

## Laura Bloom, *The Cleanskin* (The Author People, 2016)

How irresistible to review a novel that shares an almost identical title with your own: *Cleanskin* (2006), but in any case, Laura Bloom's very accomplished third novel *The Cleanskin* differs from mine in subject and style.

According to her acknowledgments, *The Cleanskin* is a work of fiction. It lightly draws on the assassination of Belfast human rights lawyer Pat Finucane, and on the Murphy Affair, during which a Sydney judge was subjected to a campaign of smear and innuendo, over accusations that he perverted the course of justice. He was convicted and later released upon appeal.

The death of Martin McGuinness, Irish terrorist turned political peace-broker, on 21 March this year reminds us of the thin line between idealism and terrorism. Bloody atrocities carried out under his leadership of the IRA will never be forgotten by the families of McGuinness's victims. And yet, and yet, there is always more to the story. A revolutionary would name political contradictions. Would the present détente between the British and Irish Governments have held as long without the agency of McGuinness, in particular his manipulation of key figures, in back rooms? The essential dilemmas raised in Bloom's novel resonate with the McGuinness story and with other stories in which activists survive their past and reimagine themselves.

Part political and psychological thriller, part *Bildungsroman*, and part analysis of place – 2009 Mullumbimby in the Northern Rivers area of NSW, 1992 London, and 1980s Sydney – *The Cleanskin* is set out non-chronologically. The climactic London scenes remind me of bag searches conducted to avert Irish terrorism during my 1970s visits to the British Houses of Parliament. And in March 2017, the symbolic significance of the Parliamentary site is once more underlined, as a target for terrorism carried out by a disgruntled, lone male who suffered racism as the descendent of an historically different, colonised people. Bloom's narrative traverses the complex subject of terrorism and its links with politics, religion, class and zealotry. With particular reference to gender, she puts activist bullying, naivety and betrayal, under the social justice microscope.

The driving question uppermost in a thriller reader's mind might be, how do youthful rebels fortunate enough to evade the law and stay alive, begin again without further damaging their family or their sanity? For a reader of psychoanalytic bent, Bloom's treatment of Freud's drives, sex and death, may be uppermost: 'Sex is the ultimate connecting, Megan used to think back then. Maybe killing is, thought Halley now' (67%).<sup>1</sup>

Male activists have always exploited, as cannon fodder, young women who believe they are equals in an unequal world. Educated or politicised, beloved or scorned by their father, these girls overcome their terror to act as bravely as any man. Susan Errington's historical novel *Ice Letters* (2015), albeit set in a different era, would make an excellent companion text to *The Cleanskin*. A secondary theme recurs through Bloom's narrative: what happens to the sons of silenced or murdered heroes and sheroes, particularly during late capitalism. In some families, the pursuit of pleasure and micro-managed materialism can blunt their children's passion and personal drive; in others it can fire them up.

Bloom weaves three historical times to create her novel narrative, which is also roughly divided into three sections. The story opens in 2009 when Irish Aidan swoops into Mullumbimby on his Ducati, seeking an informant on The Cause who has gone underground.

<sup>1</sup> As I read this book on my Kindle page numbers were not available, so I have provided percentages to show the approximate location of the quotes.

We glimpse the town as it comes into view, but his gaze is summative, cursory, he is on a mission and, from the beginning, there is a sense of urgency, a continually quickening pace. By the end of the chapter we know crime and time has been done, and that a few surprises await protagonist Halley, who has been off the map in Mullum, where she runs a café with her husband and son.

The novel then backtracks to 1989 Sydney where privileged Megan is reaching puberty, aroused and shocked by new feelings and several surprising family events. Bloom's Sydney scenes also commence on a note of high political drama. Megan's father, the highest-ranking Irish Catholic barrister in New South Wales, abandons his appeal against conviction for influencing a court case, for both idealistic and venal reasons. The family's privileged life within a large house overlooking the harbour, with magazine décor, a private jetty to dock the boat, a Mercedes and BMW in the driveway, expensive food and entertainment, gardeners and housekeepers, counterpoints the whole-food, natural product, unmaterialistic karmic ethos of Mullumbimby. In 1989, Megan is 17 and she makes things happen: when an older boy visits to comfort her after father's arrest, she kisses him. Bloom writes astutely at the beginning of the novel about the Catholic ethos of hard work and lived justice that Megan exemplifies, along with her privilege, although witness and action haven't quite reached her consciousness.

