

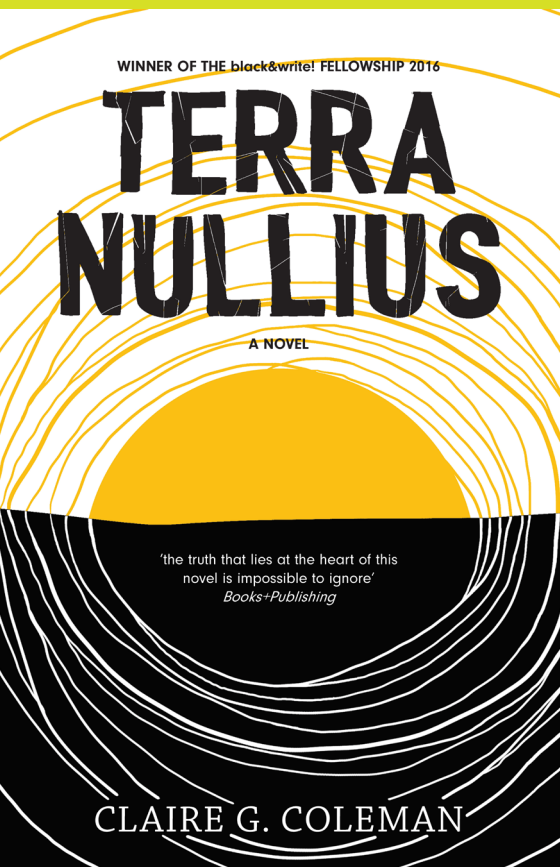


The 2018 Stella Prize Shortlist

Extract

Claire G. Coleman

Terra Nullius



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JACKY WAS RUNNING. There was no thought in his head, only an intense drive to run. There was no sense he was getting anywhere, no plan, no destination, no future. All he had was a sense of what was behind, what he was running from. Jacky was running. The heave of his breath, the hammering of his heart were the only sounds in his world. Through the film of tears and stinging, running sweat in his eyes there was nothing to see, only a grey, green, brown blur of woodland rushing past. Jacky was running. Other days he had felt joy at the speed, at the staccato rhythm of his feet, but not today. There was no space in his life for something as abstract – as useless – as joy. Only a sense of urgency remained. Jacky was running.

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Sister Bagra paced the oppressively dark, comfortably stuffy halls of her mission in silent, solitary contemplation. She was dedicated to her duty, to bring faith to these people, if they could be called people; to bring religion, to bring education to these savages. An almost completely thankless task, a seemingly pointless, useless task. The recipients of her effort seemed totally incapable of appreciating what was being done for them, even going so far as resenting her help.

No matter how much she questioned the validity of the task at hand, it mattered not. She twisted, writhed, fought like a hooked eel, trying to throw off the pointy bit of steel in its mouth, inside her head where nobody else could see. She moaned, bitched and complained behind her nearly always expressionless visage, careful to ensure nobody else would ever know about it. She would persevere, she would fulfil her duty to the best of her ability.

They may be out in the middle of nowhere, there may be nobody to see them bar the ubiquitous Natives, but that was no rea-

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son to allow decorum to slide. The walls glowed faintly; an observer would guess rightly that in daylight they were a blinding pure white. The sort of white that hurts your eyes if you are foolish enough to stare at it for too long. There would not be a speck of dirt on the walls, no sand on the floor, no scuffs, nothing to demonstrate that the building was used. An army of hands kept her halls spotless.

Her robes, her habit was too thick, too stiff, too warm for this ridiculously hot place, yet to not be dressed in the full dress of her Order was unthinkable. She would never suffer a lowering of the standards of any of the women under her command, and she was always far harder on herself than she was on them. Far better to pray, again, and then again that the weather in this godforsaken place where she had found herself would get better, get cooler, or wetter. Her role, her duty was to suffer through discomfort if needs be; her job was to be disciplined, to teach discipline, to bring the Word to the ungodly, so suffer she must.

There was no escaping the certainty that she did not belong in this place, it was too hot and too dry and the food – the quickest way to earn her ire, the easiest way to unleash her famous temper was to mention the food. Certainly, there were local plants and animals that the savages seemed to relish, but surely she could not be expected to actually eat them. Attempts were being made to grow crops from home but they were hampered by the lack of rain and lack of farming expertise.

So many people kept arriving: troopers, shopkeepers and merchants, missionaries and thieves. What they needed was just one decent farmer.

Over half the colony were still totally reliant on rations delivered by ship from home, and what arrived was barely edible after

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the months of transit. Most of it was barely edible before it even left home, after what they had to do to make it survive the trip. Once it arrived at the colony it still had to be transported over-land in the heat to the mission. The food, don't get her started about the food. Stopping suddenly as if startled, she listened. She could hear the susurrus of voices – no intelligible words, just the faintest of tiny noises like the scurrying of the infernal mice that infested this unliveable hellhole no matter what measures they took to eliminate them. Wrapped in the comfort of her accustomed silence she followed the faint, bare trace of sound, finally tracking it down to the correct door.

