

# Clarke

## HOLLY THROSBY

There's more than  
one mystery in this town

Throsby is a supremely gifted storyteller, and *Clarke* truly is a wonder!  
MARK BRANDI, bestselling author of *The Others*

## Praise for *Cedar Valley*

‘There’s a fragility at the core of her characters and an intimacy that adds depth to their quirks and peccadillos; there is such heart in her storytelling. Readers who loved *Goodwood* will find even more to love here.’

—*Books + Publishing*

‘A charming epic of intimacy . . . a moving affirmation of the sustaining grace of community that animates and enlivens this impressive work. Large and luminous.’

—*Australian Book Review*

‘Ingenious . . . *Cedar Valley* is a sweet and sad ode to loss in all its guises.’

—*Weekend Australian*

‘Throsby has talked of *Cedar Valley* as existing in the same fictional world as its predecessor, something akin to Kent Haruf’s Holt, Colorado novels or Thomas Hardy’s Wessex tales. By the end of the beautiful and humble *Cedar Valley*, you may yearn for another dot on the map of Throsby’s imagination.’

—*The Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Throsby’s talent for affectionate, satirical portraiture is sharper the second time around with moments of real heart that make [*Cedar Valley*] difficult to leave.’

—*The Adelaide Review*

‘Holly Throsby writes with a dry wit and a keen eye.’

—*Australian Crime Fiction*

‘[*Cedar Valley*] delivers in spades . . . Throsby’s rich characterisation left this reader feeling as though she’d made lifelong friends by the final page.’

—*The Sunday Times (WA)*

## **Praise for *Goodwood***

‘The kind of big-hearted, emotionally bruising story that reminds you why you love fiction . . . *Goodwood* is many things: a satisfying and conscientiously constructed mystery, an affectionate but clear-eyed portrait of a time and a place, and a darkly lovely coming of age story. But most of all, it’s a complete revelation, the conjuring up of a sad, beautiful, indelible little world of its own.’

—*The Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Goddamn brilliant. This funny-sad mystery about growing up, missing persons and dark truths about your neighbourhood will gently, gorgeously demolish you.’

—Benjamin Law

‘Lyrical without being abstruse, colloquial without being contrived. Her characters, while familiar, are nuanced and authentic, and her depiction of small-town life is bang-on in both its endearing and suffocating ways.’

—*Readings Monthly*

‘*Goodwood* is gripping, moving, often funny and written with a sure ear for Australian country-town vernacular. Very good.’

—Mark Colvin

‘A little bit *Twin Peaks* and a little bit *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Goodwood* is a terrific, thoroughly Australian novel . . .’

—*The Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘. . . the world Throsby builds around her teenage narrator in this book is so vivid it can occasionally feel more like fact than fiction . . . *Goodwood* is wonderfully lush and well-realised . . . The intrigue slowly builds to the point where the urge to learn the truth about the disappearances becomes overwhelming. The ending does not disappoint.’

—*The Australian*

‘A lyrical, rolling ballad of a small country town hit with a one/two punch of grief and a one/two punch of burgeoning sexuality for the story’s narrator, seventeen-year-old Jean Brown. The characters are rich and myriad, from family and friends, neighbours, shopkeepers and barflies. All are beautifully realised . . . Refrain and reprise are used brilliantly in a composition that’s rich in rhythm with a melodic tone conceived from a keen imagination, an observant eye and a fine ear for idiom and the colloquial.’

—*Sydney Arts Guide*

‘The small town of Goodwood is rocked when two locals disappear in this chilling, evocative and buzzed-about debut.’

—*Who Weekly*

‘So much truth, so much aching and pain by humour . . . What a wonderful book. I can see the Australian novelist continuum from Patrick White and Thea Astley in her explicit representation of the character of Australians in regional towns. Others have compared Throsby with Tim Winton. I hope she is writing another book.’

—Lindy Morrison

Holly Throsby is a musician and novelist. She has released five solo albums, a collection of original children's songs and two albums as part of the band Seeker Lover Keeper. She has been nominated for five ARIAs.

Holly's novels, *Goodwood* (2016) and *Cedar Valley* (2018), were both critically acclaimed bestsellers. For her fiction, Holly has been shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award, an Indie Book Award, two Australian Book Industry Awards, two Sisters in Crime Davitt Awards and a Ned Kelly Award.

*Clarke* is her third novel.

