

**Nicola Winstanley**

# ***SMOKE***



## Praise for *Smoke*

“In each of Nicola Winstanley’s powerful stories we feel for and feel tender toward, even love, these characters trying to navigate through their lives the best they can, with earnest hope and often unrecognized resilience as they find ways to make do and, despite everything, continue to be themselves, to find agency and possibility. *Smoke* leaves the reader looking into the future, wondering what will become of these people, what will become of all of us, recognizing how lives are often betrayed by the way the world is – often because of the brokenness of men – but also buoyed by the very humanness, the fragility and strength of the women. *Smoke* isn’t a sugar pill, but something far more effective: a clear-eyed and compassionate tonic for strength and courage.” – Gary Barwin, author of *Imagining Imagining* and *Yiddish for Pirates*

“In *Smoke*, Nicola Winstanley gives us a recurring cast of characters who we follow over their transition from girlhood to womanhood, growing up too fast in a world that has all but given up on them. But Winstanley also gives her characters hope, writing with raw, honest, unsentimental prose that infuses her stories with insight and humanity that shines a beacon of light through the bleak landscape of their lives. Nicola Winstanley is a fresh new voice in short fiction, and I’ll be thinking about these stories for a long time.” – Amy Jones, author of *Pebble & Dove* and *We’re All in This Together*

“‘A bad thing happens and then it never stops,’ says one of the characters in Nicola Winstanley’s empathetic and compelling collection. This is a beautiful book that gnaws at your heart with its stories about the pervasiveness of intergenerational trauma and the persistent human need to search for love, stability and connection.” – Meaghan Strimas, author of *Yes or Nope* and *A Good Time Had by All*

“Winstanley’s stories move effortlessly between dark and light, between innocence lost and joy gained. She writes characters with a brutal kind of beauty, imbued with sorrow and longing that force us to face things we’d like to ignore, but can’t because their universal truths reside in all of us. These are intimate, sharp, incandescent stories that assuredly declare that while suffering is an inevitable part of our lives, we can choose to not let it define us. A raw, funny and heartbreaking debut.” – John Vigna, author of *No Man’s Land* and *Bull Head*

“The stories in Nicola Winstanley’s meticulously crafted and emotionally walloping debut behave like smoke itself: spreading slowly, getting into every corner, twisting and thickening and darkening, all while the characters that inhabit them struggle to put out the fires that threaten to engulf them. This is a collection that builds in power and strength: by the time you reach its final, unexpectedly grace-filled moments, you are blinking away tears.” – Nathan Whitlock, author of *Lump* and *Congratulations on Everything*

The image features a dark grey, textured background. Overlaid on this background are several white, stylized flame shapes. The flames are elongated and pointed at the top, with some overlapping each other. The word "SMOKE" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the center of the image, partially overlapping the white flames.

***SMOKE***

**Also by Nicola Winstanley**

Children's Picture Books

*A Bedtime Yarn*

*Cinnamon Baby*

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*How to Teach Your Cat a Trick in Five Easy Steps*

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*The Pirate's Bed*

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**NICOLA WINSTANLEY**



A Buckrider Book

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## **RUBBER**

Already, at ten to nine, there's this woman banging on the front doors. Then she stops banging to peer in with her hands cupped around her eyes and tries to see if there's anyone here yet. We're not supposed to open until nine, but Liz opens the doors anyway. "Good morning – welcome!" she says to the woman, like we're on TV, and she's the worst host of the worst game show ever made.

The woman's in slippers, a kitten-and-glitter-covered T-shirt with no bra, by the looks of it, and a pair of burgundy sweatpants – everything plus-plus-sized, but still a size too small. A roll of fat, smooth and pink as luncheon meat, billows from underneath the hem of her shirt. The woman doesn't say good morning back, just flicks her cigarette on the concrete step without bothering to put it out – maybe she doesn't want her slippers to catch fire, or more likely she's just lazy – then she pushes right past Liz and goes over to the sneaker display on the wall. Liz fake-smiles as the woman passes, then props up the Open sign on the sidewalk.

