



Coming Clean by Beth Uznis Johnson

Paperback: 272 pages
ISBN: 9781646034154
US \$19.95 / CAN \$26.99

Epub/Mobipocket
ISBN: 9781646034161
US \$9.99 / CAN \$12.99

Release Date: January 9, 2024

Distribution:

Independent Publishers Group
814 N. Franklin Street
Chicago, IL 60610
P: (800) 888-4741
F: (312) 337-5985
distribution@ipgbook.com

Canadian Manda Group
664 Annette Street
Toronto, Ontario, ON
Canada M6S 2C8
P: 416-516-0911
F: 416-516-0917
general@mandagroup.com

Regal House Publishing

Advancing Finely Crafted Literature
<https://regalhousepublishing.com>
fitzroybooks.com
pactpress.com

A darkly complex, wildly funny story of haves vs. have-nots and healed vs. healed-nots as cleaning lady Dawn and her friend Matthew embark on a week-long, clandestine photography project--in the houses she cleans

Dawn, a self-employed cleaning lady in upstate New York, agrees to pose in the houses she cleans for her friend Matthew's provocative photography project. Over the course of one week, she and Matthew scour the contents of each home to find inspiration but what she uncovers instead is an unexpected connection to the people who live there: from the insecure Bridget Riley and the recent immigrant Wei Chen to the pretentious Robert McIntyre. But it's the troubled housewife, Barb Turner, and the contents of her life that finally force Dawn to confront her darkest secret about the death of her fiancé. *Coming Clean* is a novel of forgiveness, family, and fresh starts.



"Beth Uznis Johnson's debut novel *Coming Clean* is a sharp, sexy, pressure chamber of a book. Earthy and carnal like the work of Lisa Taddeo, darkly complex like Ottessa Moshfegh's *Eileen*, Dawn is a cleaning lady with a lot going on in her head, and a keen interest what the boundaries she can push as she makes a kind of peace with grief. In these pages, we find the razor's edge where everyday life tips over into art. Read it once for what happens, and then again for what's earned."

—Ashley Warlick, author of *The Arrangement*

"*Coming Clean* sneaks up on the reader in the same way that hard truths in the novel sneak up on Dawn, the protagonist. At first it seems we're spying on Dawn's customers along with her, that she is our window into those complicated lives, but gradually our gaze shifts to Dawn herself, and the houses she cleans become our windows into her. This is a smart, funny, thoughtful novel about a young woman on the cusp of starting over. We see that cusp before she does; the tension we feel is the fear that she won't recognize it in time."

—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. Beth Uznis Johnson's debut novel, *Coming Clean*, illuminates as much as it titillates. Johnson has such a grasp on how our contemporary world has affected our relationships. Her empathy for her characters, often flawed and nearly broken, is striking, and her unique vision left me eager to keep turning the pages. This is an impressive first novel."

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

About the Author:



Beth Uznis Johnson's short fiction and essays have appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *Broad Street*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, *Southwest Review*, "The Best American Essays," and elsewhere. She was the recipient of the McGinnis-Ritchie Award in nonfiction and holds an MFA in fiction from Queens University of Charlotte. She lives and writes in Chicago, Illinois. *Coming Clean* is her first novel.



Publicist:
Beth Johnson
Big Bad Words, LLC
734-718-3655
writebigbadwords@gmail.com

Media Contact

Regal House Publishing
806 Oberlin Rd #12094
Raleigh, NC 27605
info@regalhousepublishing.com

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

Releases January 9, 2024, by Regal House Publishing

(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 bethjohnson.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.

Helpful links

Advanced reader copies available at NetGalley:

<https://www.netgalley.com/widget/480837/redeem/2927d0080b14b3afb1f855869b466af9d4b8afb0109f82a61f2846f82069cc>

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

Beth Uznis Johnson author site: <https://bethjohnson.com/>

Buy the book: <https://bethjohnson.com/buy-the-book>

Distribution, Independent Publishers Group: <https://www.ipgbook.com/>

Editor: Jaynie Royal, Regal House Publishing: <https://regalhousepublishing.com/regalstaff/>

Author photo credit: Photo by Edda Pacifico





Photo by Edda Pacifico

Interview with Beth Uznis Johnson, debut author of the novel *Coming Clean*

Releases January 9, 2024, by Regal House Publishing

(Please use any portion of this interview as your space and word count allows.)

Q: What was the spark for the idea of a novel about a cleaning lady?

BUJ: Years ago, I had a cleaning lady who kept moving my fake flowers on the TV cabinet. It was like playing a game: each week she rearranged them one way, each week I put them back. It went on and on until, one day, I realized how funny it was. It was like never-ending checkers, with each player refusing to lose.

It struck me that a cleaning lady would make a great character in a novel. There's a weird sense of power having access to a whole houseful of people's stuff, despite the socioeconomic imbalances of being paid to clean up someone else's messes.

