Something Red: A Novel by Jennifer Gilmore

Another Funny, Touching, Intelligent Novel From Jennifer Gilmore

When Jennifer Gilmore’s first novel, Golden Country, was published, The New York Times Book Review called it “an ingeniously plotted family yarn and praised her as an author who enlivens the myth of the American Dream. In her second novel, Gilmore takes her particular gift for distilling history into a hugely satisfying, multigenerational family story to a new level.” In Washington, D.C., life inside the Goldstein home is as tumultuous as the shifting landscape of the times. It is 1979, and Benjamin is heading off to college and sixteen-year-old Vanessa is in the throes of a rocky adolescence. Sharon, a caterer for the Washington elite, ventures into a cultlike organization. And Dennis, whose government job often takes him to Moscow, tries to live up to his father’s legacy as a union organizer and community leader. The rise of communism and the execution of the Rosenbergs is history. The Cold War is waning, the soldiers who fought in Vietnam have all come home, and Carter is president. The age of protest has come and gone and yet each of the Goldsteins is forced to confront the changes the new decade will bring and explore what it really means to be a radical. Something Red is at once a poignant story of husbands and wives, parents and children, activists and spies, and a masterfully built novel that unfurls with suspense and humor. Explore the reading group guide for Something Red.

A Conversation with Jennifer Gilmore

Q: Where did you come up with the idea for Something Red? Was there a character or a scene that you envisioned first?

A: I grew up in Washington and have always been fascinated about how close I was to the center of things, and yet how far I was from affecting any real kind of change. I was always very aware of how
Washington operated--many of our friends were the children of senators or lobbyists' kids or government officials--and it seemed distinctly different than how inside the beltway was portrayed in the media.

My father works in foreign food policy and my mother worked her whole career for the state department, involved in food aid. I became interested in food as a global issue, as well as how it plays out in a family. Food is used in so many ways--especially now with the rise of foodies and issues of sustainability--and I wanted to explore it as identity, disease, power, the way it brings families together, and drives nations apart.

The era was informed by the Cold War, and so I wanted to deal with Russia in some way, largely, because, as in my last book, I am very interested in the way history affects families. Russia was the mother country for so many immigrants, but what was really happening there? What was left behind and what was taken? I became fascinated by the politics of the era--which stemmed from the Soviet Union as well--and how progressivism evolved into 60s activism and then into post-sixties radicalism, which seemed to be less about real causes and more about music and lifestyle. I wanted to investigate how being a radical is defined differently for and by each generation.

These are all just ideas that started me going, but I wanted to be sure I had real characters the reader could relate to intimately so it did not seem like it was just loaded with ideas. Hopefully that's what I ended up with.

Q: The political backdrop of the novel is incredibly vivid in the minds of your characters. Why did you choose this era?

A: 1979, a year I was too young to remember clearly, mind you, seemed like a seminal moment in history, fraught with endless fictional possibilities. Jimmy Carter was in the White House, the Iranian hostage crisis was in full bloom, there had been a nuclear accident at Three Mile Island. Disco was dying, and so was punk rock in its hardcore form, culminating with the death of Sid Vicious. And yet, punks more popularized version had reached our shores with the release of the Clashs London Calling. Womens oppression seemed to be waning, made concrete by Judy Chicagos The Dinner Party, shown that year at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Culturally, the world was thriving:
Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* and Mailer’s *The Executioners* were released in 1979. So was *Manhattan*, *The Rose*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Breaking Away*. Then, on Christmas Day, Soviet deployment of its army into Afghanistan began. And on January 4, 1980, Carter announced the US grain embargo against the Soviet Union. Which is when my novel begins.

Q: How did you go about your research for the novel? What were your preferred sources?