After she comes back in, Liz straightens the mat, picks up and rehanges a coat and jabs some flip-flops back into place on the rack. She doesn't stop. If you couldn't see her expression while she tidied up, you would think she liked this job.

Liz tells me that I have to polish the counter before anybody gets here. There's already someone here, but that doesn't seem to make a difference to Liz. Once she's hooked the doors back to show we are well and truly open, she comes over to the register and watches to make sure I polish properly, as though I'm a total moron and can't clean a countertop. I rub hard in big circles and



say, “Wax on, wax off.” It’s funny, but it just seems to annoy her. I bet she never goes to the movies or does anything fun, so she probably doesn’t get it.

The smell of the cleaner makes me gag, but there’s no way I want Liz to know that, so as soon as she goes to unpack boxes in the stockroom, I stop wiping.

By then, Mrs. Sweatpants is busy pulling all the sneakers off the shelves and checking the shoe sizes, even though I spent hours yesterday afternoon matching the shoes and making sure all the fives went with the fives and the sixes with the sixes – and all the rest of them, right up to eleven. Women’s, men’s and kids’. That’s a lot of sneakers to organize. By one minute to nine, there’s a pile of shoes on the floor beside her, sizes all mixed up. Finally, she sits herself down on the padded bench and squeezes a swollen purple foot into a pair of bright-white plastic sneakers with an extra-thick sole. She bends over, pulls back on the laces and wheezes. She has to strain to get the shoes on because she’s got a lot of gut to get past.

“Margie! Go and help her,” Liz says from the stockroom door to the back of my head. I think about saying, “I thought I was cleaning the countertop, Liz, what are *you* doing?” But I’m not stupid. Instead, I put the cloth and spray bottle beneath the cash register and walk as slowly as I can over to the woman. By the time I reach her, she is actually panting with the effort of doing up the goddamn shoelace.

When she sees me coming, the woman lets go of the laces, leans back in the chair and just waits for me to get down and crouch over her foot and do the laces up for her, like she’s the Queen. I finally get the shoe done up and say, “How does that feel, ma’am?” even though I couldn’t care less.

“Hmm.” She cranes her head over her stomach to get an eyeful of her foot, bends her ankle right and left. “Why aren’t they on sale?” Considering her size, her voice is surprisingly high-pitched. It sort of lilts, like music. It’s pretty.

The blood rushes to my head when I stand, and I have to put my hand on the rack to steady myself. It's tiring just standing up lately. "Ma'am, unfortunately, these sneakers are full price right now. Probably they'll go on sale later, but they're from our new line." I have to smile at this point; it's called *customer service*.

"There won't be any of my size left then. I have a common size." Then she just sits there. She barely managed to get dressed this morning, but she's smeared her eyelids with creamy, baby-blue eyeshadow, like she's a teenager and it's still the '70s. Maybe she's got a hot date.

"Ma'am," I say again, because Liz told me last week that if I didn't start saying "ma'am" she'd tell head office, "maybe you could try on another style that isn't so expensive." To tell the truth, there's not much chance of that, because all the shoes in here are cheap, especially the ones she's squashed her feet into. It's hard to get cheaper than that.

I wave my hand vaguely toward the end of the shelves where we've displayed the thin-soled, cloth sneakers from the end of summer. Liz ordered way too many and told me put them on the end of the aisle to get people's attention, but no one's fooled. Liz keeps bugging me to sell them anyway. "Make a sale," she says. "Make an effort for once."

I just say, "Commission?" She knows as well as I do, we don't get any, and that's the end of that.

Instead of answering me, the woman huffs and puffs and hems and haws, rotates her left foot slowly, pushes up onto her toes. "They fit okay, I guess." This doesn't make her happy though. She sighs and slumps back in her chair.

"Ma'am, why don't you think about it for a while?"