**Also by Holly Throsby**

*Goodwood*

*Cedar Valley*

Clarke

HOLLY  
THROSBY

  
ALLEN & UNWIN  
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

First published in 2022

Copyright © Holly Throsby 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to the Copyright Agency (Australia) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin  
Cammeraygal Country  
83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest NSW 2065  
Australia  
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100  
Email: [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

*Allen & Unwin acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the Country on which we live and work. We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders, past and present.*



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76087 874 0

Set in 14/19 pt Perpetua by Bookhouse, Sydney  
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

*For Zoë, Alvy and June*

# 1

**L**ittle Joe went up the hallway in his singlet and shorts and crept into the poky room where the curtain was closed and Leonie was sleeping. With her back to him in the dim light, Leonie's form was a hill on the bed, covered in a sackish nightie, the new one she'd got on sale at the Plaza. Leonie went up and down with her snoring—the sound of it like a soft motor—and she stirred then as if noticing Joe from a dream.

‘Joe?’ she said, still facing the dresser, not properly woken.

‘It's me, Leelee,’ said Joe.

‘I'm up, sweetie.’ And Leonie rolled onto her back, making a different landscape now on the creased sheet. The quilt had been sleep-kicked to the floor in the wee hours, such was the heat of the summer.

Joe went wide-eyed across the carpet to the edge of the bed. He said, ‘Lee, there are lots of ambulances next door.’

## HOLLY THROSBY



In the kitchen, it was hot and Leonie made breakfast. Joe ate his Rice Bubbles from a plastic bowl and Leonie ate her fried eggs and toast with margarine. The two of them watched through the kitchen window as men in blue uniforms mingled outside next door.

‘Is Barney died?’

‘I don’t think so, sweetie. Those are actually not ambulances. They’re police cars.’

‘Oh,’ said Joe.

Then he asked more questions about the police cars and Leonie answered most of them with, ‘I’m not sure, sweetie,’ and after Joe had finished asking questions there were spilled wet Rice Bubbles and droplets of milk on the red formica table.

Leonie brought a sponge over and cleaned up. She kissed Joe on the forehead and tried to act very blasé about the police vans and police cars, and she was glad when Joe didn’t ask more questions. He sat up on his knees on the chair, staring out the window, and soon Leonie went over to the living room and switched on the television. She could feel a little perspiration coming out on her body, under her bosom.

‘Why don’t you come in here and watch some telly, Joe. It’s probably getting boring out there now anyway.’

## CLARKE

And when Joe was settled in front of the television, Leonie went back across to the kitchen. She picked up the telephone and dialled.

‘Hello, Dorothy speaking.’

‘Shit a brick,’ said Leonie.

‘I can’t believe it,’ said Dorrie.

Leonie leaned over to the window and held up her hand. Dorrie waved back from the front window of the red-brick house across the street. Leonie could see Dorrie was in her new nightie too, it was a nice pattern of blue flowers.

‘She’s in there after all.’

‘Well, that’s what they must be thinking.’

‘I knew it, Dorrie,’ said Leonie, rippling with a sad sort of excitement. ‘We both did. We’ve always known she was in there.’

## 2

**N**ext door, Barney Clarke was half-woken by the sound of knocking. He sat up in his bed and listened. *Knock knock*. There it was again. A seed of hope sprouted in Barney's chest. He went quickly down the hallway in his bed shorts.

Deb? he thought implausibly.

Ben?

Oh, but the bright day and a policeman on his doorstep. Barney squinted, barely awake. This was not what he'd expected. Who would? The policeman looked a bit like every man who worked at the bowling club, but tall and with a navy hat on. Two other policemen were on the front lawn, and on the street there were three police cars and two police vans.

The policeman on the doorstep introduced himself. Barney forgot the man's name as soon as he heard it. He looked down at the official-looking document in his hands. Had the

## CLARKE

policeman given this to him? Barney could not remember taking it. *Occupier's Notice*. Barney read it over, without reading it at all.

‘So basically we’ll be executing a search warrant, mostly at the rear of your property.’

Cockatoos screeched in the street trees and Barney was informed of his rights.

‘We’re acting in relation to a missing person.’

The policeman was so tall—kind of up-there—and Barney looked past him now to the street, where a contraption that resembled a lawnmower was being removed from a van.

‘Any evidence we take from the property will be stored as exhibits.’

‘I’m just renting,’ said Barney. ‘I just rent the house.’

