Blue Collars

by

Catherine McLaughlin

Spinner Publications, Inc.

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Text ©2018 Catherine McLaughlin
All Rights Reserved
© Spinner Publications, Inc.
New Bedford, Massachusetts 02740
Printed in the United States of America
Support provided by the Massachusetts Cultural Council

Front cover: "Blue Collars," etching by Catherine McLaughlin
Back cover: "South End Garden, New Bedford," watercolor etching by Jim Sears
Photograph of Catherine McLaughlin by Zachary White
Author's Note: Unless otherwise attributed, all poems in this novel are the author's and appear in her volume of poems, *Under a Circus Moon*, published by Old Seventy Creek Press, 2015.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McLaughlin, Catherine, 1951- author.
Blue collars / by Catherine McLaughlin.
New Bedford, Massachusetts : Spinner Publications, Inc., [2018]
LCCN 2017031611|
ISBN 9780932027320 (hardcover)
ISBN 9780932027252 (softcover)
1. Families--Massachusetts--Fiction. 2. Domestic fiction.
LCC PS3613.C5745 B58 2017
DDC 813/.6--dc23

2017031611

Acknowledgments

First, always first, I wish to thank my children: my son, Conor, who provided my website photos, and my daughter, Caitlin, who designed and created the website (www.creativelycatherine.com) along with her partner, Erin. They are my lifeblood whose love sustains me.

I also wish to thank my immediate and far-flung family for their support and belief in me, especially my sister, Mary Elaine, and her husband, Armand, and my brothers, Kevin, Charles, and Chris. Special thanks to the women of Women's Week—Mary Elaine, Ro, Susan, and Sue—for their early reads and helpful criticisms, and to Ayaan Agane for her reading of multiple drafts and meticulous editing as well as the blessing of her friendship. I am also grateful for the encouragement I received from Ann Sheehan and Pat Gomes.

At Spinner, I would like to thank Sue Grace for all her hard work and suggestions; Natalie White for long hours spent with the manuscript and for her advice and great effort to make this book the best it could be (she wouldn't let me get away with anything); Claire Nemes for her proofreading and suggestions; Jay Avila for his help with book design; and finally, my publisher, Joe Thomas, for his encouragement, work, and belief in this book.

Contents

"Blue Collars" 10
Prologue 11
1. Overture 21
2. Generations 33
3. Origins of Shame 45
4. Biography of a Tomboy 63
5. Molly 91
6. Holidays 119
7. Transitions 143
8. Sunday Bloody Sunday 175
9. Upheavals 191
10. Beginnings and Endings 213
11. Back to the Future 231
Epilogue 246

A Conversation with Catherine McLaughlin 252
Book Club Discussion Questions 254
About the Author 256

Blue Collars

On the outskirts of New Bedford,
a jumble of mills, bricks, and turrets,
bars, diners, and churches
surrounds rows of triple-deckers.
In a third-floor tenement,
a woman dressed in black, dark hair graying,
dusts gilt-edged bric-a-brac from glass closets
and the framed bleeding heart of Jesus
nailed to the wall. The daughter
sits under the slanted eaves on a bed
layered with handmade patchwork quilts,
a frayed afghan across her shoulders,
writing a language her mother cannot comprehend
and rarely speaks, the shape of new words
too sharp against the soft palate
of age and the old world.

The hall smells of spice and linguiça,
but outside, the air tingles with the promise of snow.
In that hour after the sun, before the moon,
schoolboys play ball against brick walls
suffused with pink and purple shadow.
Red-cheeked, blood stirred with vague longings,
they laugh and curse and yell in vibrant chorus,
delighting in their strong limbs and raucous company.
From church to church the deep bells reverberate
and the men released from work appear,
lunch pails, caps and cigarettes.
The mother, sighing, rises to fix the family supper;
the tower clocks of the mills tell the hour,
steeple, chain and spire.

Prologue

September 1995

My mother is leaving home for the first time in her 80 years of life. The house is hollow.

