

Praise for *She-Clown and Other Stories*

‘Hannah Vincent practises a sort of believe-it-or-not deadpan surrealism to write about what really interests her—people, humanity, how we all get on, or get along or, in some cases, just get by. *She-Clown* is an excellent example.’

—Nicholas Royle, editor of *Best British Short Stories*

‘Hannah Vincent’s short stories are fictional sisters of Judy Chicago’s epic feminist artwork *The Dinner Party*. The language, the worlds and the characters are glorious.’ —Julia Crouch

‘Hannah Vincent’s stories are as minimal as Raymond Carver, and as clever as Raymond Carver: nothing is ever as it seems then you turn the page and are surprised again.’ —Lisa Blower

‘Hannah Vincent writes tight, spares no words and pulls no punches. From clown paint to oesophageal frogs, her stories are often strange, always sharp and like to linger.’ —Alice Slater

Praise for Hannah Vincent’s novels

Alarm Girl

‘A book of heat, loss, wit and aching tenderness.’

—Tim Crouch

‘Beautifully written; the heat and landscapes of South Africa leap off the page as Indy’s story unfolds.’ —Bella

‘An assured exposition of grief, belonging and the nature of self. Convincing characterisation and strong evocations of South Africa and suburban Britain conspire to turn a simple tale into a book which lingers in the mind.’ —*Sussex Life*

‘Sensitively written, this is a heartrending tale of a young girl trying to make sense of her life while accepting loss and change.’

—We Love This Book

‘In tone and content I could compare it to Nathan Filer’s *The Shock of the Fall*... A subtle and yet powerful novel...’

—Writers Hub

‘Beautiful, moving and aching human.’

—Spirit FM

‘A hugely satiating read. Compelling, beautiful and poetic, this is a book to get utterly lost in.’

—Bookgroup.info

The Weaning

‘An original, surprising, beautifully crafted novel that stands out from the crowd ... packs a powerful punch ... pared down ... enthralling ... a great achievement.’

—Anya Lipska

‘A gripping page-turner.’

—Paul McVeigh

‘Blown away by this book...without doubt a full-on five-star read.’

—Bookish Chat

‘A beautifully written, evocative and very dark story that explores issues that will resonate with the reader. Hannah Vincent is a talented observer; she sees life and people and relates them through her books with incredible insight. Fluent and powerful, I loved this book, just as I adored her first!’

—Random Things Through My Letterbox

She-
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Stories

Hannah Vincent

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To Mum and Dad

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Portrait of the Artist

CARINA'S MOTHER stared at the man's penis. It was misshapen, like a dahlia tuber, with pendulous balls hanging below. The name 'Leonardo' was written in different coloured letters in an arc above the drawing, like a rainbow. The classroom clock ticked softly. She heard her husband's stomach rumble. A casserole she had made was waiting for them at home.

The classroom door banged.

'Sorry to keep you,' the teacher said, breezing in.

She was young, with neat, fine hair and interesting clothes. She pulled out a chair on the other side of the desk, and thanked Carina's parents for coming. Carina's mother glanced at the picture on the wall again. The life-sized figure was contained inside a pencilled square, which was surrounded by

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a circle. There were two pairs of arms and two pairs of legs. She stared at the carefully drawn penis and wondered if it was this young teacher who had drawn the man so lovingly.

Carina was a lively member of the class, the teacher said, with successful friendships and an interest in history. She would be a candidate for one of the good universities, if that was what they wanted for her? And what Carina wanted, of course.

'University's what we want for her, yes,' Carina's father told the teacher, and Carina's mother nodded in agreement, conjuring a mental picture of their daughter in a graduation gown, a scroll balanced lightly in her hands. She hoped Carina would find the casserole when she got back from her netball match. She had left her a note.

'Good,' the teacher said, smiling.

She wore coral lipstick and round glasses with tortoiseshell frames. Maybe Carina would be a teacher one day.

'Now then, the reason I called you in today was this,' the teacher said, opening a drawer in her desk and pulling out a sheaf of papers. She handed Carina's father a few sheets from the top of the pile. He reached for his reading glasses, inside the briefcase by his feet. Watching him, Carina's mother spotted a button lying on the classroom carpet and bent forward to pick it up. It was black, probably off a school skirt, or a schoolboy's trousers.

The teacher gave Carina's mother some pages, too, but Carina's mother didn't have to read them to know what was written there. She lay them on her lap and pressed the button into the palm of her hand, felt its indentation. Scanning the paper, she recognised her daughter's distinctive handwriting—her fancy As and exuberant Ys—and she experienced the same light-headedness she felt when she discovered the pages underneath Carina's bed.

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She had been hunting for last summer's plimsolls to take to the shoe bank—Carina had a new pair of trainers. She was growing fast. She was a young woman now. She had started her periods while they were on holiday. Several packs of sanitary pads with French writing on, which they had bought from the campsite supermarket, were stashed under the bed, alongside a violin case, some old board games and puzzles, and this sheaf of papers. Carina's mother had assumed the pages were homework, and she sat back on her heels to see if she could understand any of it. It was a test she set herself, fully expecting not to comprehend what her daughter had written, but expecting also to find this lack of understanding a pleasure.

The violence of the first few sentences made her catch her breath. She glanced quickly around the room, as if someone was watching her. Then she shoved the papers away from her and staggered to her feet, her heart beating fast, her breath coming in short, painful gasps. She nudged the pile of paper with the toe of her slipper, as if it was a dead thing. Then, trying not to read what her daughter had written, she crouched down, shuffled the pages into a neat stack, and quickly stuffed them back where she had found them.

