

***Blue Collars* by Catherine McLaughlin**

About the author

A Conversation with Catherine McLaughlin

Interview Q & A:

1. ***Why did you choose Blue Collars as the title for your novel?*** *Blue Collars* felt right for the story of the Kilroys, a working-class family living in this blue-collar neighborhood in the South End of New Bedford. The novel speaks to the strides and the struggles of blue-collar workers in general and this blue-collar family in particular. The word blue also symbolizes depths of sadness, which Finn fights throughout the book.
2. ***Why did you write the novel? What made you want to tell Finn's story?*** I wanted to expose the corrosiveness of child abuse and be a voice for children who have been abused—to portray how abuse tears at a family and to show the destructive power of secrecy and guilt. I also wanted to depict the power of love in this family. I wanted to explore the dynamics of the Kilroys, their ups and downs, their victories and struggles, how they related to each other, how they had great affection for each other, and how that love sustained them. The story also gave me the chance to show life in the tenements in New Bedford and what it was like growing up in the 1950s and '60s. *Blue Collars* deals with some heavy themes, but it also has nostalgic, humorous, and heart-warming scenes.
3. ***How personal is the story? Is this story drawn from real life experiences?*** This is a book of fiction, and the Kilroys are a family of fiction. But of course, every writer draws from her own life experiences. And yes, I was abused as a child by a trusted family member. That betrayal definitely informs my writing, but this is Finn's story. I have my own.
4. ***Is it difficult to bring your own experience into the public eye with the publishing of Blue Collars?*** I do have my own story of child abuse, and yes, it's difficult to speak about that in public. I'm not very comfortable with it but I don't want to shy away from it either. A trusted family member sexually abused me for years, from when I was a young child – even though I had a loving family. As with many child abuse victims, there are days that I am able to talk about it and other days when I cannot. It's not something you ever make sense of because it doesn't make sense. Like Finn, I've spent a lifetime struggling with the trauma, trying to not be ashamed by it. And Finn and I share this with others who have been abused: we're survivors. But we all survive in our own ways.
5. ***How did the trauma of the abuse affect Finn in her adult life?*** Finn's accomplishments were driven by a need to prove herself worthwhile, but they were never enough because she never felt as if she could be worth much in anyone's eyes, least of all her own. She sought validation through her studies and work. However, validation has to come from within and that wasn't easy. She shied away from intimate relationships, and had trouble getting truly close to anyone. When she did marry, it was to a man who was cold and emotionally abusive. The marriage, after two children, ended in divorce. Although she intellectually knows the abuse was not her fault, she internalizes the blame, feels she can never be lovable, and is eaten up by guilt.
6. ***What are some of your fondest memories of growing up in the South End? How has***

the neighborhood and city changed since your childhood in the 1950s and '60s?

One memory that stands out is going to the New Bedford Bakery on County Street for malasadas and Portuguese bread. We also enjoyed spending lots of time at the beach and using the dike as a short cut. The South End seems to have taken an economic downturn, which started with the factories closing. However, a thriving arts community has built up in the downtown area — that offers more support for artists and writers and more activism. I remember that growing up in the South End we were surrounded by a family feeling, There was a closeness in the neighborhood, and we all looked out for one another. Today, often people don't seem to know their neighbors in that way.

7. ***Blue Collars seems to be a timely story to tell right now, considering the public allegations of sexual abuse and child sexual abuse surfacing today. Do you see this newfound public willingness to talk about abuse as a positive development?*** Yes, I see it as a positive development. In Finn's time, it was the public shame and secrecy and lack of support that allowed this kind of abuse to thrive. Victims today still struggle with that, but the more we talk about it, the more we teach our children how to protect themselves, the less secrecy surrounding it – these make it much more difficult for abusers to hide and get away with it. Also, in Finn's time we were less aware of sexuality and more naive.
8. ***Your characters navigate some difficult racial issues. Why did you decide to explore race in your novel?*** It wasn't a conscious decision. Rather, I envisioned that one of Finn's friends was African American and given the time period and the novel's setting, I just followed that lead to its logical conclusion. In the course of their friendship and coming of age it was inevitable that Finn and Connie would encounter issues of race but this was not a conscious plan.
9. ***One of your mentors was James Baldwin, who writer in residence at Bowling Green State University when you were a graduate student assigned to assist him.. How inspirational was your association with him?*** He had a tremendous influence on me. One part of that was his acceptance of me as a friend, even though he was world famous and I certainly was not. The friendship gave me confidence and a sense of worth. On another level, he taught me many things about the racial conflict in the United States. From a writing perspective, he once wrote on the fly leaf of a book he gave to me, "Go the distance. Love, Jimmy." Writing *Blue Collars* was my answer to his encouragement in that comment. He also taught me that being an honest writer was paramount. My relationship with Baldwin made me more sensitive to Connie's issues in the book.
10. ***The Vietnam War looms in the background during Finn's teenage years and hits the South End hard with the death of Connie's brother. Was his death meant as an anti-war statement?*** The death of Connie's brother was a fact of life. Including it in the book was not a political statement, but simply reporting what would have been typical of the times. Connie's brother, Freemont, died aboard a naval ship in a freak accident. Connie's other brother, Freddie, survived the war but came home with issues that haunted many GIs including drug addiction and injury. In his case, that was shrapnel in his legs.
11. ***Education seems important in the Kilroy family, despite the fact—or perhaps because of it—that neither of Finn's parents went to college and her mother did not finish high school. How did they raise five children who went on to higher education and pursue professional careers?*** The Kilroys raised their children to respect education. It was important. Education was redemption. As with many working-class immigrant families, the Kilroys saw education as the way to success, a way for their children to do better than they had. Finn's family was also unusual in their support of Finn's sister Molly going away to college rather staying home to help out the family. This continued with Finn.
12. ***Finn peels away the bedroom wallpaper in an attempt to break through to her***

brothers' room. What significance does this activity have? The peeling wallpaper was a metaphor for her need to escape and also to have the protection of her brothers. Layers of wall paper speak to the different generations that lived in this house and the different phases of their lives. The theme of removing layers recurs in the book in the peeling away of secrecy and getting to the truth.

13. **Could you describe how you designed the book cover for Blue Collars?** The design looks like a wood cut, but it's actually an etching. It represents the South End of New Bedford with its factories, tenements, churches, the dike, and the ocean—all integral parts of Finn's life.
14. **What other kind of art do you create?** I paint in acrylics. I also write poetry. I wrote a book of poetry called *Under a Circus Moon*, which was published in 2015 and is available on Amazon. And I write creative non-fiction.
15. **What comes next for you after Blue Collars?** I am working on revisions of my most recent novel called *A House of Matchsticks*. It concerns the life of Abby who was born in the 1940s and spends her life repressing her sexuality until in her mid 40s she meets a student who awakens her. I also recently finished another book titled *Monuments in Stone*, which takes place in Ireland and deals with a troubled teenager who commits a horrible crime. I am also continuing with my poetry.