A spoon rattles in the teacup as my mother stirs her tea and drinks in her empty kitchen, this the only expression for a silenced voice, silent with the weight of years, the heft of an unsaid goodbye to the tenement of her childhood and mine. I am Fiona (a.k.a Finn), the fourth youngest of five siblings. Now I look to the sentiment in boxes and plastic bags, the old chairs with worn-down arms, tables scratched with our growing pains. On a wall inside my old bedroom closet, my father's whimsical sketch of Kilroy will not be erased with scrubbing and spray, and there, by my bed, is still the wide patch of plaster covering the hole I'd picked at nightly, trying to reach my brothers' room. I never did break through, but the excavation yielded strips of '60s contact paper, shades of '50s stippling, sheets of generations-ago wallpaper, and, finally, chips of rosedust-colored paint from 1910, until I'd reached the slats in the wall and could go no further.

Boxes are everywhere. We have gathered—my siblings and I—to ease the transition: My older sister, Molly, with her husband Richard, my older brother Tom, and our younger brother, Skip. Only my brother Drew, also older than me, is missing, unable to get away from his research in Los Angeles. Fortunately, my children and my nephews have come to help out.

Ma has never lived anywhere else. She was born in this house and grew up here with her parents and her sister. She set down her married life here, raised her children here, with her parents above and her sister and her family below. Granny's tenement one floor up is still very much as she left it on the day she died, right down to the knife, spoon, and fork set out with a placemat at the table, teacup and saucer waiting for the kettle to boil. We still need to pack that up. Downstairs, where Aunt Joan and her husband, Callan, used to live, stands empty, cleaned out by my cousins after their mother died a few months ago. My mother is the only one left living here, and now she, too, is leaving the neighborhood where she once knew everyone and now knows almost no one. Ma has recently turned 80, the decade has slipped into the

1990s, and the city no longer seems a safe place for her as sometimes drugs and violence intrude on the peace. The house has been sold.

I stand amid boxes in the kitchen, hearing the echoes of laughter and shouts and tears. The living noises of 13 people inhabit my head. While Tom goes about packing with a goofy lampshade stuck on his head, I remember him at 16…

> *Tom stands in the kitchen in his khaki Eagle Scout uniform, all dimples and freckles and red hair, thrilled that he has moved up to the highest rank in Boy Scouts.*
>
> *"Take another picture for posterity," my mother says.*
>
> *My father groans and complies, his nervous, arthritic hands shaking the old Brownie camera. I'm proud of my big brother in his uniform with the dark green sash that has all the badges sewn on meticulously by my mother. Tom is my hero. He doesn't tease me as much as the other boys, and he always picks me up without laughing at me when I fall off my bike.*

As we pack up our mother's dishes, the lampshade slips off Tom's head and hits the bare floor. He's doing his best to add comic relief, but his eyes tell a sadder story. I flash back to him at 21…

> *He is in uniform again, during the Vietnam War, and at 15, I am ironing his Navy whites ever so carefully while he sits in the rocking chair spit-shining his shoes. I put the iron down on the leg of his pants, and steam rises with the strong smell of hot cotton. Our brother Drew sits in the other rocker playing "Peg o' My Heart" on his harmonica. I hum the bass line to his tune, and he is pleased.*
>
> *"Finn, how do you DO that?" Drew asks me as a September breeze wafts through the open window and steam hisses from the iron. I just grin. Harmony has always come easy to me.*

Molly is in charge of boxing up the living room bric-a-brac. She takes the ceramic Robin Hood statue off the mantle and is inspecting it when my mother yells to her from the kitchen, "Be careful with that. It's an antique."

"Of course, it's an antique. These are all antiques. They're yours," Molly shoots back.

Suddenly I can see a much younger Molly, sitting in the well-worn recliner next to the phone…

It's a warm night in May, and Molly comes down from our bedroom with the intention of taking a bath. She has her journal with her. Before she can get into the bathroom, however, she gets a phone call from her best friend, Bridie. She puts her journal on the table and goes to answer the phone. While she is talking to Bridie, I see Ma edging her way toward the journal. Molly sees her, too.

