

Clean to the Bone: A Cooper School Novel

Jan Levine Thal

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Nuanced depictions of primary and secondary characters make the setting of a New York boarding school come alive.

In the grand tradition of mysterious happenings at boarding schools, Jan Levine Thal's *Clean to the Bone*, the first Cooper School novel, places Callie Franklin in the middle of intrigue when she lands a job teaching English at an all-female academy. The Cooper School, in small-town upstate New York, is a place where, as a colleague warns her early on, "terrible things can happen to girls." Indeed, Callie has come to the Cooper School in part to get a fresh start from her own terrible childhood.

Wry inner dialogue paints Callie as realistic in her self-assessment. The protagonist's constant literary references in her thoughts establish English not just as a subject Callie teaches but also as a way of life: "Fit from years of running and lifting, she could steady the wobble on her rarely worn high heel dress boots but couldn't magically fix her cheap haircut nor silence the Charge of the Light Brigade. The Valley of Death turned out to be a conference room with a bored custodian." Callie's self-effacement balances with fortitude to create a likable person.

The author peoples her debut with so many similar multi-layered individuals that upstate New York comes alive. In another coup, Thal manages to make her characters' racial identities and sexual orientations come across as incidental traits, rather than defining ones. While the lack of appropriate punctuation and italics pervades the book, these errors do not affect the reading of Thal's nuanced depictions of primary and secondary characters.

Readers follow Callie from one situation to another, constantly reevaluating what is thought to be true, based on information judiciously released by the author. Plot points reveal themselves masterfully, maintaining the narrative's high level of suspense. The rule against cell phone usage on campus also ups the ante, as one never knows who will be on the other end of the line. The isolated, woodsy, wintry setting also asserts itself as a character. Like Callie's knowledge of the goings-on at the school, the sense of place shifts from cozy to dangerous and back again, underscoring that things aren't always as they first appear. On the whole, Callie and her Cooper School Novels have a bright future.

JILL ALLEN (Summer 2014)

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