For the rest of the afternoon she polished and tidied Carina's room, dusting with a cleaning rag made from a pair of her husband's old pyjamas, soft from years of washing. She rearranged the furniture, dragging the bed out from behind the door, vacuuming underneath it and heaving it to a new position underneath the window, taking care to replace the sheaf of papers along with the jigsaw puzzles and the violin in its case. When Carina came home from school, she approved of the changes her mother had made, saying how much easier it would be to concentrate at her desk now it wasn't facing the window.

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Later that same night, after her husband had gone to bed, Carina's mother crept into her daughter's room, like she used to on Christmas Eve. Instead of leaving presents, she took the sheaf of papers from under the bed and read them in the bathroom with the door locked.

Afterwards, with her husband and daughter still sleeping, she went downstairs to the kitchen and made herself a drink. Sipping the hot chocolate, she went through the collection of old clothes she kept for cleaning rags, cutting up a nightie of Carina's and a faded T-shirt of her own with the kitchen scissors. She snipped off the yellowed front section of some of her husband's underwear, and then, with a needle and thread taken from the sewing box she inherited from her own mother, she began to stitch the pieces together. At other times, the neighbourhood was full of noise—of trimmers and lawnmowers and next door's radio—but there, in the kitchen, in the middle of the night, everything was quiet. The weather was so mild, she opened the back door. A fox came sniffing right up to the house, stared her in the eye, then ran away.

Now, her husband was reading the words that had caused her those sleepless nights. She concentrated on the steady tick of the classroom clock, and on the feel of the found button between her finger and thumb. Next to the drawing of the naked man was a list of facts about Leonardo da Vinci's life. Leonardo was a genius. Leonardo was a vegetarian. Leonardo's mother was a peasant girl. The colouring in of the letters that spelled his name was extremely neat, with a red *L*, yellow for the *E*, pink for the *O*, a green *N*. There was no repetition, except for the final *O* which was pink, the same as the first one. At last, her husband looked up.

'I can see why you wanted to show us this material,' he said, removing his reading glasses.

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'It's strong stuff, isn't it?' the teacher said.

'Strong's one word for it,' he said. 'Is it normal for a young girl to write this kind of thing?'

'My question is, why does she *want* to write about these things?' the teacher said, leaning forward and looking at them both, her eyes magnified behind her glasses.

Carina's mother looked away, her gaze dragged back to the naked man. Faintly sketched lines suggested pubic hair.

'It's the world we live in, isn't it?' she said, forcing herself to look at her husband and the young teacher.

'Well, I don't know what world you live in!' her husband said.

His face was flushed, and she could see a small patch of bristles in the hollow of his throat where he had missed a bit when shaving.

'Have you discussed Carina's writing with her?' the teacher asked.

'We had no idea she was writing,' Carina's father said. He turned to his wife. 'Did we?'

The fingers of the man in the drawing were touching the outer edges of the square. His naked feet were resting on the tangent point where circle met square.

'Did we?' her husband asked her once more.

Was the circle inside the square, or was it the other way around?

'I suggest you take this home and have a chat with her,' the teacher said, holding out the sheaf of papers to Carina's father. He took the pages and thrust them inside his briefcase.

'Give me a call if you or Carina would like me to make an appointment with the school counsellor,' the teacher said.

They made their way through the empty school corridors to the car park and drove home through rainy streets without speaking.

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Indoors, Carina was waiting for them, sitting on the bottom stair with wet hair. She was already in her nightie. Her slippers had puppy faces and floppy ears on each toe.

‘What did she say?’

‘She wanted to talk about your writing,’ Carina’s father said, meeting his daughter’s gaze. He brought the bundle of papers out of his briefcase.

Carina scowled, spots of pink appearing on her face and neck.

‘She’s worried, Cari,’ her father said. ‘We all are.’

‘Worried about what?’ Their daughter’s eyes brimmed.

‘Worried about you—about why you would write such things.’

Carina snatched the papers and scrambled up the stairs, clutching her writing, stumbling as she went. Her mother gathered the damp netball kit that lay on the hallway floor. She would carry it to the washing machine on her journey to heat up the casserole, imagining, as she always did, a thread extending from her body, creating an intricate web as she weaved in and out of rooms on her daily business, tidying and dusting and polishing. Picking up the netball kit meant that loading the washing machine and preparing dinner could be contained within one movement—if she left it there, to see to later, there would be a messy tangle of thread. She tried not to double back on herself, in order to maintain a clean line.

‘You wrote those things down—are you saying you didn’t want anyone to read them?’ her husband called after their daughter.

A door slammed as Carina’s mother moved towards the kitchen. She heard her husband tread carefully up the stairs, heard him tap on Carina’s bedroom door, heard their daughter tell him to go away.

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'I'm coming in, Carina. I'd like to talk to you.'

The casserole she had cooked remained untouched. The round dish stood neatly in the middle of a square, woven placemat. The note she had written lay next to it. She loaded the netball kit into the washing machine, glancing at her daughter's name written on the inside of her sports shirt collar in fabric pen. One day it would be written on the door to a classroom, or an executive office, or on the front of a history text book, or on a foundation stone, even.

She scooped washing powder from a box in the kitchen cupboard. Reaching behind the box, she fetched out a small, cloth doll. She had drawn its eyes and nose and mouth in fabric pen. She stroked its hair, made from the frayed laces of outgrown plimsolls, and held the dolly briefly against her cheek. Then she slipped a hand into her pocket and took out the button she had found in the classroom. She held it against one of the dolly's drawn-on eyes and was pleased with the effect. It brought her to life. She hid the doll among the polishes and detergents once more, along with the button. She would sew it on tonight, when the rest of the world was asleep.