‘That doesn’t matter, Mr Clarke. You’re the occupier.’

The sound of Comfrey trotting softly down the hallway behind him. Barney stepped out onto the porch and closed the screen door.

‘You stay inside,’ said Barney to Comfrey, and the cat did frustrated circles on the floorboards.

The policeman looked down at Comfrey, and then up at Barney. He said, ‘I used to have a tortoiseshell myself but now I have two blue Burmese.’

‘Okay,’ said Barney.

‘Burmese are very muscular cats,’ said the policeman.



An hour later, Barney—the ‘occupier’—stood on the patio at the back of his house, where there was a small table and two chairs. It was impersonal plastic furniture. Barney’s old house had been charming and homey. This, his present house, was generic and mostly empty. He watched as the unexpected group of police people stood conferring in front of the shed next to the pool.

Virginia Lawson. At first, in his drowsy confusion, the name meant nothing to him. But then it did. *Ginny Lawson*. A twinge of recognition as the police people brought in various pieces of equipment.

‘This is *that* house?’ asked Barney.

‘This is that house, yes,’ said the policeman.

‘Imagine my surprise and disappointment that the real estate agent failed to mention it.’

The policeman smiled. ‘Bit of bad luck, I guess.’

The policeman’s name was Levins. Detective Sergeant Levins. Barney had recovered the ability to read a name tag.

‘Worse luck for Mrs Lawson, I imagine,’ said Barney, as he was police-escorted to his own shed, which was Colorbond and green. The pool next to it was kidney-shaped, a pale blue organ. Morning light shone on the water while Barney answered questions about the shed, which would be such a dull subject on any other day.

## CLARKE

No, he did not purchase it. No, he did not assemble it. Yes, it was here previously.

Barney was on the lawn now, next to the pool fence, and he saw a eucalyptus leaf fall from the overhanging tree. Then he moved to one side as a policeman dragged the lawnmower-like contraption over to the concrete. And he moved to the other side as a policeman carried past parts of a portable blue marquee.

Several leaves floated in the pool, and Barney had the distinct feeling of being in the way—in his own home. Which, of course, was such a familiar feeling to him—it reminded him of Deb, and the way it had been with Deb, towards the end.

Deb! Wait till Deb hears about this! I need to tell Deb!

And then of course the silent chiding of himself: that he somehow thought it was still possible to talk with Deb. He was deluded and irrational and moist under his shirt.

Barney stared at the lawnmower. It had big wheels with rubber tyres and seemed, closer up, less lawnmower and more like something they'd send to investigate the surface of the moon.

'What is that, some kind of radar?' asked Barney.

'Ground-penetrating radar,' said Levins.

'How sophisticated,' said Barney.

### 3

Joe sat on the edge of the couch and Leonie put a little shoe on him, and then another. She fixed the velcro straps down and Joe unstuck one and smiled at the crackly sound it made. Leonie let him stick and unstick the velcro over and over while she switched off the television and looked around for the bag Joe took to preschool.

‘Do owls know that their name is owl?’ asked Joe.

‘Like that they’re called owls?’

‘Yes.’

‘No,’ said Leonie. ‘They wouldn’t know that.’

She went over to the window above the table and watched a policeman open one of the van doors and disappear inside it. In the red-brick house across the street, Dorrie was moving about in her kitchen. Leonie could see the movement of her in the window and it always consoled her to see that Dorrie was there.

## CLARKE

‘Are owls in real life?’ asked Joe.

‘Yes, sweetheart, they are,’ said Leonie.

Leonie, only two years ago, would not have dreamed that someone would ever cohabit with her in her modest, ordinary house. Yet here was Joe. Before Joe, it was a little lonely for Leonie, but she only really noticed this in retrospect. She hadn’t been fully aware of how quiet it had been and how long the evenings were. Now there was Joe and not enough hours in the day. Now there was Joe and a lovely kind of chaos. Joe slept in the second bedroom, which Leonie used to use for Maurie’s visits. Two years ago, Leonie had made the single bed with new striped sheets and tried to make the room more suited to a child, arranging Joe’s things in the way they’d been in his old bedroom.

All the while as she did these things—tucking the sheets in under the mattress, hanging up his pin board with the photographs on it, plugging in his night-light, which was the shape of a bear and glowed orange when she switched it on—all of this time Leonie had hummed and held her grief in with every muscle she had. Leonie had never met a sad feeling she hadn’t tried to ignore. She hummed until it turned into a strange whine.



