

UNFIT MEDIA KIT

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Bio for Lara Cleveland Torgesen

Lara Cleveland Torgesen received her B.A. degree in English from Brigham Young University in 1993 and worked for several years in marketing communications for semiconductor manufacturing companies in California's Silicon Valley. When she moved to North Carolina in 2004, she left the business world to return to school to pursue her M.A. degree in liberal studies from North Carolina State University. Her deep interest in women's studies and social justice led her to research the eugenics movement in the United States, and particularly North Carolina's unique place within that movement. After interviewing



several survivors about their experiences as well as professionals in academics, journalism, and politics, she wrote the cover article for the March 24, 2010 edition of *The Independent Weekly* titled, “The Ultimate Betrayal: NC Eugenics Survivors Seek Justice.” The article won first place for feature writing from the NC Press Association in 2010. *Unfit* is Torgesen’s first novel.

Book Summary

Chrissy Rollings has a mountain of troubles to overcome, one that would crush most other girls her age.

She was born in a small North Carolina town in 1952, into a poor but happy and loving family that always managed to scrape by each month... until the night her father died in a car crash, plunging the family into poverty. Chrissy’s mother is forced to take low-paying jobs to supplement her meager welfare checks, leaving Chrissy to raise her five siblings. But even these sacrifices are not enough.

North Carolina was among the states to practice eugenics — forcing sterilization procedures on thousands of people deemed “unfit” to reproduce. When Chrissy’s mother was faced with the choice of having 14-year-old Chrissy sterilized or losing her welfare check, she makes the only choice she feels she can and signs the consent form. That act of survival sets into motion a series of events that shape the course of Chrissy’s life forever.

Despite knowing in her heart that she did not deserve to be sterilized, that she was not in fact “unfit,” Chrissy struggles for the rest of her life with feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and a belief that she doesn’t deserve to have anything good happen to her.

Little by little, though, Chrissy claws her way past every obstacle, slowly building a new family of friends and eventually finding her soul mate, with whom she is reborn. With their support, she becomes a woman who is strong, loving, intelligent, and anything but unfit.

Her gripping story is an inspiration for anyone who started life with little hope for the future, those who faced problems that felt insurmountable, or just anyone who ever felt “unfit.”

Press Release

UNFIT, A NOVEL THAT EXPLORES THE EFFECTS OF NORTH CAROLINA'S FORCED STERILIZATION PROGRAM, TO BE RELEASED BY POSSIBILITIES PUBLISHING COMPANY

CARY, NC – September 17, 2013 - *Unfit*, the stunning and timely debut novel by author Lara Cleveland Torgesen, is a brilliant exploration of the government-run eugenics program in North Carolina that forced young people – mostly the poor, the uneducated and minorities – to be sterilized against their will.

This fictionalized account – based on extensive research and interviews with survivors – follows Chrissy Rollings, the eldest child of a poor family in a small North Carolina town. At the order of the state, she is branded “unfit” and forcibly sterilized at the age of 14, her mother giving consent so that she does not

lose the welfare checks she desperately needs to feed her other five children. This act of survival sets into motion a series of events that shape the course of Chrissy's life forever.

"This book is especially timely because on July 25, 2013 the North Carolina legislature passed a budget that includes \$10 million in reparations for the surviving victims of this program," says Meredith Maslich, CEO of Possibilities Publishing Company.

Laura Gerald, M.D., who chaired the Governor's Task Force to Determine the Method of Compensation, said, "We heard gut-wrenching stories told at our public meetings by victims who were deprived by the state of the opportunity to bear children. We heard stories of people who in most cases needed help, but instead were irrevocably wronged and betrayed."

After reading *Unfit*, North Carolina doctor Elizabeth Gibbons, MD said the book "really opened my eyes to the extent to which the program operated and the effect it had on the lives of the people that it targeted. I began reading the novel one morning and couldn't put it down until I finished that evening... This novel should be read by anyone interested in learning more about forced sterilization, the effects of violence and abuse in the home, and the consequences of unchecked government power."

Unfit will be released on November 15, 2013.

About the Author

Lara Cleveland Torgesen received her B.A. degree in English from Brigham Young University in 1993 and moved to North Carolina in 2004 to pursue her M.A. degree in liberal studies from North Carolina State University. Her deep interest in women's studies and social justice led her to research the eugenics movement in the United States, and particularly North Carolina's unique place within it. After interviewing several survivors about their experiences, as well as professionals in academia, journalism, and politics, she wrote the cover article for the March 24, 2010 edition of *The Independent Weekly* titled, "The Ultimate Betrayal: NC Eugenics Survivors Seek Justice." The article won first place for feature writing from the NC Press Association in 2010. *Unfit* is Torgesen's first novel.

About Possibilities Publishing (PPCo)

PPCo: Possibilities Publishing is a small independent publishing company focusing on independent writers and would be self-publishers. We are founded on one main principle: Writer's Should Write. Leave the rest to us.