Talking after lights out, and in that jabber as well – that nonsense the Natives use instead of language. Will the little monsters never learn?

She opened the door and slipped through it, the hems of her neat pressed habit cracking like a whip with the speed; she moved so fast she was almost invisible. Two children were kneeling beside their beds whispering prayers to whatever primitive god, or gods, they worshipped. Surely they were newcomers to the mission school if they knew no better.

They would soon know, that much was certain; both would be in solitary before dawn. Why wait, why not this instant?

She dragged the little animals by their too thick, too curly hair, chastising them in a constant hissing monotone, ignoring their screamed, unintelligible complaints. They had fallen before she had dragged them through the kitchen courtyard, past the new plantings she had been eyeing earlier that day in anticipation of their future fruit. The dead weight of the children was no hindrance to Bagra in her fury, they left two uneven runnels in the gravel and dust. At the far side of the dusty red-brown courtyard,

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past the straggling green, yellow, brown weeds that needed pulling by the too-lazy Natives, was a neat line of three sheds. They were rough but strong, constructed of sheets of iron and local wood, barely the size of kennels. Two of them she opened, the bolts sliding with a snick like a drawing blade, and the windowless doors were yanked ajar. The screech of the doors opening was even louder than the wailing of the children as they were each in turn dumped unceremoniously in a box.

They kept wailing after the doors were locked, screaming more of their jabber. She suspected that they were new to the mission but surely someone had told them enough to fear the ‘boob’ as the Natives called it. Some other little monster would have terrified them with the story.

Sister Bagra had never bothered to learn the noises the Natives made instead of speaking; she could not see the point of learning a language so close to extinction. She berated them in hers, totally unconcerned whether or not they could understand her. Kicking each door once for emphasis, the sheet metal emitting a yell like a cross between thunder overhead and a church bell, she stormed away.

In the dormitories the other children were silent in deep pretence of sleep. To hear Sister Bagra at all was rare, to hear her in a fury was something few forgot. Like an ill-mannered ghost she stamped and clattered her way back to her room to pray for the strength to survive these little beasts, this terrible place.

Several hours later, over an irritatingly bland breakfast – the best the nuns and their Native servants could pull together from the rations they had claimed, begged, cajoled or scavenged from the last ship and from the poorly grown crops of the local Settlers – Sister Bagra held court. ‘We will continue to try and help

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these “people”.’ Her voice was firm, leaving no room for dispute. The word ‘people’ she said in such a manner, with such venom, as to leave no doubt she did not consider the Natives people at all. Pausing to think, to choose her words, she continued, ‘We will do our best, whether or not they can be helped.’

One of the younger sisters was new to the mission – only days, a couple of weeks at most, off the latest ship. She was too new to know when to open her mouth and when to stay silent. ‘Are we so sure they have souls to save?’

Sister Bagra stared blankly at the young woman, trying to recall anything about this nun: even her name would be a start, a handle to hang other information on. She recalled nothing; it was as if the girl had arrived unannounced to the table from the ether. Racking her brain for at least a name, she almost forgot she had been asked a question, rather, a question had been thrown into the air of the room and someone would have to answer it. She was that someone.

‘They have language. It might be vulgar, it’s horrible really, but they can communicate with each other. They have names. They have at least enough intelligence to learn a little; they must have souls.’ A name swam into her vision, faint but she could read it: Mel, that was the foolish child’s name.

Sister Bagra waved a slice of toasted bread – the poorly made primitive bread she tolerated, although she hated it – in a long bony hand for emphasis. ‘What souls they have, we will save. Whatever it is they use for brains we will educate it –’ she smiled the self-satisfied smile the other sisters most likely hated though they should be scared to say it, ‘– whether they like it or not.’

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Jacky ate his meagre dinner crouched furtively in the dappled

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golden light under spreading branches. It was not a lot of food, certainly not the abundance talked about in the old stories the older Natives told each other. An old servant had heard about it from his father who had heard it from his grandfather: there was a time before the Settlers, when everybody had plenty of everything.

It was, however, something – a handful of small apples from the ground under a tree in a too-neat park, a couple of eggs stolen from the cages the Settlers keep their birds in.

Nobody prefers raw eggs over cooked. The texture is too much like mucus: not quite drinkable, not quite chewable. Jacky drank them down as if he was starving. He was not starving, not yet, although he had been hungry a long time. He knew too well what it was like to be hungry. He knew hunger well enough to eat anything he could get, whenever he got it. His frame, slight for his size, short for his apparent age, was all the evidence needed that he had been a long time underfed. Only his muscles were mature; he had the aura of wiry strength earned during a lifetime of hard work.

His muscles and his scars, his body made of barbed wire and leather, betrayed that his life had not been easy. A young man, not much more than a teen, he was scarred like an old soldier. He had a young face, if you could see past the habitual look of pain that belonged on the features of a much older man. Nevertheless, his back and limbs were straight. His agony had the aura of something more emotional than physical.