As I walk away, she says, "Well," in that baby voice, and I have the thought that I could help her, but it's past nine and other customers are coming through the doors, so I pretend that I'm too busy and don't turn around.

Liz is standing at the counter with her arms folded, squinting through her plastic, square-rimmed glasses at her fingernails. She takes great pride in her nails and files them into polished claws every lunchtime after she's gulped down her daily ham sandwich – the loaf kind of ham, you can tell, because the square edges of the meat poke outside the bread crusts. She sits in our beige fluorescent lunchroom all by herself and reads her *Woman's Weekly*, cover to cover. She tells me she's too tired to go anywhere, but I know it's really because she likes to spy on me and make sure that even if there is absolutely nothing left to do, that I am doing something.

After staring at her nails, Liz pats down her hair. She goes on and on about her curly hair, how her mother had curly hair too. But it's not natural. It's so tight and frizzy, it looks crunchy. It's obviously a perm. A home perm – there's no way she has the money for a salon one, working here, where all we sell are things made out of rubber. Really! Rubber things, and plasticky fake rubber, like the shoes. Liz told me once that the shoes were just a branching-out from the rubber boots and hoses the store carried originally. After that the store got so popular it became a chain. Can you believe it? The history of this place is fascinating.

I start spraying and polishing, and I guess because she's also bored already, or maybe because she just likes telling me what to do, Liz hisses at me, "Fold your collar down." Then she tugs at it herself, like she's my mother, though my mother wouldn't give a damn what I wore. "And take those earrings out of your ears." I can't really blame her. If I looked like she did, I would try and make me worse-looking too – although, to be honest, I'm already pretty ugly at work, even when I get away with wearing jewellery, because if the stinking rubber weren't bad enough, there's the uniform I have to wear. It's a kind of long, light brown shirtdress with a brown-and-white-checked collar and dark brown plastic buttons all the way down the front, from my chest to just below my knees

where the dress stops – a length that makes even my calves look fat. My friend Amanda says I remind her of a psychiatric nurse when I wear it, which is fitting, if you think about what I put up with every day. Most days, I pop the top button open and wear it that way until Liz ogles my cleavage and tells me to do it back up. I didn't pop it today though. She might notice my boobs are getting bigger.

I should be helping our new customers because Liz doesn't seem to be bothering, but I pretend to clean because I would rather feel sick than have to talk to anyone else. For a while I watch a shrivelled old man run his crooked fingers through the rubber O-rings with intense concentration, until I'm distracted by a commotion near the raincoats.

A woman who isn't much older than I am is trying to keep her snotty toddler still long enough to shove him into a ladybug raincoat, which is clearly supposed to be for a girl. Once the mother has wrestled the toddler's arms into the coat, the kid starts shrieking and kicking up a fuss, and his mother gets mad and counts to three, slow and low, but it doesn't make the slightest bit of difference. Then the kid starts screaming, drops to the floor and rolls around on the carpet until he goes red in the face. Bright red, nearly purple. Lint gets stuck all over the coat before the kid rips it off, throws it in a heap and stomps up and down on it. It's probably damaged, but his mother doesn't pay any attention to the coat. She tries to take hold of him but gets smacked by the kid's flailing arms and legs. She yells, "Stop this behaviour right now!" He totally ignores her and screams louder. I never would have done that when I was a kid – my dad's too quick with his fists, and I'm a fast learner.

"See? That's what it's like." Liz has crept out of the stockroom. She glares at me. "It's no picnic, let me tell you. Especially when you're on your own."

"But babies are adorable, don't you think?"

"They don't stay babies for long. And you have no idea how

they're going to turn out. It doesn't matter what you do. And then you'll blame yourself, no matter what."

The mother digs a bar of chocolate out of her handbag and shakes it in her kid's face. This finally gets the toddler's attention and keeps him quiet enough for the mother to stuff him in his crappy umbrella stroller and tighten the straps so he can't get out. We don't like it when customers eat in the store, but even Liz doesn't say anything about the chocolate this time. The mother hangs the coat back up, all crooked, and doesn't even bother to snap the buttons back together before they leave.

