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Unlucky Lucky Days

By Vince Darcangelo, Special to the Rocky
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* **Fiction.** By *Daniel Grandbois*. BOA Editions, \$14. **Grade: B**

Plot in a nutshell: As the bassist for Tarantella and Slim Cessna's Auto Club, two of Denver's most original and idiosyncratic bands, Grandbois has had a hand in creating a sonic landscape at once primal and absurdist - sparse, yet hinting at something deeper lying beneath the dusty surface.

Turning his talent to fiction, Grandbois' prose is similar to his musical leanings, as evidenced in his new book.

A collection of 73 works of flash fiction (the average story length is one page, with a few measuring in at a paragraph or two), *Unlucky Lucky Days* reads like a collection of parables or, at its finer moments, Zen koans.

Grandbois' stories typically feature inanimate objects or anthropomorphized animals as protagonists, be it an upturned chair, half covered with snow, trying not to draw attention to itself, or a termite in the throes of an existential crisis.

Sample of prose: "The drapery didn't mind that its two halves might as well have been sewed together. Even so, thoughts of what it was hiding haunted the twelve-foot panels of blue velvet. The window couldn't offer any help. It could see out, but it couldn't see in. Some days, it wished it were a mirror, not knowing that while it slept that's exactly what it was."

Pros: The better stories here - *Toothpaste*, *The Last Supper* and *Humpert* - are darkly comic in nature and could be the unfinished works of Edward Gorey. (And yes, these shorties would lend themselves well to illustrations, especially in the hands of an artist with a knack for gallows humor.)

Cons: The abstract nature of the stories can be entertaining, but at times the deeper meaning of each piece - if there is one - is indiscernible. They need more narrative grounding to keep the reader engaged.

Final word: At its best, *Unlucky Lucky Days* is like a peyote trip in the desert - things seem familiar, but different. If you really immerse yourself in these stories, you might find yourself questioning whether Grandbois' cracked perception just might be right.

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Grandbois has ear for music - and words

By Vince Darcangelo, Special to the Rocky
Published July 3, 2008 at 6 p.m.

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Photo by Grandbois Family

Daniel Grandbois

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Audiophiles may recognize Daniel Grandbois as the bassist of some of Denver's most interesting bands, such as Tarantella and Slim Cessna's Auto Club, groups that run the gamut from gypsy to gospel to Gothic Americana. It's no surprise, then, that when he trades his four-string for a pad and paper, Grandbois takes a musical approach to fiction - with an equally sharp grasp of the absurd.

The result is a melodic brand of flash fiction - two- to three-paragraph stories that could be called prose poems - that blends the rhythm and meter of music with the narrative thrust of fiction. The quirkiness of his music carries onto the page as well, for in Grandbois' surreal world a chair or a termite is as likely a protagonist as a person.

Grandbois' stories have been collected in a new book, *Unlucky Lucky Days* (BOA Editions), which came out in June and has been designated a "notable" book by the American Booksellers Association. His next book, a novella, *The Hermaphrodite: An Hallucinated Memoir*, is due out in September.

In advance of his book-signing next week, Grandbois sat down with the *Rocky* to talk about - what else? - words and music.

How has your musical background informed your writing?

I approach writing through my ear. Stories are often begun because of the sound of a certain group of words, and revisions can consist solely of making lines sound better, which doesn't always mean more beautiful. The human organism responds inexplicably to music, to particular combinations of sonic frequencies held for varying durations and punctuated by silences; I believe it responds in similarly meaningful yet

ultimately incomprehensible ways to the absurd, twisted language of these little stories, which are sometimes hard to "get" intellectually but nevertheless find their marks.

Do you find a relationship between the music business and the fiction business?

Other than that they've both been taken over by a corporate mindset that cares less about art than it does the bottom line? Fortunately, this shift has happened at the same time that it's become easier for independent companies to produce and distribute great products, so they have risen to fill the void.

Why have you chosen to work in short fiction? What do you feel you can accomplish with flash fiction as opposed to longer fiction?

