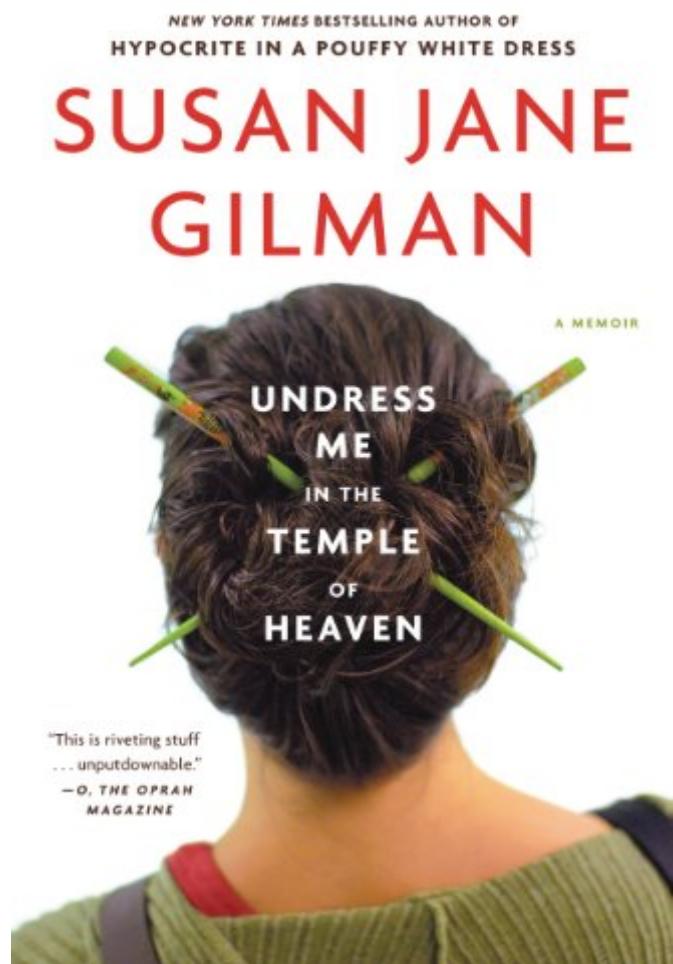


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Undress Me In The Temple Of Heaven



Synopsis

They were young, brilliant, and bold. They set out to conquer the world. But the world had other plans for them. Bestselling author Susan Jane Gilman's new memoir is a hilarious and harrowing journey, a modern heart of darkness filled with Communist operatives, backpackers, and pancakes. In 1986, fresh out of college, Gilman and her friend Claire yearned to do something daring and original that did not involve getting a job. Inspired by a place mat at the International House of Pancakes, they decided to embark on an ambitious trip around the globe, starting in the People's Republic of China. At that point, China had been open to independent travelers for roughly ten minutes. Armed only with the collected works of Nietzsche, an astrological love guide, and an arsenal of bravado, the two friends plunged into the dusty streets of Shanghai. Unsurprisingly, they quickly found themselves in over their heads. As they ventured off the map deep into Chinese territory, they were stripped of everything familiar and forced to confront their limitations amid culture shock and government surveillance. What began as a journey full of humor, eroticism, and enlightenment grew increasingly sinister-becoming a real-life international thriller that transformed them forever. *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven* is a flat-out page-turner, an astonishing true story of hubris and redemption told with Gilman's trademark compassion, lyricism, and wit.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I can't even imagine how strange it must have been to travel to China in 1986 - I went in 2006 and was bothered a lot more than I expected by not having any way to communicate. Not being able to read the Chinese characters - not being able to speak or ask for directions...Claire's descent into mental illness is visible to us, but yes, at the time, I can see how some of it could be written off as the stress of traveling with a near-stranger. The book did leave me feeling unfinished, with no follow up on Claire.

I enjoyed this book. The writer wrote with an honesty and sense of humour that lightened up what could have been a depressing story. As someone who had traveled in China, I particularly enjoyed her description of China in 1984 when it just opened up to tourism. Yet really had no infrastructure to feed or provide tourists with an environment they would find comfortable. Susan Gilman wrote a very convincing account of the serious changes her travel partner experienced during this daunting excursion. As a mental health worker of 15 years, I am very familiar with the type of behavior the main character was observing as her friend became more vulnerable. I think she did an excellent job of showing the amazing kindness of the Chinese people, even when experiencing austere poverty. The book was hard to put down, the characters came to life and were all different, not without flaws. She captured "the coming of age" that many youth experience when going "outside their comfort zone" and seeing that the world is a very complicated place. I really enjoyed the earthy quality Gilman captures, the way she pulls the story together and the moving way she wraps it up.

I cannot even tell you how absorbed I got in this book ... how difficult it was to tear myself away to prepare dinner or get my son from the bus stop. This is simply the most fascinating, compelling, intense travel memoir I've ever read. It has everything you look for in a travel memoir: exotic locales, excellent writing, insight and a compelling narrative. Let's take a look at these elements one by one.

