Books

Review: "The Office of Historical Corrections"

By Danielle Evans ’04CC (Riverhead).

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
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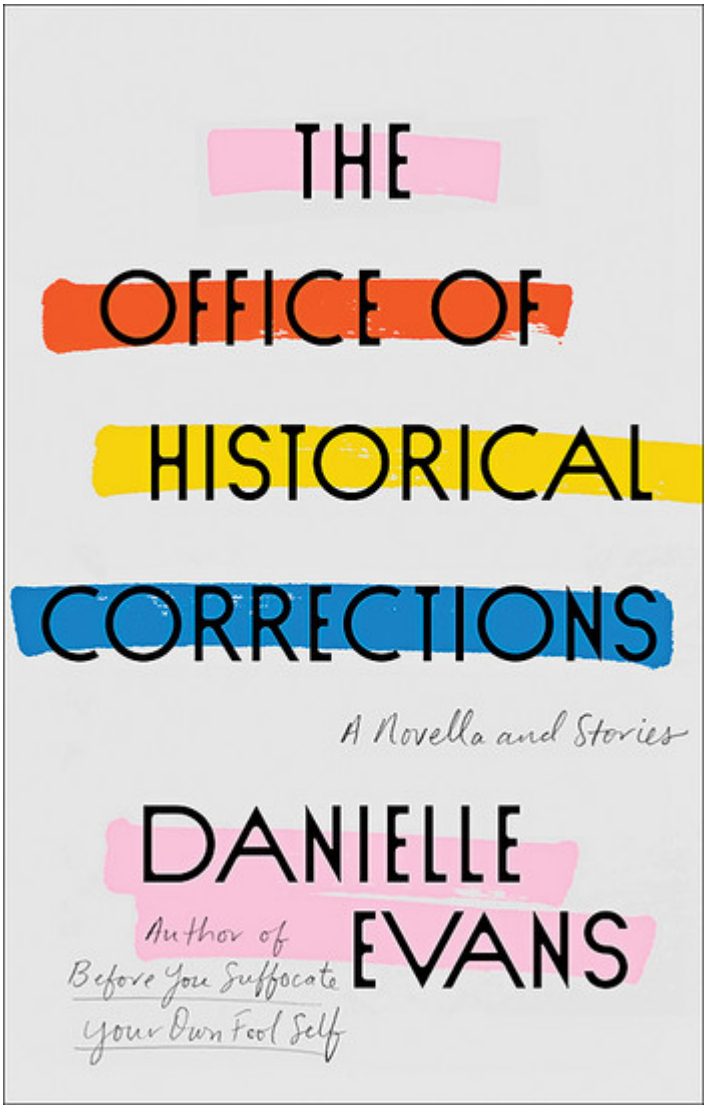
Danielle Evans. (Beowulf Sheehan)

For many young writers, short fiction is a mere launching pad, a way to hone their skills before moving on to the more popular (and lucrative) novel. Thankfully, that isn’t the case for Danielle Evans ’04CC. Her first story collection, *Before You*

Suffocate Your Own Fool Self, earned her a slew of awards and a place in the National Book Foundation's 2011 "5 Under 35" cohort. Now, with *The Office of Historical Corrections* — a selection of stories plus a standout novella — Evans proves herself not just committed to the genre but also a modern master of the form.

To suggest that the seven stories fall under a single theme would do a disservice to Evans's creativity. It's fair to say that nearly all of them tackle grief, race, and romantic relationships — and often the complicated intersection of the three.

Loss is prevalent in many of the stories, and Evans, whose own mother recently died of cancer, writes viscerally and specifically about experiencing grief as a person of color. In the first story, "Happily Ever After," a young woman realizes that she has to present herself in a certain way at her mother's hospital bed to get the information she needs. "Tell me what you would tell a white woman, her face said. A white woman with money, her clothes said." The woman's boyfriend, "several shades darker," can't even fake it; he's considered suspicious and is thrown out of CVS Pharmacy when he tries to pick up the mother's prescription.



Riverhead

Claire, the narrator of “Boys Go to Jupiter,” is white but also reeling from her mother’s illness and death, which sets in motion a tense series of events. Hoping to get a rise out of her new stepmother, Claire posts a picture of herself posing in a skimpy Confederate-flag bikini. The picture goes viral, making her a pariah at her liberal-arts college. But Claire — full of rage, youthful pigheadedness, and trauma stemming from an incident with a Black ex-boyfriend — stubbornly doubles down. Claire isn’t a sympathetic character, but Evans is an empathetic writer and seems to accept if not forgive Claire’s actions as a consequence of her profound grief.

Despite the emphasis on heavy topics, this is not a dour book. Evans is very funny and puts her characters in absurd situations that are just realistic enough to be entirely believable. Lyssa, the narrator of “Happily Ever After,” watches her own life tank while she’s working in the gift shop of a replica of the Titanic. Her supervisor,

“who mumbled something about historical accuracy,” tells her she isn’t allowed to attend the birthday parties held there because she is Black. In another story, “Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain,” a very unlikely wedding guest — dealing with her own personal demons — takes a jilted bride on a road trip that ends up at a cheesy water park. “This is going to be hilarious someday,” says the bride. She’s right. It is.

The crown jewel of Evans’s collection is the titular novella, about a professor, Cassie, who takes a job as a field agent for the “Institute for Public History,” a new government body made up of fact-checkers and historians tasked with confronting the “contemporary crisis of truth,” by correcting “decades of bad information” let loose in the real world.

For her first few years on the job, Cassie’s work is low-stakes. She ducks into souvenir shops to change incorrect dates and, in a particularly amusing scene, educates the cashier at a bakery about why the history behind its promotional Juneteenth dessert is wrong.

But then Cassie is sent on a more important mission, which turns into a thought-provoking historical mystery. A former colleague has caused havoc in a rural Wisconsin town by questioning a long-believed story — that in the 1930s, the town’s sole Black resident was burned to death inside his leather-goods store by a racist mob. As a new mob gathers, unnerved by this interloper digging into the town’s past, Cassie begins to uncover secrets and truths — ones that resonate far beyond the town’s limits.

In a year defined by both racial discord and the spread of disinformation, *The Office of Historical Corrections* feels particularly timely, and Evans’s voice stands out as one to watch. She’s doing important work here; but with riveting storytelling and wit to spare, it doesn’t feel like work at all.

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