

A NOTE FROM CLARE BEAMS

THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS HAD A WAY OF LOOKING, to me, like many worlds at once. In the house where I grew up—a sometime boarding house built in the 1730s, in Newtown, Connecticut—it wasn't always clear what century you were in. Old tree trunks supported the ceiling in the dirt-floored basement. The wide, irregular floorboards in the oldest part of the house were made of American chestnut, extinct since the blight of the early 1900s. They creaked and sprung a little underfoot and recorded the different weights of each member of my family, so that from upstairs I could tell with certainty who was walking down there. Back behind the falling-down barn, we unearthed old spirit bottles in beautiful sea glass shades—cobalt, translucent green—from some long-ago person's secret tipping, and once a partial porcelain doll's head, missing its chin and part of one cheek. I couldn't have lived in that house, in that whole historic town, without thinking about all the people who had lived there before me, wondering about the ways my life overlapped with theirs. Time, I learned, was shifty.

People, too. When I grew up and began teaching high-school English—in a different old New England town, this one in Massachusetts—I saw students become different people entirely in a year, or in a day. You can see this kind of transformation anywhere, but there's something about teaching that concentrates it and makes it unmissable. Perhaps because everything happens faster to a ninth grader than it does to an adult. Perhaps because the whole project of teaching is to create change, since that's what growth and learning are. As a person whose job it was, suddenly, to shape others, I began to think more about the ways we do that daily, all of us, sometimes in ways we don't intend. Sometimes with results almost too strange to be believed.

On a December morning in 2012, six months pregnant with my daughter, and partway through

writing the stories that would become *We Show What We Have Learned*, I was working at my desk when I saw the name of the town where I'd grown up scroll across my news feed. Then again, again. The place where I'd done all that dreamy wandering around in time was now attached to events that seemed impossible, and to faces I still can't quite bear to look at. Newtown had a new layer. My empty-nester parents had moved to New Hampshire a few years earlier, and I didn't know any of the people who were lost. But it was a fraught entry into parenthood—feeling my daughter wriggling inside me while I watched the President stand on the stage of my high school's auditorium to address the community that had lost all those children.

A fraught entry into a fraught business, as it turns out. Wonderful, but fraught too. When my daughter was born a few months later, I couldn't stop touching her skin. Peering into her face. Terror coils inside a love that big.

The stories in *We Show What We Have Learned* aren't about these parts of my life, not exactly. I'm not really that kind of writer—I write fiction for the work and the joy of inventing things, and because while I love my life, I love escaping it too. In my writing, I'm often chasing the breathlessness I had when I read in childhood, when stories and words felt limitless, when all the magic of an impossible turn could come any minute. I think that's why these stories span so many different eras, and why the characters in them confront such extremes, such strangeness. These extremes and strangeness are not my life—but then they aren't quite separate from it either. They're its shadows, stretched and distorted. *We Show What We Have Learned* would be at home in the classroom where I taught English, in the room where my daughter slept as a baby, on the Newtown Main Street that the news cameras made famous, in the house where I grew up. In ways I never planned, it takes its life from the lives I have lived in these places.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The stories in this collection span a range of time periods—from the 1600s to the present day. Can you find connecting themes between them? What is the relationship between history and the stories?
2. Joyce Carol Oates has called Clare Beams “a female/feminist voice for the twenty-first century.” Do you see this as a feminist book?
3. Several stories explore women's bodies—transformed or manipulated in unexpected ways: a headmaster shapes his female students, a grandmother grows younger, a teacher sheds body parts. How is Beams responding to contemporary body constructs? Which images did you respond to?
4. Clare Beams grew up in Newtown, CT, where the devastating Sandy Hook shooting occurred in 2012. “All the Keys to All the Doors” explores a school shooting's aftermath. What would you do if you, like Cele, had the keys? How does this story respond to the real tragedy and/or confront your concerns for schools in your community?
5. In “Ailments” Dr. Robert Cresswell makes a stand against taking Holy Communion, considering it “dangerously foolish.” When and how have you had to confront tradition? What was at stake?
6. The stories range from the wildly fantastic to the nearly realistic, but many have strangeness at their core. What do the surreal elements accomplish that more realistic fiction cannot?