It's the way I write, the way my mind works. I'm just glad there's an audience for it at the moment. I guess I could say, too, that by writing in the prose poem or flash fiction forms . . . I am able to bring my mind's natural penchant for the absurd, the whimsical, the poetic and the imagistic together with what I've learned through the years about more narrative-driven forms.

I think your stories would lend themselves well to illustration. Have you considered having an artist illustrate some of your stories for publication in graphic form?

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My agent has been working on foreign rights for *Unlucky Lucky Days*, and one of the interested publishers in the Spanish language would want to add illustrations if he takes it on. *The Hermaphrodite: An Hallucinated Memoir*, the book that's forthcoming from Green Integer - well, part of the process of making that one more publishable was to add art to it and make it a kind of graphic novel, but one that leaned more toward the words than the images . . .

I was thrilled to learn that Argentine artist Alfredo Benavidez Bedoya, whose work is collected in major museums all over the world, was interested in doing 40 woodcuts for the book. This series of woodcuts has already been shown in galleries in Buenos Aires and is scheduled to show in Denver at Redshift Gallery on Oct. 2 to go along with the September release of the book.

Do you read a lot of poetry, and what, for you, is the relationship between flash fiction and poetry?

I read a lot of poetry when I was working toward my MFA in poetry from Bennington College, which I still need to go back and finish, but I hadn't really before then and I haven't really since. I did, however, listen to a lot of poetry, thousands of hours, perhaps, of poetry books on tape - again with the ear - almost everywhere I went in the car for five years or so in my early 20s.

As for the relationship between poetry and flash fiction, I remember reading that (Raymond) Carver . . . said he liked working in the short story form because it was closer to poetry in how condensed it was, how much every word had to count. Flash fiction, then, is that much closer still to poetry. It can even lose some of the narrative qualities of fiction altogether and veer off into the imagistic, symbolic, language-driven lands of poetry. At which point, many would call it prose poetry. The distinctions remain, thankfully, unclear.

What are a few of the stories from *Unlucky Lucky Days* that stand out the most for you?

The Father because of its imagery and because it was the main story that Denver-based photographer Gary Isaacs and I were thinking about when it struck him which photo from his archive would be perfect for the cover. He showed it to me, and it was one of those moments. I welled up with tears, and he left the room so I could be alone with that.

Then, I'd say *The Author* for its autobiographical content, for capturing my process and the way my mind works. . . . Then there's *Happy Birthday Grandma* (a creation myth in which a plastic giraffe learns firsthand about the circle of life and death) because of the humor and the language and the memory of staring so closely at my daughter's plastic giraffe in this ant-filled basement room on this tiny, roadless island in the Atlantic.

Vince Darcangelo is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Utne Reader, 5280 and numerous other publications. He lives in Boulder.

Daniel Grandbois

* **What:** Grandbois will read and sign copies of *Unlucky Lucky Days* and perform acoustically with his band, Munly and the Lupercalians, at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Tattered Cover in LoDo, 1628 16th St.

* **Cost:** Free

* **Information:** brothersgrandbois.com

Missed the review?

Here's a condensed version of the *Rocky's* recent critique of *Unlucky Lucky Days*:

A collection of 73 works of flash fiction, *Unlucky Lucky Days* reads like a group of parables or, at its finer moments, Zen koans. The stories typically feature inanimate objects or anthropomorphized animals as protagonists, be it an upturned chair, trying not to draw attention to itself, or a termite in the throes of an existential crisis.

While the deeper meaning of each piece - if there is one - is often indiscernible, at its best, *Unlucky Lucky Days* is like a peyote trip in the desert - things seem familiar, but different. If you really immerse yourself in these stories, you might find yourself questioning whether Grandbois' cracked perception just might be right."

* **Grade:** B

All in the family

If the Grandbois name sounds familiar, that's because there are two authors in the Grandbois family. Daniel's brother, Peter, is the author of the well-received novel *The Gravedigger* (Chronicle Books, 2006).