Just as Ma is about to open the cover, Molly says, "Bridie, hang on a minute." Then, to distract Ma before she can open a page, Molly lets out a positively blood-curdling scream. Ma is so shaken, she throws the book in the air and wets her pants, whirling around to the front door to see if we are being invaded. Molly calmly retrieves her journal and goes back to the phone to Bridie, who is terrified, thinking something horrible has happened. Even I, witnessing the whole event and knowing what Molly is doing, feel chills go up my spine.

"You're crazy!" Ma says to Molly when she recovers.

"It was the only thing I could think of to get my journal back before she had a chance to read anything," Molly says to Bridie, laughing. "It worked."

Meanwhile, there are fast footsteps on the stairs, and Aunt Joan rushes in.

"What happened? Is everyone all right?"

Oh, we're all right, I think. Just recuperating from another episode of Molly's madcap madness.

We clear out the pantry shelves.

"God, how many thousands of plastic containers do you have in this pantry?" Skip mutters as he bags them.

"They're useful," Ma says. A child of the Depression, Ma can't throw anything away. She has rubber bands wound up in a ball, bits of multicolored string tied around a piece of newspaper, and stacks of used, flattened, and washed tin foil, all waiting for some unspecified use.

Skip twirls a few lids in the air as we sort through bowls and bins in the kitchen, and I can vividly recall him at age 10…

He is standing in front of me in the kitchen trying his best to get his wooden top to spin. He will not give up. Like Tom, Skippy has red hair, freckles, and dimples. He looks comical with his tongue sticking out in determination, his blueberry eyes focused on his task. He patiently winds

the string around the top, snaps his wrist back, yanks the string, and lets it fly. The top hits the floor point down and buzzes across the linoleum. He grins.

With a touch to my hand, Ma brings me back to moving day.

She wants me to bring the oversized picture of the Sacred Heart, the one that has always hung on the parlor wall. It's huge and looming, Jesus staring down at us with a bloody, dripping heart below eyes that follow you everywhere.

"I'm sorry, Ma, but this isn't coming to my house," I tell her gently.

She protests. I say I have nowhere to put it.

She tries to foist it off on my other siblings, but no one wants it.

Ma just shakes her head, and I quickly head off more Sacred Heart requests by ducking into the master bedroom, which is just slightly larger than the girls' and the boys' rooms. My parents' room was a comfort zone, where we went when we were really sick, with high fevers and mumps or measles. My poor father had to sleep on the couch those nights, while my mother tended to us in their room. It still feels peaceful and safe in here.

"Has the stove been disconnected?" I hear my mother ask, and I think it's safe to head back into the kitchen without the Sacred Heart coming up again.

Tom checks the gas line on the Humphrey heater to make sure it's disconnected and capped off correctly.

"Let's put the kitchen table in the van—it's going to my house," I say to my nephews. I want to get this move over with, but memories manage to hijack the moment…

Ma is clearing the last of Thanksgiving from the kitchen table, which doubles as a Ping-Pong table after holiday dinners. Tom and Drew string out the net across the middle of the table, and the games begin.

Tom grabs his paddle.

"Come on, Dad, let's go," he says, handing my father the other paddle.

The white ball pings furiously around the kitchen. Dad usually wins the first game, and he does tonight, too. Laughing, he hands his paddle to Drew; after that, we're in for a few hours of taking turns playing the winner.

I look around at the emptiness. Nothing left but the mantle clock, still ticking.

My mother turns her back on her home and slowly goes out the door, followed by Tom and Skip. My nephews hang back with me to do a last walk-through and videotape the abandoned rooms. I tearfully unplug the mantle clock. For this family and this place, time has run out.

The boys back out of the tenement, filming as they go. I follow them out, shutting the door and turning the key for the last time. As I walk by his car, I see Tom hunched over the wheel crying like the boy he once was. We drive away slowly, a procession of packed cars and a U-Haul van, my mother in the lead with me. Dry-eyed, she looks straight ahead as we leave the block.

