

Talking Points for the debut novel, *Coming Clean*, by Chicago writer Beth Uznis Johnson

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(Please use any portion of these talking points as your space and word count allows.)

A Synopsis and the novel's structure

Dawn never expected at twenty-two to be single, living in a trailer, and cleaning houses for a living. To keep life interesting, she spies on her customers, messes with their stuff, and agrees to pose for her friend's photography project in the homes she cleans. Matthew, an evocative artist, is submitting the project for a \$20,000 grant. If he wins, he'll split the cash with Dawn.

Dawn could use the money. She's lived in the trailer since the death of her fiancé in a motorcycle crash a year and a half ago. The story opens with a surprise phone call from her dad in Key West. He offers her a job—a real reason to move and start over—and gives her a week to decide whether to accept.

As Dawn tells us in the first chapter, every house tells a story. With the overarching issue of her career and living situation, Dawn takes us through the lives of each home and the people who live there. Each day, Matthew comes over to take Dawn's photograph in risqué poses.

MONDAY is the Turners, a family too rich to be poor and too poor to be rich. Everything in the house seems flawed in some way, as though Barb Turner is clinging to the idea of a happy family with her husband and five kids.

TUESDAY is the McIntyres' lakefront home, where the elitist husband Robert continuously reminds Dawn of her lowly status as a domestic servant. Dawn realizes Robert isn't so classy after all.

WEDNESDAY, she cleans at the Rileys, where the husband Mitch forgets and brings another woman to his upscale townhouse. Mitch returns with a bonus to keep Dawn quiet.

THURSDAY is the smoke-soaked white carpet at the Chens, the Chinese family whose wife loathes the United States and wants to go home. Dawn scrambles to get Wei out of the house long enough for Matthew to take photos.

If Dawn wants to be any of her customers, it's the Letwinskis on FRIDAY. The "Twins" live in an expansive, quiet home in the woods with a huge deck overlooking forest and a seemingly normal, healthy couple trying to have a baby. Friday is a turning point. After being watched through the camera lens all week, perhaps she is ready to be seen again.

Short blurbs from advanced readers:

"In these pages, we find the razor's edge where everyday life tips over into art."

--Ashley Warlick, author of *The Arrangement*

“Gradually our gaze shifts to Dawn herself, and the houses she cleans become our windows into her. A smart, funny, thoughtful novel about a young woman on the cusp of starting over.”

-Susan Perabo, author of *The Fall of Lisa Bellow*

"Regret, guilt, grief, the secrets of private lives put on display, and a chance at redemption. Johnson has such a grasp on how our contemporary world has affected our relationships. This is an impressive first novel."

—Lee Martin, author of the Pulitzer Prize Finalist, *The Bright Forever*

“Dawn is witty and sharp, brave and impulsive, and through her journey, readers will discover there's a little bit of Dawn in each of us.”

-Carla Damron, author of *The Orchid Tattoo* and *The Stone Necklace*

“Turning inside out classic themes of guilt and betrayal, and giving us the glorious middle American version of *Remains of the Day*. This book is practically an instant classic, it is that good and that smart and that brave and that unsettling.”

-Fred Leebron, author of *In the Middle of All This*

Novel themes and reader appeal

BOOK CLUB FAVORITE: Captures themes of socioeconomic status, seeing vs. being seen, what people’s belongings say about them, and the grief of survivor’s guilt as cleaning lady Dawn examines the lives of her customers during a week-long photography project in the houses she cleans.

WOMEN’S FICTION LOVERS: Spy, snoop, and steal with cleaning lady Dawn as she reveals it all during a provocative week-long photography shoot with her friend Matthew—in the houses she cleans.

EARTHY AND CARNEL LITERARY FICTION: For readers of Lisa Taddeo, cleaning lady Dawn has a keen interest in what boundaries she can push as she makes a kind of peace with grief over the death of her fiancé in a motorcycle crash.

DARKLY COMPLEX, WILDLY FUNNY LITERARY FICTION: For readers of Ottessa Moshfegh’s *Eileen*, Coming Clean’s Dawn finds the razor’s edge where everyday life tips over into art when she agrees to pose for her friend’s provocative photography project—in the houses she cleans.

LITERARY FICTION LOVERS: A beautifully written story of a cleaning lady behaving badly during a week-long photography project with her friend Matthew—in the houses she cleans.

A LAUGH OUT LOUD LITERARY study of haves vs. have-nots and healed vs. healed-nots as cleaning lady Dawn and her friend Matthew embark on a week-long photography project in the houses she cleans.

FOR FANS OF CHARACTERS BAHAVING BADLY, cleaning lady Dawn takes readers on an all-too-personal tour of the houses she cleans during a week-long photography shoot with her friend Matthew.

Top 14 lines to draw reader interest

1. Magic with a fresh citrus scent.

Her customers loved it, raved about it,
begged to know her secret.

2. It might be nice to be somewhere in the middle, in the place where poor people thought you were rich and rich people knew you weren't.

3. A house like this, Dawn thought, could totally be enough as long as you didn't make it too much.

4. Every house has its trouble spots. Every house tells a story.

5. The most innocent person can feel guilty by the mere suggestion someone thinks they are.

6. No one could resist a friend like Matthew, one who transported you to better, less painful places.

7. Dawn knew her customers' junk better than her own.

8. You've seen it, you've cleaned it, now move on to the next mess.

9. People let things go for far too long, the sure way to ruin anything of value.

10. For a while you don't worry about the mess.

But then it starts to wear on you.

11. The trick, it seems, is to clean off all the dirt and grime,
and more importantly, to keep it like that.

12. Every cleaning lady spies, snoops, or steals.

You hand her the house keys,
you have it coming.

13. People should notice what they had before it was gone because everything became gone eventually, be it from fading trends in home décor, normal wear and tear, old age or sudden, unanticipated destruction.

14. People who handed house keys to hired help had it coming. The clues couldn't be ignored: clinking vodka bottles in the trash, a crumpled bank statement on the kitchen counter, a magazine under his side of the mattress.

About the author

Beth Uznis Johnson's writing has appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *Broad Street*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Gargoyle*, *the Rumpus*, and *Best American Essays 2018*. She was the recipient of the 2017 McGinnis-Ritchie Award from *Southwest Review* and a finalist in the 2019 *Mississippi Review* fiction contest. She has an MFA in fiction from Queens University of Charlotte and writes from Chicago. *Coming Clean* is her first novel.

Visit bethujohnson.com; X, Instagram, Threads: @buzjohn, Facebook: @buzjohn1

Beth returned to school for creative writing in 2008 with the goal of learning to become a better writer. She has attended more than 25 conferences and creative writing workshops in an effort to better understand the craft of writing, understand the publishing industry, build a network of fellow writers, and to find a path to publishing her first novel.

Along the way, she has built a publication resume—both short fiction and creative nonfiction—in some of the top literary journals and *Best American Essays 2018*.

She is well versed in the process of querying, finding and breaking up with literary agents, and the perseverance to finally get a YES after the form rejection letters writers know too well.

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Regal House Publishing: <https://regalhousepublishing.com/>

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