When she receives the call at Youth Group, less the call to God than to make things right for the underprivileged kids she meets there and to be with leader Dom:

The contrast between their lives and hers made Megan feel like crying.

'I want to do something,' she'd say fiercely when she got home.

'Do well at school. Go to university and change things', her father would say like a chant. (11%).

Bloom also captures the complexity of a quasi-hippy community that is never simply a place of respite. The township of Mullumbimby, 35 kilometres from Byron Bay, is an idyllic tourist village located at the base of a mountain, surrounded by forests, creeks and rivers and close to the coast. Iggy Azalea was raised here. Bloom paints a sympathetic portrait of the idealism in the community, the artistic bent of many of its citizens, the slow pace of life, the alternative foods, remedies and lifestyles but she also beards the hippies in their den. Mullum, as the quasi-ocker locals name it, also has the lowest vaccination rate for children in Australia. Fewer than 50% of two to five year olds are fully vaccinated, raising the ire of the medical profession, aiming for national herd immunity.

At 37, Halley acts out her passions in Mullum, in timetable slots as short as Pilates' sessions. She is smart and sexy and strong. But her thoughts are tempered by complex analyses of relationships and self. Millennial readers should love her intelligence and drive, her obsessive overthinking, her dark regrets over a past that, despite hereditary idealism, went wrong.

Liam, Aiden and Dom, the three Irish brothers and antagonists, were victims of crime because their lawyer father was gunned down in their home in Belfast during the Irish Troubles. Each is intriguing in his own way. A church social worker, a student, an actor turned activist, they appear as rugged individualists rather than conventional romantic heroes. One of them wants to overturn the patriarchy, colonial in particular, but to install his own version, rather than rid the world of toxic masculinity. One of them imposes moral strictures and a caring paternalism that undermines the protagonist's autonomy to disastrous effect. All of them are damaged by family secrets and lies.

As the title suggests, the protagonist is a cleanskin, and she suffers the usual exploitations. This is a timely book, showing the way young idealistic people can be radicalised. Young

Megan begins pragmatically: 'It was quaint to her, the way he seemed to think this was about religion' (8%).

Despite its 240 pages, the narrative romps along, occasionally simmering at a dangerous level of tension when inevitable actions are delayed but not ultimately thwarted. Bloom is adept at adapting register and never bores. Her dialogue is never banal. In each community, conversation acts as dialectic to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters' moral and psychological stands and it is richly conceptualised. Game theory, referenced as a paradox, ultimately brings players unstuck because maintaining their *modus operandi* only works statistically (60%). While reversals in the narrative often surprise, violent precedents remind the reader that luck aside, these characters will act in dangerous ways, even against their best interests.

Bloom wields language with energy and precision, pausing only to create deft metaphors that amplify mood: 'the labels were pasted on, and the blame was laid, and the past with its secrets and its riddles settled between them like a raven into its nest' (14%).

She harnesses lyricism almost entirely to further plot. In this extract, Aidan is about to disclose the details of a terrible revelation:

Aidan focused on breathing deeply, looking out at the fast flowing river. The sandy shoreline was empty of people as evening approached, the mountains behind Mullumbimby fading away into a wash of deep purple. A mist rose from the water, blending blue into green into the gold of the river merging into the horizon. (58%)

Part 2 contains many twists and turns, and double and triple crossings, until when everyone seems complicit, especially one of them in particular, the reader finally discovers, like Halley, that there is no moral high ground upon which to stand. All relationships are contaminated by political machinations. Tragedy after tragedy ensues. In the end, Halley's husband, a supra-analyst who chooses silence, offers hope for their future.

Although disconcerting, initial unease about the price parents pay for losing their children must be weighed against the destructive power of civil war, political flight to the other side of the world, and the complex secrets that lie within even the best units. Bloom is psychologically insightful: 'Just this short irritation brought Nuala back to life. Her river of words, like a weather pattern you entered, swirling around you with a logic and energy of its own' (57%).

The novel reminds us that our past can come back to bite us, even in a small community of blow-ins with poor social security records. Publisher The Author People is a newish independent press with a small list but they should stay with Bloom who is a fine writer. Even should *The Cleanskin* fail to achieve brilliant sales, because of limited promotion resources rather than its readability, the book deserves to appear on prize lists.

## Gay Lynch