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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Calico Jam

Joanne Greene
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Unknown $30.99 (176pp)
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Joanna, the daughter of a weak, mentally distraught mother and a distant father, tells the story of a 1940s' childhood in *Calico Jam*, a fictionalized version of her life story. Memories flourish at Edgecombe, Joanna's grandmother's farm in upstate New York. But looming over this childhood idyll, clouds of family secrets, shunning, lost wealth, and tragedy darken the landscape and deepen the import of this book.

The adults of Joanna's family live in a societal crevasse. "Their lives, ostensibly independent, were bound in a network of impersonal interdependence to common institutions and belief systems," Greene writes. "Even those old families that had lost their fortunes modest or considerable to the Wall Street debacle…maintained a frosty aloofness, easing the edge of panic with the childlike belief that someday they would regain their wealth…Some of those fortunes were regained…ours was not."

This novel follows a young girl caught between factions of a family struggling with social and economic change and dealing with loss and guilt as only a child can. It will transport readers back to childhood and remind them of the strength of childhood experiences and the way they color adulthood.

Joanna, her parents, and her younger brother Toby arrive at Edgecombe where the adults experience and uncomfortable reunion and Joanna is introduced to the lush, free, earthy, agrarian farm where getting dirty is not a punishable offense. Joanna immediately bonds with the land: "I took Toby by the hand and showed him around the garden and fields. Already feeling proprietary; I gave my little brother a tour, grandly pointing to the far peaks, the humming pines and the silent pond." Joanna also feels an instant kinship and love for Nammy, her grandmother. Nammy's husband, Alonzo, a Mohawk Indian and the catalyst for much of the family's shame and Nammy's excommunication, becomes Joanna's mentor and guide.

Logophiles will find themselves sighing over Greene's vocabulary and word combinations long before they become invested in the characters or the slowly unfolding story. For example, Greene writes:

> *[We]…raked the fallen leaves into chest-high fortresses, molding wells in the crimson-gold mountains so we could hide and burrow and have ferocious leaf fights. We screamed and plunged into our springy, particolored bed until we had to lay back exhausted, chests heaving, cheeks flaming, to watch the impossibly blue arc of sky above us.*

Interspersed with these memories are the stories told by an adult Joanna during a trip back to Edgecombe with her husband—stories that reveal the core of Joanna's struggles. Although *Calico Jam* unfolds in a backwards and confusing timeline, the rich language, the layers, the descriptions of family interactions, and an examination of loss and grieving soothe any frustrations over awkward presentation. Readers who truly love language and the World War II era of war and societal change will relish every page.

DAWN GOLDSMITH (July 1, 2010)

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