"Goodbye, my life," she says, quietly.

She does not look back.

We lived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a city scarred by its fall from grace as the once-proud "Whaling Capital of the World." Some called it New Beffid. Others jokingly called it New Beige—why, I am not sure.

Call it what you will: It was home.

New Bedford is a city with its mills and factories, its railroad tracks going nowhere, its secret shames and poor self-image, its steeples and spires and Seamen's Bethel perched on Johnny Cake Hill, but its lifeblood beats through its half-dozen or so ethnic neighborhoods.

Ours was the working-class section of the South End, where blocks of tenements once housed mostly French Canadian, English, and Irish immigrants, replaced in later years by waves of Portuguese, Puerto Ricans, and Central Americans. We lived tight among the other tenements.

Our home was on Winsor Street near Clarks Cove. The sea sounds and brackish smells, the mourning of the foghorn, the reeling gulls, the hum of the mills all haunt my dreams. They make up the soundtrack of my childhood and the backdrop of my striving and struggling family.

At the top of our street was County Street, a main thoroughfare hosting corner drug stores, shoe stores, lunch counters, and soda fountains. At the New Bedford Bakery, you can still get Portuguese sweet bread, airy rolls called Portuguese pops, sugary fried dough called *malasadas,* and custard-filled pastry. Dad used to stop there for a loaf of bread and always asked the girl for "One Portagee, sliced." Further down was the Z Club, the barroom where my father hung out with his cronies: Jimmy-the-Crutch, Manny-Me-Nuts,

Quarter-of-a-Man, Joe Second Street, Odds & Ends, and Copper. I always thought the Z stood for the ending sound in Portuguese, pronounced by locals with heavy emphasis on the "eeezzz" at the finish.

One time, the guys got together and rented a bus to go see a Bruins hockey game at Boston Garden. When they got back, they were so drunk they couldn't recall who had won. Dad went into the Z Club to pee, asking the bartender for the key. And then the toilet paper. And the light bulb. Nothing was safe. Though how Dad, in his condition, negotiated screwing in the bulb to the socket is anyone's guess.

After, the crew tried to get Jimmy-the-Crutch home. Partially paralyzed in his legs, he was wobbly on the best of days, and more so after too many beers. He lived with his mother on the second floor of a house across from the club. Joe Second Street, Manny Menuts, and Odds & Ends tried to get him up the stairs, but only made matters worse. Unstable themselves, they kept dropping him. Dad stayed at the bottom of the stairs with Quarter-of-a-Man, who was too small to be of much help. They laughed as time after time Jimmy came sliding back down the stairs. His mother yelled epithets from the top. Finally, Jimmy took charge. He had strong arms and upper body strength, and despite still being somewhat drunk, he managed to pull himself up the stairs using the banister and dragging his legs. Dad thought it was hilarious. Of course, when he finally got home, my mother was not amused.

At the other end of our street was Crapo Street, where the Fosters lived: Connie, Freddy, Fremont, Little Nicky, and their widowed father. I liked the Fosters. Theirs was one of the few African American families living in the neighborhood. When I was growing up, it was mostly Portuguese, French Canadian, Lancashire English, and Irish.

The area further south, where the beaches are, was considered more upscale. New Bedford's south peninsula sticks out into the water like a stubby thumb with beaches on either side. While our neighborhood was jammed with three-story tenements, sitting on close-together lots, single-family homes lined the boulevard that encircled the most southern tip of the peninsula.

Where the beaches begin, a hurricane dike emerges at the shoreline from the north. Fashioned from giant granite boulders harvested from nearby towns, the dike rises more than 20 feet high and spreads 30 feet wide. When it was built, its primary purpose was to protect the mills, the fishing fleet,

and the harbor, along with rows of tenement houses situated in their shadow. The dike cut off the poor man's view of the ocean in the South End, and with that, the poetry of the inscrutable sea. The smell of tide and seaweed was and is still strong here. As an adult, when I came home for visits, I fancied I could see my father walking into the fog, round shoulders hunched, head bent as if into a strong wind, carrying a paper lunch sack. The foghorn in the harbor lighthouse moaned. The ocean water lapped lazily at the shoreline.

