

The Cleanskin by Laura Bloom, where people go to disappear

By Susan Chenery
12 January 2017

The rolling hills of the northern NSW hinterland vibrate with every gradient of green. Down on the plain the town of Mullumbimby sits at the foot of the squat, bloated body of the conical Mount Chincogan. Slumped there, writes Laura Bloom, "like a friendly ogre looking down its thickly-treed crinkled green hide at them all". Palm trees jostle along the main street, time slows down. In the overheated summer, birds descend at dusk chatting and shouting like a giant avian cocktail party.

Walkers following the path along the brown Brunswick River pass the blue wooden house oblivious to the fact that a woman was there quietly writing a book described as "a masterpiece of drama and characterisation". Much of *The Cleanskin* is set in this seductively lush place.



"We were surrounded by books and reading. Both my parents were really passionate readers": Author Laura Bloom.

Photo: douglas frost

People come here to escape, to reinvent themselves, to leave the past behind, to disappear. So has Laura Bloom's character Halley, who lives a seemingly hollow life running a cafe with her husband Matt.

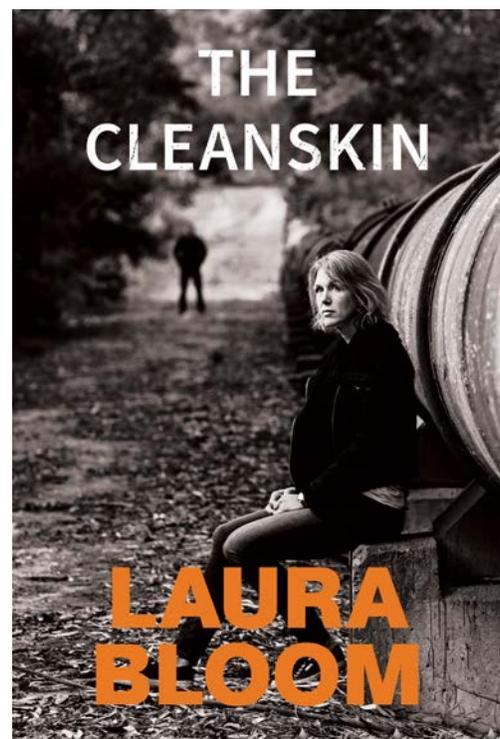
"People change their names," says Bloom of the Northern Rivers region, "but when you leave your old life and start a new life it can have a cost as well. It can work for a while but there will be a reckoning."

For Halley in *The Cleanskin*, when the past comes calling you begin to understand why she clings to the deadening ordinariness of her existence; she is on the run. As a naïve and idealistic young woman she was drawn into IRA activities, with catastrophic consequences; a prematurely exploded bomb, deaths of innocents. Bloom comes from an Anglo-Celtic family, her mother Irish Catholic, her father a Protestant. Without a word wasted Bloom picks away at the complexities and complications, motives and beliefs, involved in violent struggle. She is fascinated by how "one person's terrorist can be another person's freedom fighter."

Her earlier novel *In the Mood* also deals with the effect of war on people, the traumatised men returning home from the hell of fighting in the jungles of New Guinea, to wives who have been left fearing for them for too long. In Robert's absence Catherine Booker has given into despair, made mistakes, had an affair with a US Marine. Her day of reckoning is nigh.

Though different in mood and tone there is a vividness in both books, an impact in the writing, a building up of the story by moving back and forward in time, and a peeling away. An economy of style where nothing is laboured but everything is intense.

Bloom, 48, says she is interested in secrets because she was the youngest in a large extended family growing up in Glebe in Sydney's inner-west. Information filtered down in pieces.



"I was a super sensitive child. I have always felt that I am tuning into the things that people aren't saying. That made me a writer." There was no television: "we were surrounded by books and reading. Both my parents were really passionate readers."

After a degree in Communications at the University of Technology Sydney, she worked in community health, spent a year living in southern India and three years in London, where she wrote two young-adult novels, *Augustine's Lunch* and *Choosing Zoe*, and on returning to Australia worked for a public relations firm whose clients were a multinational pharmaceutical company and an organisation affiliated with the United Nations.

She was always observing and writing "fragments" but says, "It wasn't until I was 30 that I really decided that I was able to write novels".

In 2005 she moved with her lawyer husband and autistic son to the Northern Rivers. Her family have been there since the 1880s. "I have always been so connected to here. And this landscape just feels like a part of me."

In both her books Bloom creates complete worlds, with characters facing moral ambiguities so real that you start to feel that they are walking round the room. *In The Mood* resonates because of the choices Catherine makes, a woman constricted by her times.

"I kept taking breaks from it when I wasn't sure what should happen," Bloom says. "And I felt like I was living with these people and not talking to them. It was like 'I don't want to hear from you now'."

Bloom knows what her next four books will be, "they just have to be ready." In January she is starting the next one – "it feels like a wave I have got to hit" – and trying to ignore the annoying little voice that tells her she should get a job.

"I am still trying to work out how to be a writer. It is like wandering around in a kind of dream."

The Cleanskin
Laura Bloom
Pantera Press