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Reviews

"Lara Torgesen has written an unforgettable book based on the stories of real North Carolinians who were judged "Unfit" and forcibly sterilized during the decades that the NC Eugenics Program was

enforced. As a Family Physician born and raised in NC and educated at the University of North Carolina Medical School, I had read of the eugenics program and the participation of physicians who performed surgical sterilizations on boys and girls as well as adults without the consent of the patients under the direction of a government agency charged with reducing the population of poor, promiscuous, "mentally deficient" future criminals. Lara Torgesen describes the heartbreaking relationships between poverty, mental illness, alcohol, abuse and neglect in the lives of children and other vulnerable people. Her portrayal of the cycle of intimate partner violence is the most accurate account that I have read. "Unfit" is a sobering reminder of the consequences of unchecked government power.."

--Elizabeth Gibbons, MD, UNC Physicians Network

"I found it to be very realistic, believable, and compelling. It reminded me a bit of Jeanette Walls' style (the author of *The Glass Castle* and *Half-Broke Horses*). I found it easy to sympathize with Chrissy and to root for her throughout the story; she's a flawed character, in a very realistic way. I felt like I experienced all the pain with her—her father's death, her horrific experiences as a young prostitute, the sterilization against her will, her unsolved problems with her mother, her terrifying relationship with Stan ... etc. But all this grief and agony are balanced with beautiful things like love and friendship, and overall the story is a hopeful one without feeling unrealistic. I think the plot of the story is very good and executed quite well. Not only that, but I think it sheds light on important issues like eugenics, abusive relationships, etc. I hadn't heard of the eugenics program that sterilized Chrissy in the story, and I was horrified to find out it was a real occurrence."

--Brigid Gorry-Hines, Goodreads librarian and reviewer

About NC Eugenics

"While chairing the Governor's Task Force to Determine the Method of Compensation for the Victims of the North Carolina Eugenics Board, we learned that between 1929 and 1974, the NC Eugenics Board determined that about 7,600 men, women, and children were not fit to reproduce and ordered that they be sterilized, in most cases without consent. We heard gut-wrenching stories told at our public meetings by victims who were deprived by the state of the opportunity to bear children. We heard stories of people who in most cases needed help, but instead were irrevocably wronged and betrayed.

I am encouraged that the North Carolina state legislature recently voted to approve financial compensation to living victims. The state can finally move to another chapter in the history of eugenics in North Carolina, one that starts with a tangible acknowledgement that the state acted in error and blatant disregard to its citizens, and puts these victims firmly on the threshold of justice."

--Laura Gerald, MD, MPH

Author Q&A

What was your inspiration for writing *Unfit*? What do you hope to achieve through publishing this story?

Originally, I wanted to write a non-fiction book that expanded on the article I had written for *The Indy*. I wanted to document the stories of several more survivors, but I was unable to find more people who would talk to me. My sister was the one who first suggested writing it as a novel. We had just finished reading *The Help*, and I think that gave her the idea of creating a character and pulling in much of the information I already knew about North Carolina's eugenics program. I dismissed the idea at first, but

then I began to consider it. All of the news stories that I had read about the program tended to analyze it in terms of cold, hard facts and statistics. Those are important to know, but I felt that the lived experience of being sterilized was largely ignored or glossed over in the news stories covering the program. Such an experience would echo and reverberate throughout one's life. When I began to think of all the ripple effects it might have on a person's life, the character of Chrissy began to take shape. I couldn't stop thinking about her. And then one day, I sat down and started writing about her.

It's my understanding that the next year will be spent searching for more survivors of the program before the compensation for victims is disbursed in 2015. That's going to require more outreach and awareness. If my book can help out in some small way with that effort, I would be thrilled. It would be an honor for me to be part of that. This book is not solely focused on eugenics though. In the promo materials, there's a line in the description about how this book is an inspiration for those who have found themselves in situations where they had little hope, those who have faced problems that seemed insurmountable, and anyone who has ever felt "unfit." I didn't come up with that sentence, but I like it a lot. I think there are many ways that people can be made to feel that they are "unfit," or somehow lesser people. Sometimes it is due to race, class, or gender inequalities. Sometimes it is due to personal problems, traumas, or tragedies that people face in life. This book is my way of reaching out to all of the "unfit" out there. I want them to know that they are not alone and that they are just as deserving of respectful treatment and the good things in life as anyone else is.

A significant portion of the book deals with domestic violence and abuse, because that is a topic that is very close to my heart. Both my father and sister have experienced domestic violence and abuse, and their experiences informed much of that part of the book. My sister once told me that when she finally hit rock bottom, she felt that she had nothing left but hope. Clinging to that hope was how she managed to survive and eventually escape a very bad situation. That idea becomes sort of an undercurrent of the entire novel — that even in the worst of times, we can't lose hope. We will eventually get through it and come out stronger people on the other side. Even though the subjects I cover are anything but lighthearted, I didn't want this to be a novel about how much life sucks. I wanted it to inform but also uplift. As I wrote in the Afterword, "While this book deals with some very heavy topics and a dark chapter of North Carolina's history, I hope that the reader will sense my love for this state and ultimately view this as a book about the strength of family bonds, the resilience of the human spirit, and the transforming power of love."