A: History releases me from my own experience and jogs my fictional imagination. For instance, I read a great biography on Ethel Rosenberg, and in addition to her chronicling her life with Julius and in their political beliefs, it mentioned she was a singer. An alto. For some reason this let me see her clearly, and it became a small plot point in the book. So I read a lot of biographies, a lot of Irving Howe to better understand how movements emerged from movements. I read pop culture stuff too, books about punk rock in DC, and Joni Mitchell, and I looked up a zillion Grateful Dead set lists on-line, to be sure that played this song at this particular concert. I read a lot of cookbooks from the era, like Fernand Point’s *Ma Gastronomie*, the blue *New York Times Cookbook* by Craig Claiborne. And I also looked online at old *Time Magazine* articles, pieces on the Soviet Union. As much as I can read about it now, reading what happened in that time, with journalists reacting immediately, without hindsight, is invaluable. Really, I read anything that could put me in that time, which includes fiction, which often is the most reliable source of real, felt information. E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*, was a revelation to me, because it was a fiction writer reacting, not immediately per se, but certainly a lot closer to the Rosenbergs’ execution and the rise of the 60s than I am now. His characters in that book were like the ones mine might have been haunted by.

Q: How would you compare the public opinion of the U.S. government in 1980 with that of modern day? Do you think the particular issues that the Goldstein family copes with transfer? Why or why not?

A: Writing my way into that era, I was really struck by how little had changed and really, how little we look at the past, as a nation, to make decisions. The Afghanistan issue has hardly diminished. Food prices spiked right when I finished the book, just as they had in anticipation of that first grain embargo, and this was all related to ethanol and oil. And of
course our dependence on oil has not diminished either. Even footage of the fashion of the era is startling in how similar it was to what might be fashionable now.

On a domestic level though that's an easier question, largely because an inner-life is timeless. So what Vanessa and Ben, the kids, experience in 1979, is not that different than now, though they are not texting or listening to iPods. And issues of keeping a stressed marriage together, and how we manage our work lives and our home lives, who we are in the world versus who believe we should be in the world, well, these conflicts endure.

Q: It has been said that you are part of

My Personal Review:
President Jimmy Carter was much maligned for acknowledging a "malaise" that pervaded the United States in the late 1970s; of course, this was because he had a point.

Jennifer Gilmore's Something Red explores the ways in which relationships and attitudes about family, god, love and country diverged and clashed in this time of disillusionment and cultural drift. The author's eye and ear (and, it seems safe to assume, memory) for period detail is terrific; most striking, though, is her attention to another of the senses, as food assumes a central significance in the novel.

The main characters are often defined and separated by what they eat (or don't), and of no small importance is the fact that central figure Sharon Goldstein is a caterer to the power classes of Washington, D.C.; Sharon's 16 year-old daughter, Vanessa, has recently stopped eating meat and drinking alcohol; her son, Ben, newly departed for Brandeis University, is discovering his Jewish roots and becomes involved in a campus protest centered on the introduction of pork and other non-kosher foods to campus dining halls; and the novel itself opens with a family dinner party Sharon hosts as a send-off for Ben, during which the political and religious fault lines running between and within those assembled begin to surface. Gilmore's depiction of a dinner table conversation veering toward disaster is note-perfect and skillfully sets the stage for conflicts to come.

It may be hard to believe that the 1979 U.S. embargo on grain exports to the Soviet Union can become, in 2010, the stuff of genuine narrative tension. Here, though, it does, as Sharon's husband Dennis, an official in President Carter's Department of Agriculture, finds himself suddenly facing the prospect of no longer making regular visits to Moscow to arrange grain deals; he's come to love the city and dreads reassignment to Latin America or Asia, places for which he feels no affinity.
Tensions and estrangements small and large are the focus of this engaging, surprising novel. In a truly challenging and soul-trying time, Jennifer Gilmore’s very human and sympathetic characters seek their ways forward, trying to find selves and roles they can live with; the author's empathy and imagination ensure that their efforts, which yield varying results, provide the reward of satisfying narrative and felt emotional truth.

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