I'd been working on a different novel project at the time, but the cleaning lady idea was so appealing that I switched gears. I have always been interested in people's houses and the items they keep. A person's belongings say everything about them.

When I began writing *Coming Clean*, I had two questions in mind. First, why did my fictitious cleaning lady, Dawn, move her customers' stuff around? Was she troubled? Disgruntled? What was her backstory? She grew into a very complicated character dealing with the death of her fiancé in a motorcycle crash.

The second question in mind: Who were her customers and what did their houses say about them? As a writer, I had been trying to learn and think more about structuring a story. I decided on a week-long timeline to allow me to create each house Dawn cleaned as its own sense of place. It was wildly fun to imagine the people who lived there and what Dawn might find.

In the beginning of the story, she agrees to pose for her friend Matthew's provocative photography project—in the houses she cleans. I figured it would give them a chance to snoop around and explore the lives of Dawn's customers. It seemed like the reader should get a good look. Plus, there's this underlying tension each day that maybe they'll be caught.

Q: Which was your favorite character to write and why?

BUJ: Dawn's friend Matthew, an artist and photographer, is my favorite character in the novel. Initially, his photography project was a way to give the reader more access into the lives of her customers. I grew very interested in Matthew as an artist and how he perceives the world.

He's independent, self-sufficient, and knows exactly who he is and what he wants. Unlike Dawn, who is often uncertain and feels out of control, Matthew is a voice of reason. His wisdom comes

from a place of survivorship; he had a difficult upbringing and limited support. He is brutally honest, but it comes from a place of kindness and his need to be realistic.

He is exactly the friend Dawn needs. He's actually the friend we all need. His character searches for beauty in all things – that's the artist in him.

Q: How would you and your main character, Dawn, get along in real life?

BUJ: Dawn is only twenty-two and I'm way older than that so I think I'd be constantly warning her to be careful. She agrees to pose for Matthew's photography project in her customers' houses, which raises all kinds of potential red flags. Her cleaning business is her livelihood so it's a risk. She realizes she hasn't thought it through, but it's too late to turn back.

But, don't we all know people who are finding their way through difficult times? Who doesn't make questionable or risky choices? Dawn has survived the motorcycle crash that killed her fiancé Terry. She's in the process of reimagining her whole life, which is nothing like how she expected it to be.

Plus, she has guilt about the accident. People question whether she was responsible for Terry's death even though Dawn herself was seriously injured.

She wants Matthew to see her as a valuable collaborator in his project and tries not to show her discomfort over being provocative and scantily dressed. I'd tell her to be proud of her ideas and stepping out of her comfort zone.

In real life, I'd probably try to get Dawn to smoke and drink less. And, you know, try to set some life goals representative of her actual strengths. She takes great pride in her cleaning business and does an amazing job. Her customers love her. She has real potential. I think I'd want to be the supportive mom Dawn is lacking in the book.

Q: What part of the book was the most fun to write?

BUJ: On Wednesday, Dawn cleans the townhouse of Bridget and Mitch Riley. I'd decided to try to write a scene where the reader might understand the situation more than Dawn does. When Mitch brings home a woman from work, Dawn tries to play it cool. She's the hired help, after all, and what does she care if he's the kind of douchebag who has affairs?

Later, when Mitch is gone and Matthew arrives with his camera, he gives her a new perspective and they debate what happened. It was fun to explore how men and women view situations in very different ways and, because Matthew has a bit more life experience, Dawn feels naïve.

It was also fun to write about the Riley's townhouse because the place is modern and cool, with only black, white, and beige décor. But, there's one room that is obviously Bridget's that is

packed with tins of old letters, a storage tub full of naked Barbies, another full of Barbie's clothes and shoes, and piles of unworn clothes with tags. Dawn and Matthew spend a lot of time trying to understand Bridget's hoarding room and why she locks all her interesting items and memories away.

Q: This novel is about making a kind of peace with grief. Part of Dawn's journey includes reconnecting with her dead fiancé's mother and trying to move beyond the question of who was to blame for the accident. How did these themes come to be?

BUJ: As Dawn's character became more and more clear, I realized part of the reason she messes with her customers' belongings is because their lives represent the one she might have had with Terry. Their missteps and mistreatment of each other make her angry.

Dawn's own mother in the story is self-absorbed and focused on her second marriage. But Terry's family had embraced Dawn as one of their own. Losing him in the accident meant losing his family, too, which she'd hoped would be her family.

Dawn's story is about having to reimagine the life she might have after the one she wanted was taken away from her. It seems essential that she would try to clear the air with Terry's mother and give her own mother one last chance to be more supportive.

It doesn't turn out like she wants or expects, but I hope the reader will feel like Dawn has worked out some of her grief and can move forward.