

Women's  
Prize for  
Fiction  
2021



2021 SHORTLIST

UNSETTLED GROUND  
by CLAIRE FULLER

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Claire Fuller was born in Oxfordshire, England, in 1967. She gained a degree in sculpture from Winchester School of Art, but went on to have a long career in marketing and didn't start writing until she was forty. She has written three former novels: *Our Endless Numbered Days*, which won the Desmond Elliott Prize, *Swimming Lessons*, which was shortlisted for the RSL Encore Award, and *Bitter Orange*. She has an MA in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of Winchester and lives in Hampshire.

PLOT SUMMARY

Twins Jeanie and Julius have always been different from other people. At 51 years old, they still live with their mother, Dot, in rural isolation and poverty. Inside the walls of their old cottage they make music, and in the garden they grow (and sometimes kill) everything they need for sustenance.

But when Dot dies suddenly, threats to their livelihood start raining down. Jeanie and Julius would do anything to preserve their small sanctuary against the perils of the outside world, even as their mother's secrets begin to unravel, putting everything they thought they knew about their lives at stake.

*Unsettled Ground* is a heart-stopping novel of betrayal and resilience, love and survival. It is a portrait of life on the fringes of society that explores with dazzling emotional power how we can build our lives on broken foundations, and spin light from darkness.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Fuller depicts a life of poverty in *Unsettled Ground*, and a family that lives an almost completely self-sufficient life, but a life that is so finely balanced on the breadline that it

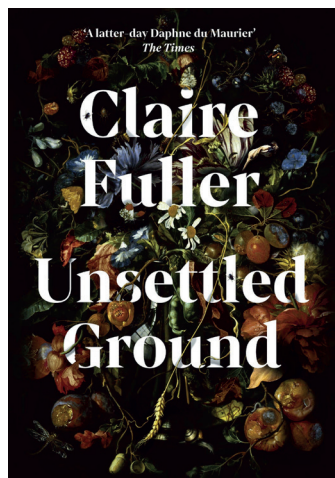
becomes immediately vulnerable when Dot dies. Jeanie and Dot may have worked hard enough on the garden to be able to live off what they can grow, more or less, but they still need money for electricity and other necessary bills, and are very much living hand to mouth.

Dot and Jeanie have been supplying local shops with their produce and putting fruit, vegetables and eggs out for the village in honesty boxes – but it seems that the villagers aren't all that honest. All of the Seeders' earnings rely on the discretion of others, even Julius, who works manual jobs here and there but has nothing steady.

After Dot's death, when Jeanie goes to the shop for essentials, we see her making painful choices about what to buy: washing up liquid instead of toilet roll, margarine that can double as oil. She and Julius eat sparingly, and when unexpected debts arise, there is no way to pay them.

Fuller's description of rural life is intensely evocative, from Jeanie's tomato growing in the greenhouse to Julius' walk in the fields with Shelley Swift, but it is as much full of destruction and decay as beauty: the cottage with its damp and mouse-ridden walls, which still has no indoor bathroom, and the scene where the bailiffs dump all of the Seeders' furniture outside in the mud.

Fuller's description of the land itself is beautiful, but she nonetheless strips the reader of any romantic notions of the English countryside, reminding us of the extreme poverty present in rural communities. Bridget and Stu's house is cramped and ordinary, and it seems that no-one except the rich (Mr Rawson and his well-dressed wife) are living anything like the comfortable idyll. Yet, even the Rawsons' marriage is unhappy, as we learn towards the end of the book.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

Dot has told Jeanie all her life that she has a bad heart, supposedly caused by rheumatic heart disease. Because of her bad attendance at school, Jeanie can't read or write, and Dot has protected Jeanie from making any life choices that will take her away from the cottage, keeping her busy in the garden and helping deliver vegetables to the local businesses. As well as lying about her heart condition, Dot is discouraging of both of her children making romantic attachments, and gives Jeanie unhelpful advice when it comes to sex. As we learn later in the book, Dot is so afraid of losing her children as she has lost her husband that she deliberately lies to both of them to keep them with her – even sleeping with Jeanie in the same bed.

What might have been possible for Jeanie if Dot hadn't told her she had a bad heart? If Jeanie had had a proper education, might she have found out that she had the skills to make a business of the family garden earlier in life? Would Jeanie have found love and a family of her own? Can you understand Dot's actions, or were her lies destructive?

## QUESTIONS

Why hasn't Julius succeeded in having a relationship with a woman?

What do we learn about marriage in *Unsettled Ground*?

What role does music play in Jeanie and Julius' family?

What did you think of the ending? Was it a relief, or was it too good to be true?

## NEXT STEPS

Write love letters between Dot Seeder and Spencer Rawson. What might these lovers say to each other? Is one more poetic and romantic than the other? Do they write about their dreams for the future? What does Dot say about her concerns about her children? What does Spencer say about his marriage? Perhaps they don't mention either of those things at all. Are the letters short, or long? Try to get into the head of each character. What

is their voice like? Do they have any favourite phrases? Are their letters formal, funny, tongue in cheek, flirty, serious?

Alternatively, write the story of how Bridget and Stu met. Bridget explains briefly that Stu kisses her an hour after meeting her, but what else happened that day? Write a short story from either Stu or Bridget's point of view and describe the first impressions of the other person, how their meeting came about, what the kiss was like, what happened after and perhaps what had happened already that day – was it relevant in any way?

How does the other person appear to Stu or Bridget? Is there instant attraction, or is there something else going on?



THE 2021 WOMEN'S PRIZE  
FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

“ IT'S HEARTBREAKING, IT'S REAL, AND DEALS WITH ISSUES THAT I THINK ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED IN FICTION AS WELL AS SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. ”

SARAH-JANE MEE  
2021 JUDGE

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

OUR ENDLESS NUMBERED DAYS by CLAIRE FULLER  
HOW MUCH OF THESE HILLS IS GOLD by C PAM ZHANG