com.

It's obviously a play on *Better Living Through Chemistry* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and ultimately, it works for the book as a whole because it says satire and it says explosives and it signals that there's some play going on, and ... I love long titles.

Q: What do you like most about it (the book)?

A: I like that I did the things I wanted to do without questioning whether it was too weird.

Q: Would you change anything?

A: I'd change the price — of my last book. This one's still fresh. Nothing yet.

Q: What was the hardest part about writing it?

A: Writing is so damn hard for me. I'll quote a former screenwriting instructor who was quoting someone else, so I have no idea who to credit for this: writing is like pulling a rusty chain through one ear and out the other. The hardest thing was just getting to the writing. Not meeting my own expectations was my biggest fear. This one took almost 11 years. I do find sitting down and getting at it to be a torturous process ... when you finish something (a story or a manuscript), you're always starting again. It doesn't become easier. And sometimes, someone's first book or movie is their best. You question yourself more: is this (idea) worth three months, or six months, or two years of my time?

Q: What are you reading now?

A: I just finished a really cool book published by Insomniac Press. It's *The Evolution of Inanimate Objects* by Harry Karlin-sky. It's a fictional biography of Darwin's youngest son Thomas, an invented person. I just started Don DeLillo's *Libra*, and Charles Foran's *Mordecai Richler* biography. I also recently read Calgary author Suzette Mayr's *Monoceros*. It's fantastic. I'm telling bookstores here they have to stock it.

Q: How do you read, books or e-reader?

A: No e-reader. Not now or ever. I read so much online (anyways), I can't imagine ever reading fiction on a screen for pleasure. I'm finding the whole e-book thing demoralizing. Luckily my book (*Better Living Through Plastic Explosives*) is like a fetish object. It makes the case for having a book as a beautiful object, as well as a thing to read. I get e-mails from strangers saying they love holding it and looking at it.

Q: Three desert island books?

A: King James Version of the Bible — for a bunch of reasons. Something like a big fat collected stories of Mavis Gallant or John Cheever. And three books as one: Philip Pullmans' *His Dark Materials* trilogy: *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass*.

Q: Do you stick books out to the end or quit?

A: I don't stick things out to the bitter end. I usually give a book about 30 pages. Life's too short for reading with a horsehair shirt on.

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Brett Gundlock, Postmedia News

Zsuzsi Gartner says, "Writing is so damn hard for me."

Swank regrets birthday party blunder

CELEBRITY • Hilary Swank said she "deeply regrets" attending a birthday party last week in Chechnya for Ramzan Kadyrov, who has been accused of orchestrating torture and other human rights violations.



Hilary Swank

"I deeply regret attending this event, which has thrown into question my long and deeply-held commitment to the protection of human rights," Swank said in a statement.

— Reuters