Barney was in the kitchen now, spooning cat food into a bowl on the floor. He pushed the switch on the kettle and took

## HOLLY THROSBY

out two slices of bread. He noticed that his toaster was still so clean—a bright little toaster. Barney had bought all his appliances at the Plaza in one go and had received a discount of ten per cent for purchasing more than three products that said Breville. There were posters all around the store for this promotion, this offer of a discount, and Barney made calculations at the counter, stunned to be buying appliances, momentarily pleased with his modest saving.

Now a toast smell filled the kitchen and Barney looked up to see the police people carrying out items from his shed and setting them on the lawn in the sun. The red toolbox that had belonged to his father, an old Remington typewriter, a crate of empty Grolsch bottles. Barney spread butter on the toast and then honey.

Deb used to talk about Ginny Lawson—it was all coming back to him. She used to read the newspaper every morning at the kitchen table with her cup of coffee and her breakfast of soaked oats. She used to watch a television show called *Unsolved Mysteries*. It had always amused him how much she loved that show. Barney briefly smiled, standing there in the middle of the kitchen. Comfrey was licking the last of the cat food, pushing the bowl against the wall. And then a policeman appeared at the sliding door and Barney set his toast down and went over. He squinted at the name tag: O'LEARY.

'Does the shovel belong to you, Mr Clarke?'

'Actually, no, that was here. Mine's got the orange handle.'

## CLARKE

‘Would you mind coming out and confirming which items belong to you?’

Barney stepped outside into the stinking morning and closed the sliding door behind him.



There was no way of driving from Leonie’s house to the Plaza without crossing the train tracks. The tracks divided the town of Clarke. Leonie’s house was on one side, and the Plaza was on the other. So Leonie crossed over at Horsham Street, where there was what she considered to be adequate signage and traffic signal interfacing. A boom gate went down when a train was coming, and up again once it had safely passed.

‘When I was a little baby I was so excited of tunnels,’ said Joe from his car seat.

‘Were you, sweetie? I didn’t know that.’ Leonie was preoccupied, thinking about all those police cars. So many police cars! The train went past and Leonie looked down at her pale, freckled hands on the steering wheel.

‘Leelee, why don’t we see any tunnels?’

‘Because there aren’t any tunnels in Clarke. The tunnels were in the city.’

‘Oh,’ said Joe.

Leonie glanced up at him in the rear-view mirror. He had his toy rabbit on his lap and was turning it around in his hands. The boom gate went up and they crossed the tracks and,

## HOLLY THROSBY

several blocks later, pulled into the underground car park. Then Leonie led Joe up the ramp and onto the street again, past the McDonald's and through the gate of the preschool—a brick bunker of a building with a cartoon kangaroo on the sign. It had a shade-clothed sandpit and an astrourfed lawn.

Joe hung his bag on a silver hook and Leonie had her brief morning interaction with Kaye. Joe hovered, holding Leonie's leg, staring at the children playing on the colourful rug. Leonie wrote the time and signed her name on the sign-in form. It was 8.47 and she was Leonie Wallace.

'I could take you to the underpass near the showground one day soon. It's like a baby tunnel,' she said, and Joe nodded. Then she let herself out and waved goodbye to Joe from outside the front window, as always, and Joe waved back with Rabbit in his hand and sorrow in his eyes, and the sorrow killed Leonie every time, even as she smiled through it.

Leonie went back up the footpath and in through the main entrance of the Plaza. *Clarke Plaza: Experience the Lifestyle*. She rushed past the disposal store, the newsagent, the Wendy's. She felt an urge to laugh or to cry. She hadn't been able to talk to Dorrie properly in front of Joe. Dorrie had stayed in her house and Leonie had packed Joe into the car. She'd talk to Dorrie this afternoon. She'd set Joe up with a puzzle so they could talk.

Leonie pushed open the glass door and went along to where her desk was, right next to Wanda's.

## CLARKE

‘You’ll never guess what happened this morning,’ she said, breathless.

‘What?’ said Wanda, who had a Garfield mug in her hand and cat hair on her shirt. A map of the world hung behind her on the wall, with red pins stuck all over it and red lines joining the pins together.

‘Well,’ said Leonie, ‘half the police in Clarke showed up next door looking for Ginny’s body.’