



*the*  
Clay  
Girl

A NOVEL

Heather Tucker

# Bio



Throughout a long and varied career in the health sciences Heather has gathered stories— from working as a nurse in Ethiopia, Columbia, France, Belgium and Northern Ontario, to her experience as a teacher, a public health and psychiatric nurse and bereavement counsellor. She worked extensively as a professional writer, developing educational resources, policy and curricula... until discovering that ‘playing with words’ is more fun than working with them.

Her stories have appeared in literary publications, anthologies, including *Wicked Words*, *From the Cottage Porch* and *Wild Words* as well as online. She is the winner of New York’s [Literal Latte](#) Fiction Award and the [Writers’ Union of Canada](#) short prose competition, a four time winner of the Writers’ Community of Durham Region short story contests, as well as a finalist in the [Australian Book Review](#), Elizabeth Jolley Prize, Writers’ Union of Canada Short Prose contest, [PRISM](#) International Non Fiction ‘Prize’, Malahat Novella ‘Prize’, the Constance Rooke Creative Non-Fiction ‘Prize’, the Malahat Open Season Award and Far Horizons competitions. Her debut novel, [The Clay Girl](#), will be released October 2016 by ECW Press. She is a graduate of the University of Toronto, The Humber School for Writers, the Institute of Children’s Literature and is a member of [The Writers’ Union of Canada](#) and [The Writers’ Community of Durham Region](#)(WCDR).

Heather and her imaginary friends can be found in Ajax or North Kawartha, Ontario.

***(taken from [heathertucker.ca](#))***

# The Clay Girl will take your breath away

By **MARCIA KAYE** Special to the Star  
Sun., Nov. 6, 2016

You've never met anyone like Ari Appleton. Feisty, bright young heroines forced to deal with devastating family circumstances have long made for memorable characters in Canadian fiction, from Anne Shirley of *Green Gables* fame to Yolanda in Miriam Toews' *All My Puny Sorrows*.

But Ari Appleton will take your breath away.

In Heather Tucker's astonishingly exquisite debut novel, **The Clay Girl**, we meet Ari in the 1960s as a quirky eight-year-old, the youngest of six sisters who are being split up and farmed out to relatives around eastern Canada. The girls are escaping horrific dysfunction: their abusive father has blown his head off, and their skanky, addicted mother can't look after herself, let alone six kids. (Did I mention this is not a children's book?)

At first, Ari lucks out. She's sent to loving aunts in Cape Breton who tell her she's not dirt, as she's always been told, but clay, which is malleable and full of possibilities. Clay soaks up water, they tell her, just as bright little Ari soaks up everything in her path. "And with a little added grit, but not too much, the clay becomes stronger."

But the grit piles up when Ari's mother, now living in Toronto, regains custody. Over the next eight years Ari deals with an increasingly chaotic and violent home life while forging outside relationships with teachers and others who recognize her astounding creativity and burning intelligence. To counter loss after loss, she keeps close an

imaginary sea-horse totem named Jasper, a refuge of stillness and balance in her life where none exists. Heading toward her 16th birthday, Ari realizes that escaping her hellish home life is more fraught than she thought.

*The Clay Girl* leads us into very dark places, but Ari keeps herself — and us — from despair by being funny without being naive, edgy without being cynical. Author Tucker's prose is as lyrical and powerful as the ocean, Ari's voice as sure and strong as a rudder through wild seas.

Tucker, of Ajax, has clearly drawn on her experiences as a psychiatric nurse and bereavement counsellor who has worked in Africa, South America and Northern Ontario. Her rare gift of showing us beauty, hope and humour amid profound trauma make *The Clay Girl* an extraordinary debut novel.

*Marcia Kaye is a frequent contributor to the Star's book pages.*

***(taken from thestar.com)***

## ★ The Clay Girl

*Heather Tucker. ECW (Perseus/Legato, U.S. dist.; Jaguar Book Group, Canadian dist.), \$16.95 trade paper (368p) ISBN 978-1-77041-303-0*

Tucker's triumphant debut novel is the story of a childhood lost, a family found, and a coming-of-age, recounted in precise and poetic language. Harriet Appleton is eight years old, the littlest of the six sisters scattered among their relatives after a tragedy befalls the already struggling family. Sent to Nova Scotia to stay with her aunts Mary and Nia, who rename her Ari, a name she keeps, she finds herself safe and loved for the first time in her life. The idyllic period is cut short when Ari's mother insists that she be sent back to her family in Toronto. Ari will spend the rest of her childhood trying to get back to the only place where she was allowed to be a child. She is aided by sympathetic teachers and a beloved stepfather, held back by her mother's cruelty and a sense of duty to protect her step-siblings. Ari writes, "all the houses that have kept me, slept me, have written their own songs," and indeed the broken homes that Ari moves between, while devastating to consider, contribute to the intricate beauty of the tale. It is at times difficult to read, but this novel is worth every moment of pain and every tear. *Agent: Hilary McMahon, Westwood Creative Artists. (Oct.)*  
*(taken from publishersweekly.com)*

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## **General Discussion Questions for ANY book:**

### **Story:**

1. What is the significance of the title? Would you have given the book a different title? If yes, what is your title?
2. What were the themes of the book? Do you feel they were adequately explored? Were they brought to life in a cliché or in a unique manner?
3. What did you think of the structure and style of the writing?
4. What scene was the most pivotal for the book? How do you think the story would have changed had that scene not taken place?
5. What scene resonated most with you personally in either a positive or negative way? Why?
6. Has anything ever happened to you similar to what happened in the book? How did you react to it differently?
7. What surprised you the most about the book?
8. Were there any notable racial, cultural, traditions, gender, sexuality or socioeconomic factors at play in the book? If so, what? How did it effect the characters? Do you think they were realistically portrayed?
9. How important is the setting & time period to the story? How would it have played out differently in a different setting? What about a different time period?
10. Were there any particular quotes that stood out to you? Why?

### **Characters:**

11. Did any of the characters remind you of yourself or someone you know? How?
12. What is motivating the actions of the characters in the story? What do the sub-characters want from the main character and what does the main character want with them?
13. What were the dynamics of "power" between the characters? How did that play a factor in their interactions?
14. How does the way the characters see themselves, differ from how others see them? How do you see the various characters?

15. How did the "roles" of the various characters influence their interactions? I.e. For a woman: Mother, daughter, sister, wife, lover, professional, etc.
16. If you could smack any of the characters upside the head, who would it be and why? (Courtesy of Nick)
17. Were there any moments where you disagreed with the choices of any of the characters? What would you have done differently?
18. What past influences are shaping the actions of the characters in the story?

### **The Ending:**

19. Did you think the ending was appropriate? How would you have liked to have seen the ending go?
20. How have the characters changed by the end of the book?
21. Have any of YOUR views or thoughts changed after reading this book?
22. What do you think will happen next to the main characters?

### **Overall:**

23. Are there any books that you would compare this one to? How does this book hold up to them?
24. Have you read any other books by this author? Were they comparable to your level of enjoyment to this one?
25. What did you learn from, take away from, or get out of this book?
26. Did your opinion of the book change as you read it? How?
27. Would you recommend a friend unleash it?

*(taken from [bookbundlz.com](http://bookbundlz.com))*