WILMINGTON, NC
Monday, October 31
Fiction craft talk, 10 a.m.
UNCW Writers' Week
Room: Warwick Ballroom 1
601 S. College Road

Monday, October 31
Book launch and reading, 7 p.m.
UNCW Writers' Week
Room: King Hall 101
601 S. College Road

Tuesday, November 1
The importance of teaching writing:
a workshop for aspiring K-12 educators, 10 a.m.
Room: Warwick Ballroom 1
601 S. College Road

SOUTHERN PINES, NC
Tuesday, November 1
Workshop and reading, 5:30 p.m.
Book signing sponsored by The Country Bookshop
Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities
555 E. Connecticut Ave.

GREENSBORO, NC
Wednesday, November 2
Reading, 7 p.m.
Scuppernong Books
304 S. Elm St.

DAVIDSON, NC
Thursday, November 3
Reading, 6 p.m.
Main Street Books
126 S. Main St.

CHAPEL HILL, NC
Friday, November 4
Reading, 7 p.m.
Clare Beams and April Ayers Lawson read from
and discuss their debut story collections
Flyleaf Books
752 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

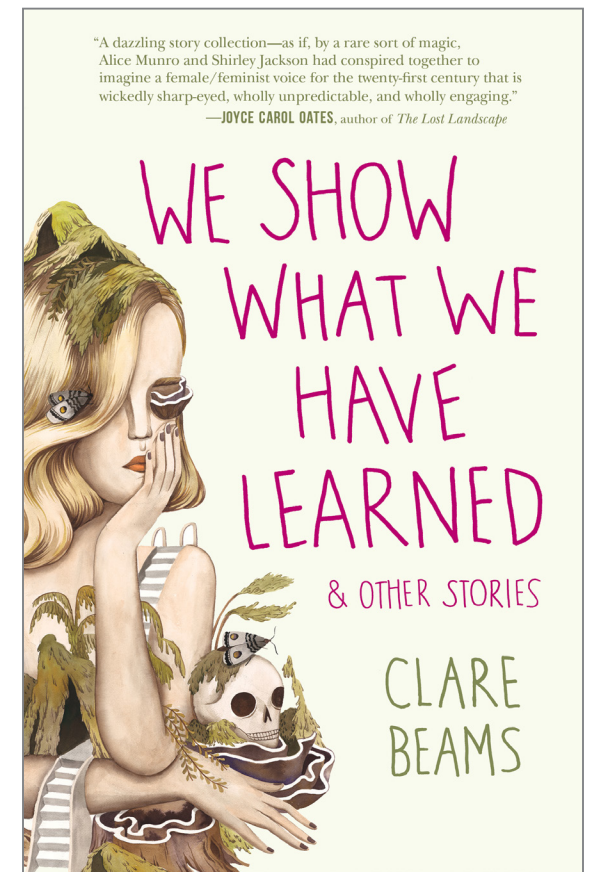
RALEIGH, NC
Saturday, November 5
Short story craft lecture, 2:30 p.m.
Faculty Reading, 4:30 p.m.
NC Writers' Network Conference
Raleigh Marriott Crabtree Valley



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CLARE BEAMS is the author of *We Show What We Have Learned* (Lookout Books, Oct. 2016). Her stories appear in *One Story*, *n+1*, *Ecotone*, the *Common*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and have received special mention in *The Best American Short Stories 2013* and *The Pushcart Prize XXXV*. She is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and currently blogs for *Ploughshares*. After teaching high school English for six years in Falmouth, Massachusetts, she moved with her husband and daughter to Pittsburgh, where she teaches creative writing at Saint Vincent College and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.

A guide to Clare Beams's *We Show What We Have Learned*



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