By then, Mrs. Sweatpants is trying on another pair of shoes, light blue this time, like her eyeshadow. It must be her favourite colour. These shoes fasten with Velcro, like children's shoes, but they go all the way up to men's size eleven. It seems she can manage the Velcro by herself, thankfully. She makes a little grunt, and then they're all done up. Next, she pushes up from the chair and admires herself in the full-length mirror that hangs on the wall beside the raincoats.

She turns her feet side to side, scrunches up her nose and pulls up the bottom of her sweatpants past her ankles, so she can see her feet better. It must be obvious even to her that the shoes are terrible, but because no one in their right mind would want to actually wear them in public, these ones are on sale.

"I hope she doesn't want a ladybug raincoat to go with those shoes," I whisper to Liz. "I think we're out of her size." Liz doesn't find it funny, just tells me to stop wasting time and points one of her claws at the countertop I've already wiped approximately sixty thousand times since we opened.

Still at the mirror, Mrs. Glitter-Kittens swivels her head around and opens her mouth, hoping to get our attention, but at the same time a man wearing "The Executive," one of our beige trench coats from last season, tiptoes up to the counter. I know what he wants

before he asks for it. You just get a sense for these things – and of course, there’s the trench coat; it’s not exactly original. “I was wondering,” he says in a fake posh voice. That’s it. Then he just stands there for about half an hour staring at my straining top button, his hands deep in the coat pockets. He only snaps back into action because I sigh loudly. He leans in and whispers, “I was wondering, miss, if you sell rubber sheets.” He’s so close, I can see the foamy spit in the corners of his mouth, the yellow crust where his eyes meet the bridge of his nose.

They always think I’m going to say no; I swear. Maybe they think I’ll shriek and wet myself. But when I lean in closer and whisper back, “Sure we do,” because we do, he says he’ll come back later and scuttles away.

Liz is in the office. I can see her through the sliding glass window that lets her see out into the shop. She’s on the phone and wants me to think she’s calling in the order to the warehouse because the order book is out on the table. But we haven’t counted the stock yet and have no idea what we need. I know she’s called Matt, anyway, because she’s gripping the phone handle hard with both hands, and you can see in her face and in the way the tendons in her neck pop out that she’s yelling her head off, only really quietly. That’s how she always speaks to Matt. He’s her pride and joy . . . not. Nineteen and unemployed and not in university either. He’s categorically a loser, but sexy as hell. Maybe Liz thinks it’s her fault that Matt’s the way he is, and that’s why she’s so crabby all the time.

When Liz notices me, she flicks her fingers and waves the back of her hand toward the woman who is treading around in the blue shoes. Instead, I cross back and stand in the stockroom because it connects to the office. The door is partly open, and, from there, Liz can’t see me, but I can hear every word she says.

“Again? . . . I don’t have any money . . . What will you . . . ? What? No.” Silence. “Are you sure it’s yours?” Then “Oh my God.

You can't –" Then "Will you tell me who it is?" She's not pleading, not even angry, she just sounds defeated. I guess Matt doesn't tell her what she wants to know because almost straightaway she slams the phone down in the cradle, then puts her face in her hands. I get out of there before she catches me listening.

Once I'm back on the shop floor, I take my time and wander back over to Mrs. Sweatpants. Apparently, she's decided not to buy anything because she's taken off the blue sneakers and has scrunched her feet back into her fluffy slippers, and when I reach her, she tries to avoid me and gathers up her tatty, peeling handbag and plastic shopping bag.