He could not risk a fire, he knew the Troopers were still out there, would always be out there, looking for him, and a fire in the bush would be as bad as shouting, as announcing where he was. He felt his face harden, his shoulders tighten at the thought of

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going back there. That last beating was more than even he could tolerate, even habituated to beatings as he was. It was surely not his fault that the dinner had burned; cook was drunk, cook was always drunk. He should have never left Jacky, whose job was mostly stacking wood on the woodpile, alone to look after it.

The decision where to go was almost impossible to make; all he knew for certain was he was not going back to that place. His decision to leave had been so sudden, so unexpected it had not really been a decision. It was more like a reaction, an inevitability. All he could think of to do next was not a decision either, any more than deciding to eat when hungry was a decision. He would do what many others would do if they had no idea what to do next: he would go home.

The choice had been so simple it should have been just as easy to start. He would already be on the move if only he knew where home was.

He had been so young when they had taken him, so far from his home, from his people. Nothing of that trip remained in his memory, though logically he must have come from somewhere. They had taken him to the farm from the school. Nothing remained of the time before they gave him a new religion, a new language, a broken degenerate version of the Settler tongue he could never learn to speak well enough.

For all their big talk they seemed to have no real intention to help him to speak their language as well as they. Near enough was good enough, whether the Settlers could understand him well or not. From the school he was sent to a house to be a servant, so long given orders, so long without freedom of action that he had almost forgotten who he was.

I am Jacky, he thought, I belong somewhere, I had a family

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once, I have a family who misses me. This litany played over and over in his head. I have a family, I have a family, I am Jacky.

What memories he had of family were nebulous at best, painted on clouds, on a sky bleeding red, breaking up at sunrise. He knew he must have a family – everybody has a family, he was not born at the school – if only he could remember them. Weeping, staying silent despite there being nobody to hear, he prayed they would remember him.

He did not know where he was going yet was certain that getting home was going to be many, many days, weeks, on foot. He was an escaped servant and had no money and no papers, no permission to travel, by foot was his only means of transport. Knowing he was still hunted he could not even dream of getting help, almost anyone he approached would send him back there.

Even his own people would think of nothing else, they would not hide him, not help him. They had their own problems.

The sun was setting; its comforting warmth, its amber light, fading. It was a wrench to lose the light, yet the darkness and cold held no fear for someone for whom bed had been dirt, in a cold, dark woodshed for years. Besides, those few times he could get away, escape, run out into the bush, were the only times he had felt safe. The cold and the dark were far less frightening than being beaten, far less discomfoting than the cramped claustrophobic shed he lived in before his sudden escape.

His preparations for the night were devoted to not being found. Careful to leave no trail he wandered deeper into the bush, walking only on leaves, on rocks, barely able to see in the half-light. He knew the Settlers were at least unnerved, at most terrified, by this landscape that Jacky found increasingly familiar. Finding a dry enough hollow in the roots of a giant tree, a washout where it

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overhung a dry stream, he crawled in. Safer but not safe, he burrowed into damp, bug-infested litter and fell into a restless, fear-filled sleep.

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A runner was sent out not long after dawn, when Jacky failed to bring in wood for the fire. Nobody had seen him the whole day before, nobody could even remember seeing him as the servants ate their scraps for dinner. The senior servants who had been there most their lives, who knew exactly how to survive, were taking no risks. They had a runner ready before a volunteer informed their master Jacky had taken off. Such swift action took some fire from the Settler's wrath.

Immediately, the runner was out of sight. The station was as if abandoned; the small cluster of buildings, made of tin sheeting and local wood, deathly silent. The Settler hid inside, took out his frustration and anger on a bottle. The servants, Natives all, were hiding, or finding some, any, work to do in hidden places, or outside as far from the buildings as possible. They knew it was too hot, the sort of heat that melts the new paint off your walls. They knew that in that sort of heat the Settler would stay inside. Only the young were talking, not yet completely enslaved in their hearts, they spoke in hushed whispers of Jacky's audacity. Sure, he had run away before but always for only hours at a time, taking off into the bush he could still remember a little, though they could not. Never before had he still been gone in the morning.

This time he had really run away; the youngsters had never even entertained that thought before.

They had learnt a new word 'absconded', and they knew it had something to do with freedom.

'Run away' what could that mean, could they all do it? Where

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would they go? Where did Jacky go, where will Jacky go? Some of the younger servants had been brought to the station before they could remember, others had been born there, the children of servants, they had never known any life other than servitude.

The older men, when they heard the young ones talking were quick to shush them, before the master heard. They too would love to be free, though many had forgotten what freedom was, but their fear of being caught talking about it, their fear of even thinking about it, was greater than that desire. Many had been there too long and had almost forgotten what the word 'freedom' even meant. They did not wish the youngsters to get in trouble for thinking of the impossible. Jacky would be caught, he would be punished, that is what happens to everybody who runs. The youngsters would see the punishment and then they too would learn to fear.

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