PEN/ROBERT W. BINGHAM PRIZE FOR DEBUT FICTION, finalist

YOUNG LIONS FICTION AWARD, finalist

“As if, by a rare sort of magic, Alice Munro and Shirley Jackson had conspired together to imagine a female/feminist voice for the twenty-first century that is wickedly sharp-eyed, wholly unpredictable, and wholly engaging.”

—JOYCE CAROL OATES, author of The Lost Landscape

“Stories as well executed as these are their own reward, but it’s also clear from the capaciousness on display here that Ms. Beams has novels’ worth of worlds inside her.”

—NEW YORK TIMES

“A richly imagined and impeccably crafted debut.”

—KIRKUS (starred review, Best Debut Fiction of 2016)

“A sharp eye for detail and an appreciation for emotional nuance underpin Beams’s ability to captivate readers, even as she eschews neat endings in favor of mysteries that linger.”

—PASTE

THE LITERARY, HISTORIC, AND FANTASTIC COLLIDE in these wise and exquisitely unsettling stories. From bewildering assemblies in school auditoriums to the murky waters of a Depression-era health resort, Beams’s landscapes are tinged with otherworldliness, and her characters’ desires stretch the limits of reality. Ingénues at a boarding school bind themselves to their headmaster’s vision of perfection; a nineteenth-century landscape architect embarks on his first major project, but finds the terrain of class and power intractable; a bride glimpses her husband’s past when she wears his World War II parachute as a gown; and a teacher comes undone in front of her astonished fifth graders.

As they capture the strangeness of being human, the stories in We Show What We Have Learned reveal Clare Beams’s rare and capacious imagination—and yet they are grounded in emotional complexity, illuminating the ways we attempt to transform ourselves, our surroundings, and each other.

CLARE BEAMS is the author of We Show What We Have Learned, a finalist for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction and the Young Lions Fiction Award. Her stories appear in One Story, n+1, Ecotone, the Kenyon Review, Recommended Reading, and The Best American Nonrequired Reading, and have received special mention in The Best American Short Stories and The Pushcart Prize. She is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. After teaching high school English for six years in Falmouth, MA, 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.

Review copies available upon request: smithel@uncw.edu.
Selected Praise

“An elegant and assured debut, packed with confident prose…Smart, savage, and compulsively readable.”

—MEGAN MAYHEW BERGMAN, author of Almost Famous Women

“Imaginative, unsettling, and relentlessly sharp, the nine stories of the book are full of immersive detail and fully realized narrators that give believability to the fantastic.”

—PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

“Beams’s collection skillfully and alluringly navigates the border between the familiar and the unexpected, and beguiles and unsettles in equal measure.”

—MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

“This debut collection is full of promise and surreal delight…. We hope there’s much more to come from this writer.”

—O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE

“Beams’s stories have a laser-focused honesty that reminds you of the pieces of yourself you’d rather not look at—the conformist, the manipulator, the egotist—yet her work is also profoundly generous, circling back again and again to the tremendous need that makes us behave in ways that are less than noble.”

—FICTION WRITERS REVIEW

“Clare Beams has a gift for illuminating one character’s most private moment, causing the impact to transform the fates of many. She navigates the tightrope between inner and outer reality. The range of her stories is astonishing—funny and devastating, suspenseful and mesmerizing.”

—URSULA HEGI, author of Stones from the River

“These amazingly inventive stories reveal an imagination rare in its command and courage. In gorgeous prose that thrills, instructs, and thoroughly inspires, Clare Beams obliterates the ‘dividing line between possibilities and impossibilities,’ showing how our passions can rule with reality-bending magic.”

—CHANG-RAE LEE, author of On Such a Full Sea

“Clare Beams’s invigorating stories are brave, inventive, lyrical, and just a little bit nasty. Read them now.”

—SAM LIPSYTE, author of The Fun Parts

“These stories are at once spooky and lush, eerie and deeply felt, ghostly but also vibrantly alive. Clare Beams is a magician, and each of these stories is a muscular, artful haunting.”

—CAITLIN HORROCKS, author of This is Not Your City

CLAIRE BEAMS’s 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. Beams is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, and currently blogs for Ploughshares. She teaches creative writing at Saint Vincent College and the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts.
From the Author

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 tippling, 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.
Media angles and questions

Four of the nine stories in this collection take place in schools, “Hourglass” and “The Renaissance Person Tournament” being two examples. Why do you think you’re drawn to writing about teachers and students? What makes the classroom such a rich setting for fiction? What fascinates you about the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood?

You grew up in Newtown, Connecticut, and one of these stories explores the aftermath of a school shooting. How did your relationship to Sandy Hook inform the story “All the Keys to All the Doors”? Why did you want to explore school violence through fiction?

The stories range from the wildly fantastic to the nearly realistic, but all of them have strangeness at their core. How do you account for the strange turns some of these stories take? What do the surreal elements accomplish that more realistic fiction cannot?

The prolific author Joyce Carol Oates has called you “a female/feminist voice for the twenty-first century.” How do you react to that charge? Do you see this as a feminist book? In what way? What has been your experience of writing and publishing as a woman?

Several stories explore women’s bodies—transformed or manipulated in unexpected ways: a headmaster literally shapes his female students, a grandmother seems to be growing younger, a teacher begins to shed her body parts. Why is writing about the female body important to you?

A few of these stories feature mothers, women about to be mothers, or women wondering if they’re capable of motherhood. How has being a mother affected your writing?

The stories in this book are set in a range of time periods and locations—from the 1600s to the present day. “The Saltwater Cure” takes place in Massachusetts during the Depression, and “Ailments” follows a family and how germ theory shapes their communion rituals outside of London during the Plague. What role do history and place play in your writing? What kind of research was involved?

Lookout Books, the literary imprint of the Department of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, is the publisher of We Show What We Have Learned. According to their mission statement, they seek out emerging and historically underrepresented voices. Can you talk about the experience of working with a small, independent press and what has made them uniquely suited to publish this book?

Your book tour will take you to under-resourced schools in North Carolina as part of a grant from South Arts. What will you tell students about the arts, about the importance of writing, or about the role of writers?