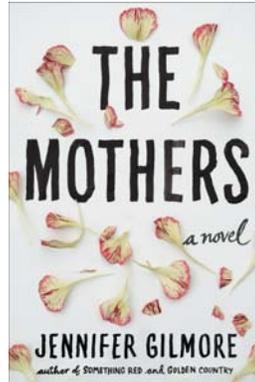




Women's League for Conservative Judaism

## ORPAH'S LIST SELECTION 2013-2014

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### *The Mothers* by Jennifer Gilmore

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## SYNOPSIS

*The Mothers*, Jennifer Gilmore's semi-autobiographical work of fiction, provides an intimate view of a woman's desire to become a mother. Jesse, an assimilated American Jewish academic nearing her 40th birthday, and her Italian born husband, Ramon, have tried for years to conceive. Unsuccessful, most likely due to Jesse's earlier bout with cancer, the couple decides to adopt.

They enter the process, naively unaware of adoption's harrowing procedures, interviews, applications, and accommodations – first with adoption agency interviewers and then with the birth mothers whose favor they must gain.

As they proceed with their search through adoption agencies around the country, they meet a wide variety of other couples, including a number of same sex partners also eager to have a family. In addition, skillfully woven throughout the story are glimpses into Jesse and Ramon's own colorful families who illustrate the subtle and ironic implication that family, regardless of its imperfections (and even dysfunctions), is important. The couple's need to create their own is wholly understandable.

Each of Gilmore's mothers has her own set of complications – not only Jesse's mother and mother-in-law, and Jesse's own ideas of what kind of mother she would be, but also the cavalier, capricious and sometimes manipulative birth mothers. All are objects of Gilmore's engaging storytelling.

For those who are familiar firsthand with the frustration and heartbreak of infertility, Gilmore's book might be a painful reminder. For those whose experiences were uncomplicated, they can only respond: "*There, but for the grace of God, go I.*"

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## STUDY GUIDE

Prepared by Ellen Kaner Bresnick, *Books Chair*

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Gilmore's four book divisions: Getting There, The Application, The Birthmothers, and Flying? How do the titles add to the story-line? Where is the "there" in the first section? What does it represent for Jesse?
2. How does Jesse view her mother's style of mothering? How does it compare with Claudine's? What is the significance of the "Magic Pot" story that Claudine reads to the girls?
3. Chapter 3 focuses on Jesse's childhood friend Ellen Beskin, who is adopted. What does this character add to the story? How does Jesse come to understand the meaning of the words "adopted" and "mother" through her relationship with Ellen?
4. How does Jesse feel about open vs. closed adoption? How does it reflect her feelings when she says: "*They have a lot of fantasies about where they might have come from, who their parents might have been. They have to decide as adults if they want to find these people, strangers really. It can turn their worlds upside down.*" How do they affect her ultimate decision?
5. What does Jesse learn about the roles of birth mothers? What does this do to her definition of family?
6. What role does Jesse's Jewishness play in her journey? What images does she use when speaking of her own family (pp.28-30)? How do these images lend themselves to the last words of the chapter: "*Wasn't I supposed to be the mother?*"
7. How does Jesse feel about the process of writing the adoption profile? How do Jesse and Ramon, combine their voices into a single narrative? What pressures do they feel about their presentation and their story?
8. Why does Gilmore include the narrative about Anita and Paula (the gay couple seeking to adopt)? What are their frustrations and how do they affect Jesse and Ramon?
9. Why does it take so long to get the birthmother letter approved? Why is the endless process of revisions so important?
10. What does Jesse think when she does not hear from birth mothers?
11. What does Jesse learn about the way Carolyn and Michael are going to have children? What happens to her definition of the term "birthmother"? Why does Jesse consider herself and Carolyn to be part of the "lost generation" (p. 205)
12. What happens when her sister Lucy comes home? How does Lucy's condition affect Jesse, and the narrative arc of the story? Do you think Lucy's pregnancy was intentional?

13. What does Jesse learn about being a mother when she asks the question: “*Who was a better mother?*” (p. 237)
14. In chapter 24 Jesse tries to create some sense of normalcy. Why? How does she attempt to do this? What really significant piece of information is Jesse given in this last chapter? How does it relate to the title of the section? Do we have a sure sense of what will happen at the end of the novel? Why? What is the author attempting to do here?