At this point, the employee manual tells me, I should try to keep the customer in the store and encourage them to buy one of the items they had been considering. Close the deal. What the employee handbook doesn't account for is what happens when this particular customer wants to make it clear to me she's finished and won't be buying anything at all, thank you very much, no doubt to avoid my high-pressure sales tactics. Flustered and in a hurry, she stands and attempts to put the shoes she's been trying on back on the rack where they belong, but in her eagerness to get out of there, she knocks the rack over. I mean, the whole thing. All the shelving collapses, and all the shoes go flying and get mixed up with each other. Almost every kind of shoe we sell is white. It's literally an avalanche.

Even though she must be pretty old, Liz can move at lightning speed, like a snake, or maybe a crocodile, if you want a really good comparison, and she appears suddenly from the office and zips right there before the woman or I have even had a chance to react.

Mrs. Sweatpants and I both just stand there gaping at the disaster, but Liz throws her arms wide and yells, "What have you done?" At first, I think she must be yelling at me, but she's staring right at Mrs. Sweatpants, who is frozen in place, her hands still out

in front of her as if she could magically make the shelves reassemble by doing a whammy through the end of her fingertips. “How long do you think it takes us to sort out these shoes? To put them on the rack? To make everything nice?” Liz’s round face is bright red, and her perm is bouncing up and down because her whole body is shaking. Then she wags a finger, like she’s acting on TV, but it’s for real. “Why must you waste my time? Look at you! I have to do this all day! And for what? For you? So you can mess the whole thing up? What about me?”

The woman breaks her freeze and takes a step back because she probably thinks, like I do, that Liz is about to slap her right across the face.

The other customers in the store have turned their attention away from the jumble of shoes and collapsed shelves and now focus on Mrs. Sweatpants. Soon, everyone in the store just stares at her. We’re all just waiting for some kind of answer, I suppose, but instead, the woman slowly turns, like she’s walking underwater, and glides past the coats and umbrellas and through the front doors, eyes front, chin up in the air, like nothing happened.

I start picking up the shoes, one at a time, then dig through the pile for a partner and line them up on the floor in a pair when I make a match. Liz tries to put the shelves back together. She groans while she struggles with the hardware. When I offer to help, she hisses and bangs the shelves harder.

While she wrestles with the shelves, the guy with the O-rings comes over to ask for some help, and Liz barks at me, “Finish those shoes! Get those shelves back up and do a count while you’re at it.” Then she pats her hair back down, plasters a fake smile on her face and says, “Certainly, sir,” in the not-even-a-little-bit-shrill voice she saves for customers only and follows him to the back of the shop.

I manage to get the shelves back into place, then pair up and reshelve the shoes for the next three hours, while Liz helps the



customers who trickle in. We don't get a lot of customers, besides the Christmas rush, when people seem to think a rubber garden hose would make a nice gift for a loved one, but still, it never ceases to amaze me how many people come for door stoppers and inflatable beach balls. Although, mostly they come for the shoes. When you walk around here, you can see maybe half of all the people here creaking around in our ugly shoes – not the rich people, obviously, but they don't live around here.

Apart from the fact that Liz is kind of a bigger bitch than usual and doesn't talk to me, the day goes on like it does any other day: it stinks, it's boring and customers tell me to hurry up at the cash register, as if they didn't just spend twenty minutes trying to decide if they wanted a green hose or a black hose and are now actually in a big rush because they're missing an important meeting. Sometimes I say to Liz, "Late for AA again!" as someone bullets out of the shop, but I'm pretty sure she would find it even less funny today than she usually does. I swear, I would be friends with her if she let me – I mean, I've tried – but she's just sour.

At lunch, I don't even bother sitting in the lunchroom because I need to get out of the stink, and I just know Liz'll cut my break shorter than my usual measly forty minutes and make me do something stupid that she could do herself because she's extra grouchy today.

I take a walk down to the seawall and watch the water. It would be a pretty nice break if I didn't feel so nauseated, even in the fresh air, and though I should probably eat my Marmite sandwich, because I need the calories, the doctor said, I throw it in bits to the seagulls and watch them while they fight and scream. "Just like my folks, aren't ya?" I tell them and laugh, then feel sorry for myself for a while because it's funny, but it's true. "I won't be like that." I put my hand over my stomach. My buttons are going to pop soon. I'll have to get a new uniform.

