



THIS
HAS
NOTHING
TO DO
WITH
YOU

press kit

For more information or to
schedule an interview
with Lauren Carter, contact

Anna Boyar | Managing Editor
anna@freehand-books.com | 403.452.5662
#515-815 1st St. SW, Calgary, AB · T2P 1N3

www.freehand-books.com

“*Where does another person’s suffering end and yours begin? I asked him once, after I’d finally fully explained about my parents, about what my mother had done.*

It’s here, he said, laying his palm on my sun-browned arm.

It’s in your own skin.”

MEDIA release

This Has Nothing To Do With You by Lauren Carter

A NOVEL

*A literary crime novel about the darkest places
humans go, and the process of emerging out of them*

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When Melony Barnett's mother commits a violent murder, Mel is left struggling with the loss of her parents and her future. For more than two years, she drifts around the continent, trying to carve out a life that has nothing to do with her past, before returning to her Northern Ontario home and adopting a rescue dog—a mastiff with a tragic history. As she struggles to help the dog heal and repair her relationship with her brother, Matt, she begins to uncover layers of secrets about her family—secrets that were the fuel for her mother's actions.

This Has Nothing to Do With You is a compulsively readable novel that follows a dynamic cast of characters, revealing the complexity of the bonds that are formed through trauma and grief—with siblings, lovers, friends, and dogs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Carter



HEATHER RUTH PHOTOGRAPHY

LAUREN CARTER is the author of four books including the novel *Swarm* and the poetry collections *Following Sea* and *Lichen Bright*. Her first novel, *Swarm* was on CBC's list of 40 novels that could change Canada. In 2014, her short story "Rhubarb" won top place in the Prairie Fire fiction prize and appeared in the annual *Best Canadian Stories* (edited by John Metcalf). Her work has also been nominated for the Journey Prize and longlisted multiple times for the CBC Literary Prizes in both poetry and fiction while also earning multiple grants, including the Manitoba Arts Council Major Arts Award, given to Manitoba artists whose creative work shows "exceptional quality and accomplishment." She grew up in Blind River, ON, and has lived in the Greater Toronto Area and The Pas, MB. She currently resides in St. Andrews, MB.

A Q&A with Lauren Carter

The novel details a violent murder that interrupts Mel and Matt's lives and sets the story in motion. Can you talk about your inspiration behind this? Does it detail an actual crime?

Yes and no. My own high school graduation party took place at a friend's camp and during that night there was a murder along the highway. Early in the morning, we drove towards town and on the way we passed a contingent of police officers at a rest stop where two people had been murdered by an unknown assailant known as the Blind River Killer (the case remains unsolved).

The scenario in *This Has Nothing to Do With You* is spun out of this but it is fiction. However, the impetus to write it probably comes from the same place as my own interest in true crime and compelling mystery stories (I'm a huge Tana French and Patricia Highsmith fan, alongside documentary series like *Making A Murderer* and the podcasts *Somebody Knows Something* and *The Clearing*). What does it take to drive people towards gruesome actions?

To write the book, I needed to get into the head of Mel and Matt's mom, Bernadette, in order to figure out how she could find herself at the campground, holding that gun. I needed to think a lot about how betrayal could snap her like that—not only her husband's betrayal, but also the betrayal of her own life, how she ended up in an unexpected existence that is, in many ways, unsuited to her, with broken dreams all around her. Gradually, the family's secrets unraveled themselves for me, as I worked on the book.

What fascinated me in Bernadette's actions is how normal they are, and how anyone could end up there, given the right circumstances – I think this is why we're all so interested in true crime too. At the end of the day, the truth is exactly what Sophie says to Mel (to paraphrase): we are more than the worst thing we've ever done. We are all human beings. We could all end up in those dark places.

“We are more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. We are all human beings. We could all end up in those dark places.”

What themes do you explore in this book?

Family trauma and dysfunction. Brother and sister relationships. Formative friendships amongst women. Learning how to have empathy after something horrible has happened to you, and figuring out how to live in a world filled with trauma and violence.

What were some of your influences?

I started writing this book immediately upon finishing Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, a story about a young woman unraveling a uniquely traumatic family history.

I literally closed that novel, dried my tears, and picked up a pen. I thought *This Has Nothing To Do With You* would be the fourth short story in the linked stories I'd been writing, but it kept going. I started writing where it currently begins—the morning after the graduation party - and the story gradually began to unfurl (with, of course, many changes and rewrites along the way).