Across from East Beach is where Acushnet Park once stood. I don't remember it, but the adults always spoke fondly of this amusement park and pavilion—the clam bakes, big band music, and dancing every weekend. My parents courted here. My dad held my mother's hand for the first time on the Ferris wheel. The park was wiped out three separate times by hurricanes, and after Hurricane Carol in 1954, the owners gave up rebuilding it. (I was only three when Carol roared through, swelling the waters and flooding the South End. I distinctly remember watching from the window and seeing boats float down our street. The strangeness of it frightened me badly, and I retreated into the kitchen, where the hurricane lamps were lit. In an attempt to make Drew's glow-in-the-dark plastic skeleton glow brighter, I held it atop the lamp's flame. It melted, of course, and Drew was furious.)

At the top of the peninsula and along the shores of Clarks Cove, people launched motorboats or sailboats. The long stretch of Municipal Beach abuts this area.

Municipal Beach was our beach as kids, and almost every day in summer, we'd walk about 10 blocks from home to get there. Directly opposite the beach is Hazelwood Park. Many years ago, when he was a young man and not yet broken by the mills, my father played tennis here. Once, he was even named city champion.

The hurricane dike on this side ran behind the old Kilburn Spinning Mill, a complex of red-brick buildings housing several garment factories and warehouses. This was where I had my first job, at 16, and where my father retired from after being laid off from the Berkshire Hathaway.

Our clapboard, three-decker house was like much of the city's housing—New England-style tenements occupied by related families on all floors. In our case, my mother's sister Joan and her husband, Callan Murphy, lived on

the first floor with their twin sons, my cousins Little Cal and Patrick, known to us as the Twins Downstairs. Granny and Grandpa lived on the third floor. The seven in my family—my parents, Fay and Jack Kilroy; my three brothers, Tom, Andrew, and Skippy; my sister, Molly; and I—were sandwiched in the middle floor.

A squat, gray metal gas burner called a Humphrey heater warmed our home. It sat in the main room, which was our kitchen, along with the white porcelain Magic Chef cook stove and cream-colored Frigidaire with its door rounded at the top. You had to listen for just the right clicking sound every time you shut the refrigerator because it didn't latch right. In the middle of the room stood our dining table and as many chairs as we could cram around it. This was the space you walked into when you entered from the back door, which is the door we always used. The refrigerator was on the right, and straight ahead was the glass cabinet that held special dishes, a fancy clock, and two ceramic dogs.

For much of my childhood, we were without hot running water and a phone, but we did have a small TV in the parlor. It sat on a television stand in the corner. To get to the parlor, you had to pass through the kitchen. We took company into this room, with its tall bay windows overlooking the street. A cedar chest sat in front of the windows in a little alcove, and this spot was where all family formal pictures were taken—proms, graduations, anniversaries, even Eagle Scout promotions. The room was also furnished with a couch and twin rocking chairs, one almost always occupied by Tom, who loved to rock while listening to records on the hi-fi that he and Molly had bought. At Christmastime, the cedar chest would be moved to make room for the tree.

A door from the parlor opened to an elaborate staircase that led downstairs, to the front door, which we almost never used. We always came in from the backstairs. The front staircase was used mostly for storage. It had a musty odor and many, many wall hooks filled with winter coats. Shelves lined one wall containing a huge assortment of canned goods. On top of the shelves were extra Army blankets and pillows. A short barrel held the potatoes, another the onions.

Our tenement had three bedrooms. I shared the middle bedroom with Molly, who was the eldest. In addition to a three-quarter bed, two bureaus, and a narrow closet, it had a two-shelf bookcase on the wall near the bottom of the bed. The shelves were stuffed with Louisa May Alcott novels and such

classics as *Five Little Peppers, Skippy,* and many more, which I devoured by the light that bled in from the kitchen. There was that recurring hole in the wall next to my side of the bed, which I worked on every night, picking with my fingernail, like a prisoner plotting an escape: I was trying to break my way into my three brothers' room. Periodically, Dad would slather thick plaster of paris over the hole. Undeterred, I'd be right back at it the next night, sometimes even before the plaster had dried.

