

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

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