### **Biographical Information**

Jennifer Gilmore's first novel, *Golden Country*, was a New York Times Notable Book of 2006, an Amazon.com Top Ten Debut Fiction of 2006, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award and for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. *Something Red*, her second novel (2010) was a New York Times Notable Book.

Gilmore received her B.A. from Brandeis University (1992), where she majored in English and Creative Writing. In 1997 she received an M.F.A. in Fiction from Cornell University. While at Cornell she edited the literary magazine, *Epoch*, and went on to teach creative writing and literature there. After moving to Brooklyn in 1998, she freelanced, and worked for The Leonard Lopate Show at WNYC and as the book club host for A&E.com.

Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in magazines and journals including the Alaska Review, Allure, BookForum, the Lincoln Center Theater Review, Los Angeles Times, Nerve, the New York Times Magazine, the New York Times Book Review, Vogue, SELF, Salon, the Stranger, Tin House, Vogue and the Washington Post. Her personal essays have been included in several anthologies including More New York Stories: The Best of the City Section of the New York Times, The Friend Who Got Away, Bad Girls: 26 Writers Misbehave and How to Spell Chanukah.

Gilmore has been a MacDowell Fellow, and has taught creative writing and literature at Cornell University, New York University, Eugene Lang College at the New School, and at the 92nd Street Y. Currently she teaches at Barnard College and Princeton University and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Want more information? Follow Jennifer on Twitter at @jenwgilmore or visit her author page on Facebook.

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### **Reviews of *The Mothers***

<http://www.latimes.com/features/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-jennifer-gilmore-20130505,0,6870926.story>

[http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-22/entertainment/38737608\\_1\\_jesse-open-adoption-international-adoption](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-04-22/entertainment/38737608_1_jesse-open-adoption-international-adoption)

<http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Family/Modern-Parenthood/2013/0411/Jennifer-Gilmore-s-The-Mothers-An-honest-adoption-novel>

[forward.com/articles/175384/author-jennifer-gilmores-new-novel-confronts-the-m/?p=all](http://forward.com/articles/175384/author-jennifer-gilmores-new-novel-confronts-the-m/?p=all)

<http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/04/the-dark-sad-side-of-domestic-adoption/275370/>

### **To order copies of *The Mothers***

The publisher, Simon and Schuster, is offering 50% discount and free shipping for all nonreturnable books. The cost of the hardcover book is therefore \$13.00. The order sheet is attached. Contact, Norma Lippincott, Telesales Manager ([Norma.lippincott@simonandschuster.com](mailto:Norma.lippincott@simonandschuster.com))

### **Interviews with Jennifer Gilmore**

<http://www.npr.org/2013/05/22/184264231/fictional-mothers-reveal-facts-of-a-painful-adoption-process>

<http://www.parents.com/blogs/mom-must-read/2013/05/15/must-read/jennifer-gilmores-new-novel-the-mothers-is-inspired-by-her-difficult-adoption-journey/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jennifer-Gilmore/325749969350>

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/one-true-thing/201304/jennifer-gilmore-author-the-mothers-adoption>

<http://www.glamour.com/inspired/blogs/the-conversation/2013/04/author-jennifer-gilmore-on-mot.html>

<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/04/25/every-adoption-is-a-ghost-story-an-interview-with-jennifer-gilmore/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/04/the-dark-sad-side-of-domestic-adoption/275370/>

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/blog/members-of-the-scribe/author/jgilmore/>

### **Adoption agency and information websites**

Use these websites for more information about adoption and the terms that are used throughout the novel.

<http://www.adoptionnetwork.com/>

<http://www.americanadoptions.com/>

### **Additional Books on Adoption**

*Carried in Our Hearts - The Art of Adoption: Inspiring Stories of Families Created Across Continents*, Dr. Jane Aronson

*March Into My Heart: A Memoir of Mothers, Daughters, and Adoption*, Patty Lazarus

*No Biking in the House Without a Helmet*, Melissa Fay Greene