Off one side of the kitchen sat a small bathroom with toilet, sink, and clawfoot tub, and off the other side was tucked a very narrow pantry, which had cupboards and shelves and a long, shallow, porcelain-enameled, cast-iron sink. Here was where we kids had our baths when we were young, and where Ma did the washing with water warmed on the stove: the clothing of five children, the towels, sheets, and bedding, her dresses and aprons, Dad's blue-collar work shirts for the mill and his rugged chinos and all of our bathing suits. After she scrubbed them clean, she'd string them out on the clothesline from the pantry window, which overlooked the backyard. I spent countless hours daydreaming at this window, wondering about life beyond Winsor Street. From here, I could see the sun setting, with its reflection in the windows on the block. I could look out at the green steeples of the Portuguese church, the slate spire of the French church, and the gray steeple of our grand Irish church, St. James, on lower County Street. Truth be told, St. James was the "shanty Irish" church—St. Lawrence's, on upper County, was for the lace-curtain Irish, which we certainly were not.

This was our New Bedford.

This is how we lived it.

A Conversation with Catherine McLaughlin

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.

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.

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.

***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, and the more open we are about it—the more difficult it is for abusers to hide and get away with it. Also, in Finn's time we were less aware of sexuality and more naive.

Your characters navigate some difficult racial issues and you also use some racially charged language. What went into your decision to do that?

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. Readers may find some of the language offensive and maybe even inflammatory. However, it's an accurate and honest representation of the common vernacular used at the time. We whitewash the past at our own peril.

One of your mentors was James Baldwin, who was a writer-in-residence at Bowling Green State University in Ohio 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.

Education seems important in the Kilroy family, despite the fact—or perhaps because of it—that neither of Finn's parents finished high school. How did they raise five children who went on to pursue higher education and 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.

Visit Catherine's website at www.creativelycatherine.com.

About the Author

Author and artist Catherine McLaughlin grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts. She received graduate degrees from the University College Dublin in Ireland and Bowling Green State University in Ohio. As a graduate student at Bowling Green, she was an assistant to writer-in-residence James Baldwin, author of *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin mentored McLaughlin, and they developed a friendship that continued through the last ten years of his life.

McLaughlin earned her bachelor's degree from UMass Dartmouth, where she later returned as a visiting lecturer. She taught English and writing for 40 years at Framingham State University and UMass Dartmouth. In 2015, she released *Under a Circus Moon*, a book of her poetry. *Blue Collars*, published in 2018 by Spinner Publications of New Bedford, is her debut novel. Now retired, McLaughlin is a professor emerita of Framingham State University. She lives in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, with her two cats.

Blue Collars

Set in the South End of New Bedford, Massachusetts, during a transformational time in American history, *Blue Collars* is Catherine McLaughlin's debut novel.

Young Fiona "Finn" Kilroy grows up in a devoted, yet dysfunctional, Irish American family during the late 1950s, '60s and '70s. Theirs is a working-class, immigrant neighborhood, where Portuguese, Irish, French, African American, and Cape Verdean families live side by side in three-decker tenement houses distinct to industrial mill cities.

Finn's hardworking and hard-drinking father labors as a loomfixer at the Berkshire Hathaway textile mill, while her resourceful, Catholic mother holds the family together. Her life seems carefree and idyllic, her days and nights filled with family, singing, reading, swimming, playing board games and building forts. But a terrible secret haunts Finn's childhood and its revelation only deepens her pain and confusion. Her determination to survive—and forgive—in the face of betrayal is as heartwarming as it is heart wrenching.

Blue Collars is a timeless story of a family's enduring love triumphing over poverty, abuse, and heartache.