When I get back, Liz puts on her coat and says for the first time ever, "I'm going out." She turns for one last shot before she steps out the door. "Don't do anything stupid."

As soon as she leaves, I ignore the two customers who are busily messing up the shoes again and go into the office. I lift the handset off the office phone (for the manager only, but she's not here) and call Matt right away, and when he answers after about twenty-seven rings I say, "Hey, baby. She's coming over there. She just left."

Matt swears mid-yawn then howls, "Why?" like he just lost his life savings – not that he has any. He knows she'll be there any second. Liz lives depressingly close to the store.

"Did you tell her?" I ask, as if I didn't know. "Does she know?"

"I didn't give her the deets. Don't you."

"Why not?"

"Shit. Gotta go." Just like that, as if we didn't have a million things to talk about now that everything's changed.

Liz gets back fifteen minutes after her allotted break time is over. I tap my wristwatch and say, "You're in trouble, Mrs. Liz, fifteen minutes," and try to make the expression she makes when I'm sometimes late in the morning after staying up half the night with Matt on the beach with the people he knows – I think they're a bad influence on him, especially now, but he doesn't care what I think. Liz won't meet my eye. Definitely her perm has lost some of its spring.

She could at least tell me off for being smart, but she just goes into the office to put her things away, then reappears with the vacuum cleaner and starts cleaning the rug by the front door, even though it's only two thirty and we're not supposed to do that until ten to five. She drags the vacuum head across the surface,

stabbing at the carpet sometimes with the cleaner tube. She pulls and pushes so hard she starts to break a sweat; dark circles appear on the underarms of her uniform, making it uglier, which I didn't think was actually possible.

"Are you okay?" I ask, when she has finished the carpet and comes to stand beside me in the booth where I've been filing my nails, which, unlike her, I'm not allowed to do because the customers can see me and they will think I'm lazy.

The look on her face! Right away, I know she knows.

I give her my best smile, but she turns away.

She could be happy about it, if she wanted to. It's not so bad, is it?

I'm actually relieved when I see Mrs. Sweatpants reappear at the front doors. If it's anything like last time, she'll take ages, and by then we'll be into the late-afternoon rush, and I won't have to talk to Liz for the rest of the day. I expect the woman to go and start pawing over the sneakers again with her chubby hands. Instead, she comes up to the counter.

I'm about to say, "Can I help you?" like I'm supposed to, but she holds her hand up to keep me quiet. Her palm is a very pale pink and pillowy. For a moment, I have the desire to take her hand and hold it. I bet it would be baby soft.

With her other hand, she points at Liz. Then she takes a big breath and starts an actual speech, that sounds prepared and everything, even though her voice shakes. "That was very cruel, what you did to me. Knocking those shoes over was an accident. You should be kinder to the people who come and shop here." She stops and thinks about it a bit, then takes a gulp and starts to improvise. "You should be kinder to people. I'm not working, and my son is very sick." She turns to me then too, her doll-eyes wide. I never

yelled at her for knocking down the shelf, but somehow, she wants me to think that her feeling bad is my fault too. Finally, to no one in particular, she says, her pretty voice breaking, "This is the best I can do. I don't have any money. I don't have any shoes."

Then it's the weirdest thing, because Liz comes out from behind the counter, and she walks up to that woman in her falling-down sweatpants and slippers and puts her arms out and hugs her, hard, her cheek on the woman's cheek. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Liz says, over and over again, like it was her own fault for knocking down everything, not the woman's, and maybe I imagine it, but I think Liz is crying because afterward she sniffs and blinks when she goes back into the office. She stays in there for the rest of the day without saying one word to me. Between serving customers, I keep glancing at the top of her curly head through the sliding window, but she never looks up.