What kind of reaction have you been getting from people like doctors or politicians in North Carolina?

So far, most of the people who have read it have been family members and friends, although some of that group does include doctors. The reaction has been very positive so far. I've also been surprised by the number of people whom I don't know who have contacted me after borrowing the novel from friends to tell me how much it meant to them. That is very gratifying to me to hear from them. Let's face it — my own family members and friends don't have much choice in the matter. They have to like my book or at least stay quiet about it if they don't. I had very little hope that this book would even be published, so it is exciting to me to think that it might be read and appreciated by people I don't know.

How do you feel about the recent legislation to provide compensation to survivors of the eugenics program? Do you think there will be many people like your main character Chrissy who decide not to come forward as a survivor?

I am thrilled to learn that a few of the remaining survivors will attain some level of justice before they die. It is long overdue. These promises have been made for over a decade now. A little part of me still won't believe it until the day the checks are issued, but the fact that it's been included in the approved budget and there's a plan for disbursement is a very, very good sign. I'm proud that my state is trying to provide a tangible acknowledgement of a past wrong, and I do hope that more of the survivors will come forward to claim it.

How long did it take you to write *Unfit*, and what kind of research did you do?

It took me about nine months to write it. I'm not the kind of person who can just sit down and crank out a novel in a few weeks. I worked on it little by little almost every day. Sometimes I had to take breaks from it, especially during the traumatic parts, but then I'd come back to it. When I wasn't writing, I was often still thinking about it. Often my husband or children would catch me staring off into space. When they'd ask me what I was thinking about, my answer was always the same: my book. Actually, I enjoyed every moment of the writing process. And when I was finished writing the last sentence, I put my head in my hands and cried — not because I was relieved to be finished but because I was sad to have to say goodbye to all the characters I had grown to love.

I did most of the research for it during the time I was in grad school at NCSU. I read every book I could get my hands on about the eugenics movement in the U.S. I was horrified to learn that Hitler had borrowed many of his ideas from *American* eugenicists. I read every article and news story I could find about the North Carolina program. By far the best and most comprehensive work done was a series called "Against Their Will" from *The Winston-Salem Journal*. One of the journalists from that series, John Railey, was kind enough to meet with me and provided a lot of information including contact information for some of the survivors. I also interviewed Dr. Johanna Schoen, a professor of women's history at the University of Iowa, and I read her book, *Choice & Coercion*, which also provided more insight into North Carolina's program. She was one of the very few people who ever had access to the records of the Eugenics Board. Those records are closed to the public, but I was able to find some information from reports produced by the Board as well as eugenics propaganda that was sent out by an organization called, "The Human Betterment League of NC," which sought to "purify" the state's gene pool by ridding our communities of all the "mental deficient" through forced sterilization. The Human Betterment League was backed by some of the wealthiest, most powerful people in the state.

I interviewed NC House representative Larry Womble, who was very instrumental in writing legislation first to take the eugenics law off the North Carolina law books (in 2004) and then to provide some sort of compensation for the remaining survivors. I also interviewed Dr. Dorothy Roberts, a professor at Northwestern University School of Law, and author of *Killing the Black Body*, which I also read. She provided context for me about the former enthusiasm for eugenics philosophy. It was in fact part of a much larger pattern of assumptions that were made, and are still being made today, about race, class,

gender, and reproduction. I even tracked down a woman who had written a letter to the editor in the *News & Observer*, describing how she used to interview prospective adoptive parents for the state's adoption services. She said that, at the time, they would inquire as to the reasons why the couple needed to adopt. On one occasion, the wife confided that she had been sterilized during her stay at a state training school for girls. This former state employee told me that the memory of that painful conversation still haunts her to this day. And that experience inspired one of the parts of the novel.

Even though I had read everything and conducted interviews of the experts and felt that I knew the NC eugenics program up, down, and sideways, I was still unprepared for the first time I came face to face with one of the survivors of this program. I nearly burst into tears when we met, because I think it hit me for the first time that this program had affected real flesh-and-blood people, some of whom were still alive today and still suffering. They were the ones harmed by it, and they still carried their scars from it, even though it happened so long ago. Sometimes I think it takes coming face to face with a victim or someone who has been affected first-hand by something to switch from the mode of just shrugging our shoulders and saying, "That's sad, but what can I do about it?" to saying, "I don't know how yet, but I'll do what I can to help you."

After meeting with four of the survivors and learning their stories and then reading about so many others stories of survivors, I felt so driven to do something for them. I don't know whether my book will do anybody any good. I hope it does.

Are you working on any other projects?

I've tossed around some ideas for some collaborative projects with other people but haven't started on anything yet. My guess is that one of these days I'll find another subject that inspires me and fills me with passion, and then I'll find myself once again typing feverishly in front of a computer screen. That's when I'm the happiest.

Tour Dates

TBD

Images

Book Cover:



Headshot:



Sales Info

Available for pre-sale starting Sept. 15. Release date is November 15, 2013, and *Unfit* will be available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Sony, and Apple.