I'm influenced by novelists like T.C. Boyle and Joyce Carol Oates who both dig under the surface (and into the darkness, in the case of JCO), while also creating plots that propel the reader forward.

The story also began percolating alongside the circumstances in my own life. When my husband, Jason, and I moved to The Pas, in northern Manitoba, we rescued a puppy who'd been found on the street in -50 C weather.

A crazy puppy, I'll add. A puppy I thought I'd have to give up because he was so challenging (I'd never had a puppy before, and he was a crazy puppy).

This feeling of being at my wit's end day after day, and having to address his heightened needs, including figuring out how to train this dog who needed training in a remote community and then shuttling him to Saskatoon, a six-hour drive away, when he needed surgery on both knees at the age of two (which I used for a story called "Bones," picked up by Mark Jarman for the *Fiddlehead*). I suppose I started thinking

more deeply about what it took to put yourself aside for another creature, in a way that's different from having children (because I don't have children), in a way that's also about what you get from the animal who you didn't have to take in.

Another influence was the Hungarian film *White God*, about a canine revolt against animal abusers and a young woman's involvement, which I saw while in Calgary as writer-in-residence for the Alexandra Writers Society. I loved how this film reflected suffering in so many facets and spoke how we are interconnected and obliged to help one another. A Rilke quote begins that film, which I felt echoed the themes of empathy and suffering and striving to find a clear path that I was exploring in the novel—"Perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest being, something that needs our love."

You are also a poet. How do your poetic sensibilities influence your prose writing?

I began my writing career as a poet so I think that my love of metaphor and sharp imagery works its way into my fiction. But the opposite is also true: my love of constructing a narrative arc finds its way into the structuring of my poems and collections of poetry as well. My favourite high school English teacher recently sent me a note about my collection *Following Sea* (which also came out in 2019) that praised it as "a gripping read – rare in a poetry collection." That made me proud.

The story has an exceptional flow to it. The story charges forward as the background is being filled in. What were some of your strategies for maintaining the suspense while moving back and forth in time?

When I'm writing, the drama of the backstory usually rushes forward, becoming story in itself, with its own arc and trajectory. I don't write with outlines, so, in the beginning, this isn't a conscious choice. I begin to write, and all of the stuff in the character's history comes rushing in and I know I have to follow it (this happened with my first novel *Swarm*, as well).

Maybe I could call this a psychological impulse, in that it speaks to how our lives are so influenced by the formative experiences that occur when we're young and that we often have no choice over.

That isn't to say, however, that pacing comes easily. Sometimes the backstory (or, alternate plot, which is really what it is) lags and I have to trim it. Pacing is always formed through lots of rewriting and cutting excess, shortening flashbacks or sections that dip into tedium.

Basically: everything has to have a reason for being there—but not just for plot, also for emotional resonance, for revealing character, for foreshadowing. If it's just sitting on the page for no reason other than to look pretty, I've learned that it must be cut.

Did have your characters mapped out before you began writing, or did you come to know them through the process? Did they ever surprise you?

I wrote a few short stories featuring versions of Mel, Josie, and Lara leading up to writing the novel (one, *Rhubarb*, won the *Prairie Fire* Fiction contest and was published in the 2015 *Best Canadian Stories* anthology, edited by John Metcalf). Through this I got to know them a little bit.

However, I don't do any mapping out before I start a project—preferring, instead, to get to know the characters and the story as it unfolds (while this does involve writing many drafts, I find the freshness of surprise twists and turns keeps me engaged and making surprising connections). Mel was a shadow of herself when I started the book and she grew and grew and grew and came alive for me more than any other character I've ever worked with.

Sophie's appearance was a bit surprising to me, especially when I saw what she was wearing, and I found Mel's propensity to make bad decisions sometimes startling and sometimes amusing. Angie also grew on me and by the end I really appreciated her quiet tenacity and calm wisdom. Lara, of course, is the coolest, and I'd love to hang out with her some more (she reminds me a bit of Phoenix in *Swarm*).

Some of the fictional towns—Norbury and Hixon River, are modelled after real places. Why did you choose to make them fictional?