Even though it gets pretty busy after four o'clock, I look after the customers myself, and you might think I was extra nice to them too, even the elderly man who tries five different raincoats and doesn't buy a single one, but really, I'm only being professional, because I need this job or my dad says I'm out on the street, and obviously I can do it. It's not difficult.

At five o'clock, after all the stragglers have finally left, when I'm getting my bag from under the service desk and Liz is locking the front doors, Matt appears out front, just as she clicks the dead-bolt. I haven't seen him for a couple of weeks, and he doesn't look good. He knocks on the doors and his lips make the words, "Mum, let me in." Liz stares at him through the glass but doesn't move. He's become wiry and tense, and he paces in front of the doors, his unlaced basketball shoes slapping on the concrete. He runs his hands through his hair like he wants to pull it out. Liz glances back

at me. I'm frozen in place, my handbag held against my stomach like a shield.

He knocks again, heavily, then bangs with his fist. "Mum!" His muffled yelling comes through the glass. "Mum, let me in!"

Liz bows her head and leans against the door, her hands flat against the glass. Matt waits, but when she doesn't look up after a while, he goes crazy outside. He thumps and yells, kicks the doors and they rattle and buckle. A pedestrian approaches, then scurries across the road, so he doesn't have to pass Matt or pay any attention to what's happening.

Liz's forehead bounces against the glass, like she's made out of rubber herself, like she won't break, no matter what. Finally, she raises her head, shakes it, steps back from the door and turns her back to him, until she's facing me.

"You fucking bitch!" Matt screams so loud I bet the whole town can hear him. "It's all your fault." He kicks again, then whines, "Give me some fucking money!"

It's not him. Not really. He can't help it when he gets like this. But still.

He gives up, stops yelling, throws his head back in disgust and stalks away, his hands deep in his pockets, like he's trying to pull himself back together. Through it all, Liz stares at my handbag, concentrating really hard, as if she's making a wish.

"He's gone," I say. She begins to cry. "Liz." I drop my bag, walk over and put my arms around her, all the way. She's smaller than I thought, smaller than me, her shoulders narrow and slight. Her brown uniform hangs off her like a paper bag. I lean my cheek against her head and feel the softness of her curly hair. "Shh," I say, and rock her gently, like she's my child. "It'll be okay," I whisper, over and over. "It'll be okay." But we both know I'm lying.



Nicola Winstanley is a writer for adults and children. She has been shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award and is the recipient of the Alvin A. Lee Award for Published Creative Non-Fiction. Nicola's fiction, poetry and comix have been published in the *Windsor Review*, *Geist*, the *Dalhousie Review*, *Grain* magazine, *untethered*

magazine and *Hamilton Arts and Letters*, among others. She holds an MA from the University of Auckland, NZ, and an MFA from UBC. Nicola works at Humber College in Toronto and lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

*Smoke* is award-winning children's author Nicola Winstanley's first work for adults and it showcases her ability to create unforgettable characters. This deftly written, linked short story collection moves between New Zealand and Canada following the lives of a fascinating collection of characters and considers the impact of intergenerational trauma from multiple points of view. Questions of responsibility and fate, and a search for understanding thread through these searing stories. Yet even though these are stories of loss, *Smoke* is ultimately a book about grace, one which calls not only for a rejection of guilt, but also for approaching the world with deep compassion.

## Praise for *Smoke*

“This is a collection that builds in power and strength: by the time you reach its final, unexpectedly grace-filled moments, you are blinking away tears.” – Nathan Whitlock, author of *Lump* and *Congratulations on Everything*

“This is a beautiful book that gnaws at your heart with its stories about the pervasiveness of intergenerational trauma and the persistent human need to search for love, stability and connection.”  
– Meaghan Strimas, author of *Yes or Nope* and *A Good Time Had by All*

“These are intimate, sharp, incandescent stories that assuredly declare that while suffering is an inevitable part of our lives, we can choose to not let it define us. A raw, funny and heartbreaking debut.” – John Vigna, author of *No Man's Land* and *Bull Head*

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