

★ **This Is How It Begins: A Novel**

Joan Dempsey

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Dempsey appeals not just to the intellect but to the heart, in this incredibly timely novel about tolerance.

In a time when religious liberty is on trial, *This Is How It Begins* is an extraordinarily pertinent novel dripping in suspense and powerful scenes of political discourse.

Tommy Zeilonka, along with a dozen other teachers in the state of Massachusetts, is fired for “conduct unbecoming.” The allegations come from a small handful of Christian parents who believe their children are being discriminated against: “they’re bombarded with curriculum designed to indoctrinate them into the idea that their Christian faith is wrong.” The kicker? All of the fired teachers are gay.

Tommy’s family roils from the news and its consequences. Tommy is brutally attacked and hospitalized days later; students in his art-professor grandmother Ludka’s classroom begin heated debates; and his senator father takes a stand against the Christian families, demanding changes to antidiscrimination laws.

A House bill is introduced with the goal of defining the term “sound moral character.” Further, the involvement of a radio host akin to Rush Limbaugh and an outspoken pastor bring family values and community outreach to the fore.

Just as in life, there’s more to the story than a straightforward plot. Personal histories, family secrets, and passionate beliefs overlap and intersect. Ludka, for instance, is reminded of the Nazi propaganda she encountered as a young Christian in World War II Poland.

Joan Dempsey’s powerful novel is the perfect reminder that the personal is the political, especially when violence, or peace, is exalted in the name of “tolerance.” As Ludka proclaims at the hearing of the House bill, “The Holocaust did not begin with the gassing of the Jews at camps ... The Holocaust began in hearts of people.”

It’s the heart Dempsey appeals to with *This Is Where It Begins*, not just the intellect. It’s a must-read for anyone, regardless of political affiliation.

AIEMEE JODOIN (September/October 2017)

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