EXOTIC LOCALES In 1986, Gilman and her college friend Claire embarked on an "around the world" backpacking trip that starts in China, which (as Gilman puts it) "had been open to independent backpackers for roughly ten minutes." This is a very Communist China that, at the time, was not yet very modernized. It is also, as Gilman finds out on a return visit 20 years later, a China that no longer exists. Gilman's account of the difficulty of travel, the incredible bureaucracy, the food, the sights, and the people (often generous to a fault) brings to life a country and a culture

that may be a mystery to many Westerners.

EXCELLENT WRITING Gilman has a sharp wit and a way with words that make this book--which is, at times, as harrowing as any thriller--a pleasure to read. Her self-deprecating and wicked sense of humor grounds the book, and her creative use of metaphors delighted me time and time again. Consider this self-description: "Most of my time at Brown, I'd felt like geometry: a collection of unlovely, isolated parts that needed to be proven over and over." Seriously, how awesome is that metaphor? The book is full of this type of wonderful writing--making the book flow like a stream of crystal clear water. (As you can tell by my seriously lame metaphor just now, it isn't the easiest thing in the world to come up with apt and creative metaphors.) In addition, Gilman's personality comes shining through on every page, and I found her to be winning, hilarious, down-to-earth and just plain awesome. (I'd love to hang out with her some time. I bet she is a hoot.)

INSIGHT I'm thankful that Gilman waited before attempting to write this memoir. The events in the book require a certain type of maturity and hindsight to fully understand and view properly. Had she written this book shortly after the events described, I don't think it would have been nearly as effective. With the benefit of 20 years to ponder the events of the trip, Gilman is able to analyze her younger self and the decisions she made with a wisdom that would have been lacking had she written the book in "real-time." Thus, we have two Gilmans writing this memoir: the 22-year-old Gilman who experienced the events and brings them to life and the grown-up Gilman who has the wisdom and maturity to understand and comment on her younger self and her experiences. I've read memoirs that lack the introspection and commentary that time can bring, and I think this book benefited tremendously from Gilman's choice to write the memoir as an adult versus a young adult.

COMPELLING NARRATIVE Although this could have been a "two naive American girls traveling in China" travel narrative (and you almost wish it could have been), Gilman and Claire's journey takes a bizarre and riveting turn when Claire begins to unravel psychologically. As little oddities begin to crop up (such as Claire's insistence that she is writing a "world curriculum" and must go by herself to do research and make contacts), both the reader and the grown-up Gilman can see that the warning signs were there from the start. But Gilman's analysis and reasoning on why these warning signs don't register until it is too late are compelling and reasonable. I could totally see my 20-year-old self making the same decisions and getting into the same harrowing situations in which Gilman finds herself at the end of the book. The last third of the book was as suspenseful, harrowing and riveting as any thriller I've ever read. My pulse and anxiety level were rising with each new development, and I couldn't imagine experiencing this kind of nightmare myself. Yet, as Gilman writes in the epilogue, it was this experience that helped shape her into the woman she is today.

The bottom line is that this book is simply the best memoir and

travel narrative I've ever read. I simply can't recommend it enough. I'm usually pretty stingy with my stars, but I'm giving this one 5 stars without hesitation. Make time for it ... you'll be glad you did. It is an excellent piece of writing that tells a riveting and compelling story that has something important to say about life, love, and being a citizen of the world. Despite Gilman's often nightmarish experiences, it will make you wish you'd taken that backpacking trip you always said you would but never quite got around to doing.

My travel experience is not as extreme as Gilman's. I traveled with a group of people in Western Europe for 8 months in the mid-70s, when I was fresh out of college. One of my travel companions was "difficult." It was a life-changing experience and I will always be grateful that I did it. I totally identify with the sense of trepidation and isolation of being in a new place, needing to depend on others to get what you need, with the additional stress of a communication barrier. Making it through is such a triumph. The memories last forever, and they change you on such a gut level. I read a lot of memoirs, and usually my major criterion is the voice of the author, i.e., would I like this person if I met him/her. Obviously some of the other reviewers were turned off by Susan Jane Gilman. Maybe because I identified with some of the underlying emotions and experiences, it basically neutralized my feelings about the people on this book. Susan did seem a little whiny in the early days of the trip, but ultimately this book ended up being more about plot for me. Mostly it is about finding a way to get through a horrible experience - and she did, and she ultimately triumphed over what happened, with help from others, and to me this is a great book. The writing is fine. In this situation I think it is more important to tell the story and not get wrapped up in how well-written it is. (Of course, if it were poorly written, then the quality of the writing would be a major issue.) One thing I always find about traveling is that, whenever a situation seems desperate, something or someone comes to your rescue. Luckily for Susan and Claire, they did have their saviors. I loved-loved-loved the ending, which I did NOT see coming, and I just want to say to Susan Jane Gilman, good for you.

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