



TLC SHOWCASE

Sarah Mellor

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Introduction to *The Departed*

The Departed is a crime novel set in Liverpool in 1979 during a winter of snow, strikes and power cuts, and features Detective Leigh Borrowdale, the only woman on the Serious Crime Squad. When an unidentified body is found in an abandoned dock building, Leigh's investigations lead her and her partner, Des Chung, into a labyrinth of family secrets and lies.

I'd always dreamed of being a published writer but had never managed to finish a novel I was happy with. Eight years ago, I decided it was now or never and the time was right to commit to learning how to write a crime novel. Signing up for the TLC Manuscript Chapter and Verse Programme was a major part of that commitment to myself.

I considered an MA and other writing courses but decided on TLC, not only because they'd been recommended by writers, but because the mentoring programme offers one to one, bespoke work with a published writer. From the start, Aki and Joe at TLC were warm, welcoming and enthusiastic. They paired me with Jane A Adams, the perfect match. I was excited to work with an experienced author who knew what she was talking about, and by the end of my mentorship, I'd completed a novel. Although this wasn't the book that was finally published, it was a forerunner to *The Departed* and working with Jane helped me to find my voice and was an unmissable part of my development as a writer. It also meant that when my detective, Leigh, popped into my mind, I already had the setting for the book.

I also really appreciated the TLC Industry Day, which was a great event and enabled me to meet other writers and share some of my writing with a literary agent and editor.

The Departed was published by Harper North in March 2025 and is available in hardback, audio book and on Amazon Kindle. The paperback will follow in January 2026.

Extract from *The Departed*

Friday 26th January 1979

Cheapside, Liverpool

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Skull. Ribcage. Collarbone.

Leigh folds her arms and leans back on the hard chair, peering at the post-mortem images through a blockade of male shoulders. The sun isn't even up yet, the sky black through the tiny window, and she has the distinct feeling she's being tortured. Firstly, dragged out of bed at 6 am on a wintry January morning and fighting her way through a blizzard to reach the Bridewell; secondly, being confronted with close-up pictures of the body of a teenager within seconds of arriving.

Click, snap, partly skeletonised hand, separated from the wrist. Click, snap, left femur, split in two.

She reaches for the reassuring presence of the Tizer can in her pocket and attempts to look at the screen without fully registering the images. Dealing with tragedy is part of her job – it's what detectives do for a living (that, and tolerate people shouting 'bizzy scum' at them) – but she's certain she comes across dead boys more than the average police officer. In the five months since she's joined CID: a teenager lying curled and lifeless at the foot of Haigh Heights, his ankle tied to a washing machine that had landed upright beside him; another wedged against the door of a toilet in a Toxteth club (this, when she was out enjoying herself); and another who creaked on a rope from the beams of a derelict house, toes sweeping the bare floorboards. Her detective inspector hears the words death, teenager and male, it seems, and the job is hers.

And now here she is, recovering from the surprise of being seconded to a murder enquiry, sitting in a freezing basement where a police surgeon is presenting a slide show of human remains to an audience of detectives.

'IC1,' he says, using the identification code for White European, '5 foot 9 or 10. We know he's young because there isn't any wear and tear on the bones, and there's no tooth loss, although there are cavities. I'd guess at the lower end of adulthood –

between 17 and 25.'

Leigh sighs loudly, attracting a few head turns from the row in front.

'I haven't made a full report on past illnesses or past breaks and fractures as yet, but at first sight, there doesn't seem to be any marks on him, no obvious injuries.'

Leigh takes the Tizer out of her pocket. It's been sitting on the windowsill outside her bedsit all night and it's so cold it burns her fingertips. There's a fizz and a small pop as she snaps back the ring-pull, attracting more turns. One fella's head stays cranked back, his eyes sweeping the length of her. Leigh stares him out and then turns her gaze on the detectives in the front row. They all have their heads down, scribbling notes.

As the surgeon clicks the slide projector to show black, twig-like fingers, she looks around to see if she recognises anyone in the motley audience. The small room is packed, the hastily assembled squad consisting mostly of experienced old hands from Serious Crime, burly men in dark suits who look like the cast of *The Godfather* – although a young Chinese fella in the corner smiled at her when she came in. She does a head count, examining each of the 14 detectives to work out which ones are divisional CID, like herself, brought in because a cohort from Serious Crime is in Leeds, supporting the almighty cock-up that is the Yorkshire Ripper investigation.

As far as Leigh can see, she's the only woman in the room.

'He's been in the dock building for a while,' the surgeon says. 'He's not yet dry bones but the flesh has been mostly stripped by decomposition. Advanced decay. From items found at the scene, the estimated date of death is likely within the last decade. Skeletonisation could have been accelerated, owing to the presence of rats.'

A picture of an anklebone wrapped in wire appears and Leigh imagines her brother's bones, lying undiscovered on a desolate cliff-side, being stepped over like the remains of a mountain sheep. She shivers in the donkey jacket she's wearing over her cheap suit. The blizzard is still blowing outside and a bitter wind is flowing down the stairs and through the open door. The young fella in the corner catches her eye, wraps his arms around himself, and makes a mock shiver. Leigh gets that thought again, that she's being tortured; that by some strange alchemy, she's attracting the very things she tries to avoid.

For five years now, she has thrown herself at life. She has learnt the *Merseyside Police Manual of Instruction* off by heart, she has spent long nights sweating over exams, subjected her body to punishing exercise routines, and patrolled the city streets in the

rain, wind, sleet and snow and, in the summer of 1976, the sweltering heat. She has filled what little spare time she has with as many activities as possible: netball, tennis, swimming lessons, ping-pong, sex with strangers. She has been on chilly day trips to West Kirby, Chester, Rhyl and the Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port. She has fought with her mother. She has endured lots of heart-stopping moments such as this one, even though she knows the body can't belong to her brother James – wrong height, wrong clothes, wrong shoe size, wrong location.

Leigh stares at the screen and yields to her destiny. For five years, she has tried her best to cheat fate; for five long years, she has attempted to forget her grief and live her life.

Only to find herself in this smoke-filled room, where a dead boy's bones are still on the screen, and her brother is still missing.

About the Writer

Sarah Mellor is a debut crime author and psychological therapist based in Liverpool. She has been writing – and dreaming of being a writer - for as long as she can remember. She loves crime novels, particularly stories with lots of twists and turns, and this was her aim when starting her series of 1970s/1980s-set books featuring Detective Leigh Borrowdale and her partner, Des Chung. When not writing, Sarah continues to practice as a therapist, avidly reads crime novels, and spends time with her husband and grown-up daughter. She has also written on mental health, including editing a journal for therapists.

