Prize-winning story collection charts “absurd territory of the illicit”

PITTSBURGH—Shannon Cain is the 2011 winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize, one of the nation’s most prestigious awards for a book of short stories. Cain’s manuscript, The Necessity of Certain Behaviors, was selected from a field of nearly 325 entries by acclaimed author Alice Mattison. The book will be published this fall by the University of Pittsburgh Press, sponsor of the prize.

“The power in this sparkling collection becomes more and more apparent as one reads,” Mattison stated. “You notice right away that the stories are funny and surprising; it takes a while to see how heartbreaking they can be. I loved reading about these vibrant, lovable, irrepressible women.”

The 46-year-old Cain was born in Denver, Colorado, and grew up in New York, Rhode Island, Maryland, Connecticut and California. Tucson, Arizona, is her hometown of 32 years.

The stories in The Necessity of Certain Behaviors chart the treacherous and often absurd territory of the illicit. From the mother who loads her children and her cannabis harvest into the minivan for a cross country trip, to the mayor’s wife caught pleasuring herself in the steam room at the Y, to the eco-adventuring urbanite who discovers a village in which bisexual non-monogamy is the norm, the characters seem destined to suffer—and sometimes enjoy—the consequences of their own restless discontent.

What does winning the DHLP signify for Cain? “To win this prize is an unexpected manifestation of a desire that’s been pacing restlessly in my fragile writer’s heart for more than a decade,” she said. “My joy lies in knowing these stories will find their readers.”

Cain’s stories have been awarded the Pushcart Prize, the O. Henry Prize and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Tin House, The Colorado Review, the New England Review, American Short Fiction and Southword: New Writing From Ireland. Cain earned her MFA in 2005 from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

The co-editor, with Lisa Bowden, of Powder: Writing by Women in the Ranks, from Vietnam to Iraq (Kore Press, 2008), Cain is co-adapter of Coming In Hot, the stage adaptation of the book. She has taught fiction writing at the University of Arizona, Gotham Writers’ Workshop, Arizona State University, and as a private coach and workshop facilitator. She is currently the Picador Guest Professor of Literature at the University of Leipzig, Germany. She is the artist-in-residence for Tucson’s Ward One and the fiction editor for Kore Press.