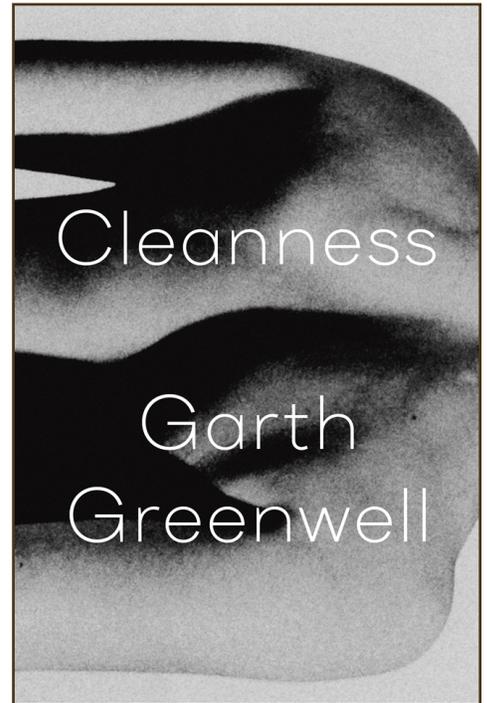


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Cleanness

by Garth Greenwell



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I loved Garth Greenwell's debut, *What Belongs to You*. It tells the story of a romance between two men, an American teacher and a charismatic hustler he propositions in a public bathroom in Sofia, Bulgaria. *The New York Times* called that book "a rich, important debut, an instant classic to be savored by all lovers of serious fiction because of, not despite, its subject: a gay man's endeavor to fathom his own heart." Greenwell's devastating new work of fiction, *Cleanness*, goes even further.

Narrated by the same expat teacher of the debut, *Cleanness* encompasses a broader range of relationships, between teachers, students, lovers, friends, past, and present. It spans nine chapters set in new locations: a writer's retreat on the Baltic Sea in "Harbor"; an Italian hamlet in "The Frog King." It contains some of the most candid, evocative writing about physical intimacy I've ever read. It bears witness to a revelatory romance between the narrator and R., a closeted fellow foreigner. *Cleanness* is a world summoned up, its linked chapters bending into a sweeping narrative arc. Greenwell's elegant prose imbues everything with dignity.

—Mitzi Angel, Publisher

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the genre of *Cleanness*? Why is the book structured into three distinct sections, only one of which is titled (“Loving R.”)? Is this sequencing chronological, associative, or both?
2. Why are certain elements of the narrator’s life obscured or omitted? How do those omissions echo the narrator’s desire to “be nothing” (29)? What other information does the book conceal?
3. Several chapters take place on brief trips away from Sofia. What does the narrator seek in transitory places and relationships? How do these relationships shift across settings?
4. The second chapter, “Gospodar,” and the penultimate, “Little Saint,” depict two erotic encounters with men the narrator has met online. How do these chapters complement or complicate one another?
5. In “Gospodar,” the narrator finds in submission “the pleasure of service . . . the pleasure of being used” (32–33). How do intimate encounters work as economic transactions? What happens when the sexual contract is revised or broken?
6. How does sex compel the characters to confront, perform, or relive trauma? What are the limitations or dangers of sex as a therapeutic exercise?
7. In “Decent People,” the narrator recounts an altercation at a political protest in which a demonstrator shattered a window: “This escalation seemed to give the crowd pause, it was as if there were an indrawn breath, a hesitation that might have been the prelude to real violence” (53–54). What other instances of *almost* violence or *almost* action occur in *Cleanness*?
8. In the title chapter, “Cleanness,” the narrator describes his relationship with R.: “it poured a kind of cleanness over everything we did” (97). What is “it” in this instance? What differentiates R. from the narrator’s other relationships? What are the meanings of the book’s title, and how do these meanings reverberate through other chapters?
9. In the same chapter, a persistent wind punctuates the narrator’s conversation with R. How does the environment evoke mood here and elsewhere—the sea in “Harbor,” the architecture in “Mentor”?
10. Like his author, the narrator is a writer and poet. Following his breakup with R., he confesses: “I wanted to ruin what he had made, what he had made me, I mean, the person he had made me” (159). How does his narration register the writing process? What does the style suggest about the nature of language and representation?
11. Greenwell writes in English, but his American narrator speaks Bulgarian with near fluency. Are there instances where the narrator feels either emboldened or constrained by translation? Why does Greenwell weave Bulgarian phrases into the English text?
12. How does Sofia’s Soviet past affect individual life and gay culture? Does this history manifest in the physical, architectural environment? How does oppression operate there, and in what ways is this similar or different from how the narrator recalls experiencing marginalization in America?
13. In “Harbor,” the narrator reflects on his fraught religious past (162). Elsewhere, he gives a

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submissive sexual partner the name *Svetcheto*, “the little saint” (173). How does erotic desire coincide with, or bristle against, religious devotion?

14. In the final chapter, “An Evening Out,” the narrator spends a night drinking with Z. and N., two former students. The shift in setting accentuates his longing for Z., culminating in a scene of voyeurism (212–213). How does this moment recall his conversation with G. in “Mentor,” which also takes place outside of the classroom? How do ethical uncertainties incite guilt and shame? Does the book resolve these questions?

About the Author

Garth Greenwell is the author of *What Belongs to You*, which won the British Book Award for Debut of the Year, was long-listed for the National Book Award, and was a finalist for six other awards, including the PEN/Faulkner Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. A *New York Times Book Review* Editors’ Choice, it was named a Best Book of 2016 by more than fifty publications in nine countries, and is being translated into a dozen languages. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *A Public Space*, and he has written nonfiction for *The Guardian*, the *London Review of Books*, and *Harper’s Magazine*, among other publications. He lives in Iowa City.

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