

The Cleanskin: troubles that won't let you be

The Cleanskin's author Laura Bloom.

By Alan Gold
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Some novels owe their relevance to the moment in history defined by their theme and the actors who live the narrative. Others transcend time and place because of the universality of their argument, their characters and the landscape from which the narrative is drawn. Laura Bloom's superb new novel, *The Cleanskin*, sits in the latter category and is destined to become a classic of its genre.



Substitute the Northern Ireland sequences of this novel with any of today's war-ravaged battlegrounds, and the secrets that haunt the protagonists could define almost any victim and perpetrator of past and future conflicts. No matter what the cause of the conflict, how wars and hostilities affect the minds and actions of those caught up in the maelstrom speaks to us through the ages, even when the particulars of the rivalry are long forgotten.

The Cleanskin is a masterpiece of drama and characterisation. It's mainly set in contemporary Australia, and the consequences of what happens to the characters can

be traced back the partisan religious and territorial troubles in Northern Ireland where communities and families were torn apart by the intolerance of faith. In its reflection on the internecine warfare between Catholics and Protestants, the IRA and the British Army, this novel unveils the ongoing traumas of people in any conflict who try to put their past behind them and lead a normal life.

Bloom begins the novel in the rural idyll of Mullumbimby on the NSW northern coast, a stone's throw from Byron Bay and its carefree lifestyle. Halley, her husband Matt and their teenage son Benny run the local cafe, a meeting point for the townsfolk, where the coffee is always fresh and the chatter is inconsequential.

But Halley is yet to fit neatly into the town's ethos. Something, perhaps her marriage, perhaps something in her past that she refuses to disclose, is frustrating her. Her silence about the life she led before she came to Australia, and Matt's inability to break through the barrier, causes an undercurrent of disturbance.

Yet life continues for the family until Halley's past becomes the nightmare of her present. Into her world steps a stranger, Aiden, who catapults her back to when she wasn't Halley but Megan, living through the traumas of the Troubles and urban warfare. Halley is desperate for her former life to remain secret; Aiden, sent to Australia by his older imprisoned brother Liam, is determined to make her face up to the secrets and consequences of her past.

The complexity with which Bloom exposes Megan's life and pits her against her alter ego, Halley, creates one of the most enduring female characters I've across in a long time. Unwilling to consider simple right versus wrong solutions to the convoluted religious and political issues of Northern Ireland, the author creates in Halley a conflicted, confused, yet morally courageous woman. Bloom deftly crosses barriers of time and place, between Australia and Ireland and between the 1960s and today. She shows how the past affects our lives.

The Cleanskin is more than a novel that deals with reconciliation, truth and justice. The universality of its narrative makes it applicable to any conflict at any time. Substitute Islam for Christianity or Syria for Ireland, and the characters would speak the same language. Indeed, Bloom has written a novel relevant to anyone whose actions in a past life continue to haunt them. This could be a story that resonates in the minds of refugees from any area of recent conflict, and could do more to change our view of asylum-seekers than any plea from advocates.

NSW-based Bloom's previous novels, *In the Mood* and *Choosing Zoe*, show her to be an author who is excited by the lives of people who are left out of the frame. *The Cleanskin* is an exceptional work of fiction, the creation of a subtle and intelligent mind, and will live in the hearts of anybody horrified by the consequences of today's war-torn world.

Alan Gold's latest novel is The Mechanic.

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