I grew up on the North Shore of Lake Huron, in Ontario. Hixon River is modelled after my hometown of Blind River. Because of my history, there is, of course, a certain intimacy with this town and the entire region, stretching between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie, that I wanted to be allowed to freely alter. Giving Blind River and Sudbury—where the majority of the story's action takes place—fictional identities extended the distance between me and these communities, allowing me to make them into what they needed to be for the story while keeping the story's roots firmly planted in Northern Ontario.

This book will create a strong feeling of nostalgia for anyone that grew up in the 80s and 90s. As you were writing, what did you do to ensconce yourself into that time period?

I listened to a lot of '80s and early '90s music (and had a lot of fun dressing up for an '80s party at the Legion in The Pas when I first started the book). I also watched films made at the time and plumbed my own memories of fashions and attitudes and worked to remember what life was like before the Internet. I also visited the CBC in Toronto where I watched episodes of the National screened during the weeks in which the book takes place.

How would the story be different if it was set in modern times?

I think this story reflects modern times, with Matt's focus on the news coming out of Rwanda. These days, it's easy to follow every event unfolding around the globe, every tragedy, every terrible thing which we have no control over and can only watch. I wanted, in this book, to point to that compulsion to observe a tragedy that fiercely demands empathy while being unable to act. How hopeless so many of us feel, sitting back and watching the world do things we don't want it to do and hurt people we don't want to be hurt.

Matt feels an extreme sense of responsibility for the world – starting with the injustice in his own family (which is gradually revealed). At this time – Spring 1994 - he gets lost in his focus on the unfolding events in Rwanda which are murky and hard to see, as the borders were closed, and information was only gradually coming out.

He loses track of his own life and his pain over the tragedy within his own family and doing what he needs to do to bury himself in this focus.

If this story was taking place now, I think Matt would be ricocheting between one terrible thing after another, stuck constantly on the Internet, but I wanted the focus of one single event: a genocide that unfolded within view of the western world and which the western world did not take action to address. I don't by any means equate people's experiences in the Rwandan genocide with Matt and Mel's losses and acknowledge several times through the book that they are, in many ways, privileged. However, as an individual, Matt's compulsion to observe this terrible thing occurring on the other side of the world triggers his own unaddressed feelings around the failures in his family. This is also a contemporary issue: how the world leans on us so heavily now and many of us are triggered again and again by the news we're watching whether that's mass shootings on the other side of the border or the trending of #BeenRapedNeverReported.

Also, I wanted to write about the phenomenon of kids hitting the "hippy trail" throughout the U.S. and Canada – gathering in places like Oregon's Cougar Hotsprings - that was alive and well back in those days.

Do you have a favourite character in this book?

Definitely Mel. She and I became very close while I was writing the book and I'm excited for others to get to know her as well.

In the acknowledgements, you mention that some of Grommets antics may or may not have been inspired by your dogs. What is the most precious thing that a dog has destroyed?

Well, my late dog Oliver ate our couch (as Grommet does). My husband had Ollie before we met and there are family stories about him eating scented candles wrapped as Christmas presents and my mother-in-law's Italian leather shoes (which he threw up three days later).

Our dog Mowat chewed the head off a wooden carving made by my husband's late great-uncle. He also likes to harvest his own wild strawberries and I have to work to keep him out of my zucchini patch (probably because it's too big so sometimes I give them to him).

He also has a propensity for getting into bizarre and mischievous situations. Just this summer he ate a rusty, mud-caked fishing hook while we were camping which we realized when we saw the line hanging out of his mouth—luckily we were able to encourage him to gag it up.

He ate it because he likes to eat dirt and the patch of dirt he had chosen just happened to be the one with a fish hook in it. Why? Because he's Mowat, that's why.

advance **PRAISE**

“Grommet the Dog is my new favourite character! All his poor, messed-up people held me riveted to the page too. Lauren Carter has created a novel for our times: how do we learn to live in a world filled with tragedy? With compassion as big as her talent, Lauren Carter infuses this epic story of the broken-hearted with love, life, and hope. *This Has Nothing to Do with You* is an antidote to apathy and despair. I’m an instant fan.”

—Angie Abdou

“I found it tender and devastating. A deep dive into the trauma created by family secrets — and secret-keeping!”

—Sarah Selecky

“Unflinching and mesmerizing, Lauren Carter’s novel explores the daily impact of generational trauma, the need to love unreservedly, and a woman inching toward healing by dredging up the past.”

—Emily Pohl-Weary