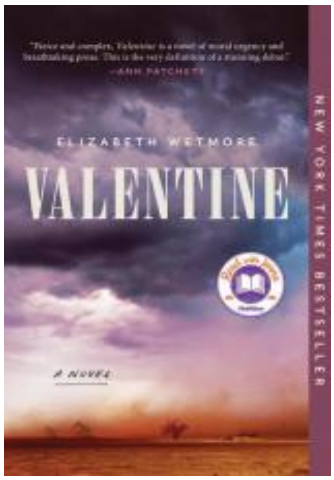
Valentine

by Elizabeth Wetmore



About the Book

Written with the haunting emotional power of Elizabeth Strout and Barbara Kingsolver, an astonishing debut novel that explores the lingering effects of a brutal crime on the women of one small Texas oil town in the 1970s.

Mercy is hard in a place like this...

It?s February 1976, and Odessa, Texas, stands on the cusp of the next great oil boom. While the town?s men embrace the coming prosperity, its women intimately know and fear the violence that always seems to follow.

In the early hours of the morning after Valentine?s Day, 14-year-old Gloria Ramírez appears on the front porch of Mary Rose Whitehead?s ranch house, broken and barely alive. The teenager had been viciously attacked in a nearby oil field --- an act of brutality that is tried in the churches and barrooms of Odessa before it can reach a court of law. When justice is evasive, one of the town?s women decides to take matters into her own hands, setting the stage for a showdown with potentially devastating consequences.

VALENTINE is a haunting exploration of the intersections of violence and race, class and region in a story that plumbs the depths of darkness and fear, yet offers a window into beauty and hope. Told through the alternating points of view of indelible characters who burrow deep in the reader?s heart, this fierce, unflinching, darkly funny and surprisingly tender novel illuminates women?s strength and vulnerability, and reminds us that it is the stories we tell ourselves that keep us alive.

Discussion Guide

1. Consider the Texas landscape as it is richly described throughout the novel. What varying moods does it create? How does it affect the characters and their stories?

2. Why does Gloria change her name to Glory? What?s powerful about the names we use?

3. Gloria?s Tío Victor claims that ?every story is a war story.? What might he mean?

4. When throughout the novel does listening prove powerful and transformative? When is a failure to listen to someone?s story harmful?

5. In what ways is a violent, misogynistic man like Dale Strickland entitled and empowered by others, his town, and the culture at large?

6. What smaller, daily harms are done with impunity to the women in the novel? How does such behavior --- often dismissed as harmless --- reflect and affect larger value systems?

7. Mary Rose Whitehead is criticized by her own husband for helping Glory. Why is this? How is it that her decision to help and protect an abused girl and later testify in court is so offensive to many in the town, even the Ladies Guild?

8. How does Corrine Shepard address her grief over Potter?s death? What significance do you make of the cat that keeps ?coming into [Corrine?s] backyard and killing everything??

9. Why do you think Corrine initially refuses to help Mary Rose? How and why does her attitude change?

10. What is valuable for each in the secret friendship between Debra Ann and Jesse Belden? What do they understand about each other?

11. In what ways is the bookmobile important, particularly to Debra Ann? What might Debra Ann mean when she tells Jesse that ?Every book has at least one good thing??

12. Ginny?s grandmother told her many stories about women who died trying to do all that was expected of them? What is the value or burden of such narratives? What story is Ginny trying to write, and is it connected to her decision to leave Odessa? Did you expect her to return?

13. One lesson Suzanne Ledbetter imparts to her daughter is to ?never depend on a man to take care of you...not even one as good as your daddy.? Why is this so important? What are the obstacles to economic power for women in the novel? Which of those still exists in some form today?

14. What is valuable to Corrine about the occasional ?misfit or dreamer? present in her high school English class over her 30 years of teaching? What might she mean when she emphasizes to them that ?stories save lives??

15. Corrine vehemently expresses to Potter how unfulfilling stay-at-home motherhood is for her. What does a fuller life look like for her and the other mothers in the novel?

16. Jumping from the high dive at the YMCA pool for the first time, Aimee and Debra Ann feel like they ?can do

anything? and ?their faith is rooted in their bodies, the muscle and sinew and bone that holds them together and says move.? How is this different from what is so often expected of the bodies of girls and women?

17. What are the significant themes in the story Debra Ann tells Jesse about the old rancher?s wife and her extraordinary garden?

18. What explains the profound and unjust ruling in Dale Strickland?s trial? What are the potential emotional effects of such injustice? What are the most effective ways to respond and survive?

19. Karla Sibley?s experience waiting tables at the bar suggests that to speak up against the generational legacy of male entitlement, violence against women, and racism ?would require courage that we cannot even begin to imagine.? What then is to be done about such oppressive forces? How does Karla respond to them?

20. Tío Victor eventually decides against vengeance on Dale Strickland because ?nothing causes more suffering.? What might he mean? Is Dale sufficiently punished by the novel?s end, in your opinion?

21. In what ways has Glory begun to heal? Though her scars ?tether her to a single morning,? what is her relationship to her body as she drives toward her mother in Mexico? What will it take for her to continue to heal?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Wetmore is a graduate of the Iowa Writers? Workshop. Her fiction has appeared in *Epoch*, *Kenyon Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Iowa Review* and other literary journals. She is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and two fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, as well as a grant from the Barbara Deming Foundation. She was also a Rona Jaffe Scholar in Fiction at Bread Loaf and a Fellow at the MacDowell Colony, and one of six Writers in Residence at Hedgebrook. A native of West Texas, she lives and works in Chicago.

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