



## WHAT TO KNOW about Clare Beams



Fiction writer Clare Beams is the author of the short story collection *We Show What We Have Learned*. The collection, published in 2016, won the Bard Fiction Prize and was a Kirkus Best Debut as well as a finalist for several other awards. Her most recent publication, *The Garden*, landed on several Best Books of 2024 lists, and her novel *The Illness Lesson* (2020)

was a New York Times Editor's choice. Beams has received several fellowships including the National Endowment of the Arts, MacDowell, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. A finalist for the 2023 Joyce Carol Oates/ New Literary Project Prize, Beams is currently teaching in the Randolph College MFA program and lives in Pittsburgh with her husband and children.

For more information, access [clarebeams.com](http://clarebeams.com)

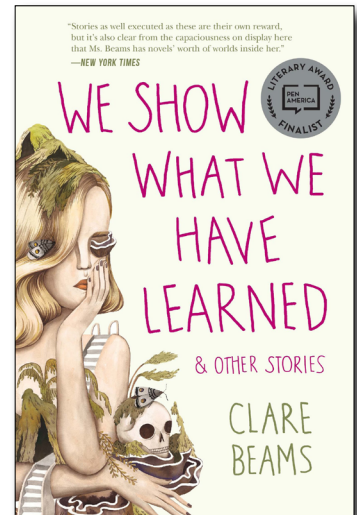
## QUESTIONS: *We Show What We Have Learned & Other Stories* (2017)

*We Show What We Have Learned* is a collection of short stories that depicts what it means to be human, to experience life, in many different settings and time periods.

- Though each story is different, what themes can be found in each of the stories? How might the stories be connected?
- Grief is an emotion experienced by everyone, including many of the characters in this collection. How is grief portrayed throughout this collection? Do you feel that one (or more) stories deal with grief more than others? If so, why?
- In the title piece, Beams tells the story of a teacher, Ms. Swenson, who continuously gives pieces of herself to reach her students. She tells her students one day that "it is time for you to show what you have learned." What is something, outside of educational topics, that a teacher, mentor, advisor, etc. has taught you?
- "We Show What We Have Learned" is not the only story in this collection centered around students and education. "All the Keys to All the Doors," "Hourglass," and "The Renaissance Person Tournament" all have an aspect of education to them as well. What about education can we gain from these stories? How can we take the things we gain and apply them to our own education or the education we might give to future students?

In a 2020 interview by Peter Kispert from *American Short Fiction*, Beams was presented with a question about the "complicated desire for physical transformation" that can be found throughout these works.

- How is that desire depicted in these stories? Is there a story that has more physical transformation than another? Why or why not?
- Many of the main characters throughout these stories are women. What role do women play throughout this book? Does a feminist critical approach enhance a reading of the collection? In what ways? In speculative fiction, are readers bound by any rules or aspects of the "real world," particularly concerning gender roles?



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

- In Cynthia Kadohata's novel *A Place to Belong*, Hanako reaches out to touch a boy's burn scar, realizing, "Yes, you could learn a lot by laying your palm on someone's scar." While the boy's scar is a reminder of the war, it is also a metaphor for how individuals are 'marked' by their experiences. How does the corset in Beams' story "Hourglass" serve a similar purpose? Does the corset physically alter Melody's understanding of what she has literally learned from Miss Caper? Is the corset, too, a metaphor? How does this view of another person's physical being affect our understanding of Beams' "The Saltwater Cure"?
- One of the many strengths of Clare Beams' writing is her mastery of extended metaphor. Our 2023 Common Reader, Brenda Peynado's *The Rock Eaters*, was another masterpiece of extended metaphor. What might inspire both of these writers to employ this device? How are they creating a new approach to the craft of fiction? As both readers and writers, how might we "show what we have learned" from their work?

## LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- If we realize that Clare Beams' work exists beyond and independent of being classified as "speculative fiction," what are the ethical issues that her work addresses? What are the 'lessons' that we learn from the heart of each story?
- Is it possible for literature to transform us, the way that various characters are transformed by lessons in these stories? How can we use these lessons to create change in our immediate lives? How can you use literature on your campus or in your community to send a message that good things happen to us when we collectively experience a common text? What type of service project can you participate in with your community that is focused on literacy or educational outreach?
- How important is it to discuss the stress of teaching and education, particularly in a climate where books are being banned and resources are being limited? What can we do to prevent educators from experiencing a version of "disintegration" that affects Ms. Swenson in "We Show What We Have Learned"?

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES

[National Council of Teachers of English \(NCTE\)](http://National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE))  
[American Library Association - Banned Books](http://American Library Association - Banned Books)  
[Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation online support groups](http://Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation online support groups)  
[Office on Women's Health \(OASH\)](http://Office on Women's Health (OASH))  
[Service Project inspiration: \[www.kindcotton.com\]\(http://www.kindcotton.com\)](http://Service Project inspiration: www.kindcotton.com)  
[National Organization for Women \(NOW.org\)](http://National Organization for Women (NOW.org))  
 Find community mental health programs near you  
 Contact your local public library for literacy programs or tutor training

## ADDITIONAL READINGS

Cameron Barnett, *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water* (2017)  
 Brian Broome, *Punch Me up to the Gods* (2021)  
 Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (1922) and "Paul's Case" (1905)  
 Anthony Doerr, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (2021)  
 Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic* (2019)  
 Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir* (2018)  
 Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (2005)  
 John Williams, *Stoner* (1965)