

Book Review: Broken Country  
By Clare Leslie Hall

Let me make one thing clear from the get-go: this review is an outlier compared to most of the praise being heaped on Clare Leslie Hall's novel "Broken Country."

One other point: I hate soap operas. And this novel, in my opinion, contains *way* too much soap for my taste.

The story opens in 1968 in the small fictional village of Hemston in England. Beth and Frank Johnson, both around age 30, are happily married. Their past, however, is littered with excess baggage. Part of that baggage, accomplished author Gabriel Wolfe, the man Beth loved as a teenager, has just returned to the village with his young son Leo following a divorce. When Beth's brother-in-law, Jimmy, shoots and kills Leo's dog after it attacked and killed some of the Johnson's sheep, it starts a chain reaction that lifts the long-buried past to the surface.

Okay, a reasonable plot. But when the main characters, in particular Beth and Gabriel, begin making the dumbest of decisions, against all logic and reason, that's where I have a problem. I find it challenging, at best, to relate to characters who are stupid, selfish, and hurtful to others – especially when they acknowledge that what they are doing is wrong but do it anyway.

For example, without giving too much away, Gabriel's son Leo reminds Beth of her son Bobby who died in a tragic accident at age nine, two years prior. As Leo grieves the loss of his dog, Beth adopts a young puppy from a neighbor, gives it to Leo, and offers to come by the home each afternoon after school to help him train the dog. Beth's husband Frank is not happy about this. But she does it anyway.

And when Gabriel says he needs more time to focus on his writing and suggests Beth start picking Leo up from school each afternoon, she agrees to that as well.

Now, fully exposed to the man she had been in love with, and based on the descriptive writing still is, she puts her marriage in jeopardy and alienates her husband in front of the entire town. Of course, she says she loves Frank. Well, you don't do these kinds of things to the people you supposedly care most about.

Flashback chapters help paint a somewhat fuller picture of Beth and Gabriel, as well as Gabriel's alcoholic mother, who is a total bitch. Gabriel comes from money, Beth does not. Obviously, his mother doesn't want her son consorting with the lowly Beth – and openly tells her so. We've seen this movie before.

Again, just the type of twisted storyline you'd expect in a soap opera. Which is why I was largely turned off by it and can only offer up three out of five stars for a book whose title makes no sense to me.

But if soaps are your thing, you may completely enjoy it, as many others seem to have.