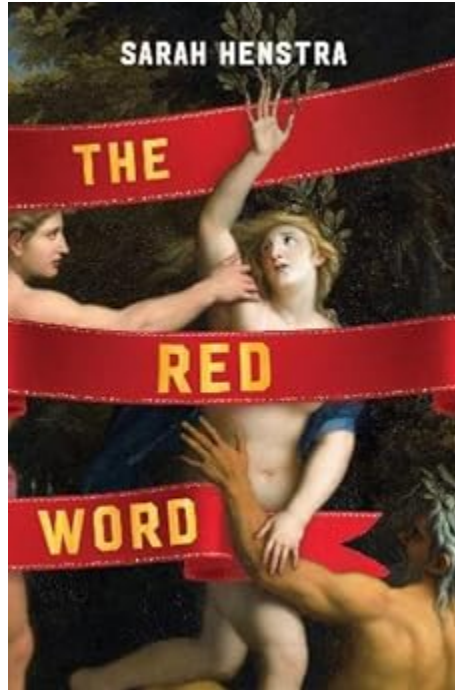


Book Notes - Sarah Henstra "The Red Word"

largeheartedboy.com/blog/archive/2018/03/book_notes_sara_28.html



In the Book Notes series, authors create and discuss a music playlist that relates in some way to their recently published book.

Previous contributors include Jesmyn Ward, Bret Easton Ellis, Celeste Ng, Lauren Groff, T.C. Boyle, Dana Spiotta, Amy Bloom, Aimee Bender, Heidi Julavits, Hari Kunzru, and many others.

*Though set in the 1990s, Sarah Henstra's novel *The Red Word* is a timely and compelling exploration of rape culture.*

Booklist wrote of the book:

*"Set in the 1990s, *The Red Word* interrogates the prevailing political preoccupations of that time: gender politics, third-wave feminism, and consent . . . A timely and nuanced dissection of rape culture."*

In her own words, here is Sarah Henstra's Book Notes music playlist for her novel *The Red Word*:

The Red Word offers a snapshot of American college life in the mid-1990s, when two opposing forces collided head-on: the heyday of fraternity hijinks and the rise of third-wave feminism in the classroom and

beyond. The story unfolds against a backdrop of typical campus activities: study groups, keggers in the dormitory basement, all-nighters in the computer lab, women's marches, movies at the rep cinema, poster campaigns, sorority car-washes, protests, costume parties, potlucks. There's also a Greek mythology thing going on here: the narrator, Karen, enrolls in a course called Women and Myth and, when conflict starts to brew between her social-activist roommates (whose house they call Raghurst) and her frat-brother friends, Karen sees it all in epic terms.

The songs on this playlist are a mix between my own remembered tunes of 1990s student life and summer jobs (I planted trees every summer in Ontario, Canada, to pay my tuition), and older or more recent songs that helped me conjure the right mood for a scene or even the right attitude to buckle down to the work of writing.

Pink, "What's Up?" (4 Non Blondes cover)

4 Non Blondes' iconic anthem was played so often on the radio in the early 90s that it wasn't cool enough for me to really like it. But this song is so singable—its chorus so simple—that it creates instant camaraderie amongst those listening. And it's a young woman's song, a complaint against the "brotherhood of man" dominating the world. Getting "real high" and screaming "What's going on?" isn't, perhaps, the most effective of social-change strategies, but it's a necessary first step toward finding one's voice, and the women of Raghurst are very much in the middle of that step.

Bob Dylan (with Janis Joplin), "It Ain't Me, Babe"

Karen begins dating Mike Morton, a member of GBC who stands out to her as smarter and more serious than the other frat boys and therefore seems like appropriate boyfriend material. But their relationship is badly one-sided, with Mike mooning after Karen while she makes up excuses to avoid him (meanwhile, she secretly lusts after another, totally inappropriate, frat boy). Janis also figures directly in the novel. The girls of Raghurst have a poster over the sofa of her screaming into a microphone, and in one scene they debate Janis's status as feminist role model.

Leggo Beast, "The New Deal"

At one point in the novel Karen compares the frat boys to "henchmen of Ares, god of war." The New Deal features writer Howard Bloom advising young people on how to resist fascism and other destructive forces around them. I find everything about the piece deeply moving: Bloom's wise, nerdy voice, his deep respect for adolescent passion and adventure-seeking, and his metaphor of the gods residing within us: "You have to freeze him [the god of war] in his own private hell and make your positive gods the gods that take you over." Leggo Beast sets this monologue to a humble harmonica-electronica soundscape and plays it (Bloom's speech) twice. I wish I'd listened to his advice instead of waiting to write my first novel until after forty.

Nine Inch Nails, "Closer"

This is the song in *The Red Word* that induces the fraternity brothers to crowd into a room together to perform what they call The Rut: an ecstatic, spinning dance that ends with all of them in a pileup on the floor. When I was nineteen, this was the filthiest song on the radio—not merely because of its lyrics (there were plenty of rap songs with worse) but due to its grinding, trancelike beat and Trent Reznor’s digitally disguised (read: stalker, serial-killer) voice. Karen, like the frat boys, adores this song.

Sinead O’Connor, “Troy”

The quintessential cri-de-guerre of the woman wronged, this song was extremely good to sing along to in one’s dorm room. I played it often while writing and revising *The Red Word*. For one thing, it’s stuffed full of mythological references (“the Phoenix from the flame!”). For another, O’Connor’s full-throated bellowing helped me zero in on the voice of the indignant young women in the novel, particularly Karen’s roommate Dyann Brooks Morris, who wants to see the fraternity go down in flames.

Jimi Hendrix, “Little Wing”

Isn’t this the ultimate stoner song? I don’t know if Hendrix intended it as an ode to drugs, but that’s certainly how I hear it. “Little Wing” came well before the 90s, but a roommate put it on a mixtape for me, so I will forever associate this beautiful little tune with my swoony, smoky undergraduate nights...

Anais Mitchell, “Wait for Me”

This one is from Mitchell’s “concept album” *Hadestown*, a retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in an awesome swamp-folk, Cajun mashup of styles. Ani di Franco is on the album too, playing the part of Persephone, wife of Hades. I might have chosen any of the songs—“How Long?” is a breathtakingly poetic duet—but “Wait for Me,” in which Orpheus goes questing after his beloved in the Underworld, is the most heart-wrenching and romantic. This song helped inspire me when writing Karen’s melancholy address, years after the main events of the story, to the love she has lost.

The Stone Roses, “I Wanna Be Adored”

Another of those monotonous-yet-mesmerizing 90s bands, The Stone Roses was in constant rotation in my student house. I like the way this song captures Karen’s quest to fit in at both the fraternity house and at Raghurst. She wants to be loved by both groups, and to an extent is willing to “sell her soul,” as the song says, to find this adoration. Can you find your tribe at college without compromising your individual values, opinions, beliefs, tastes? Do you even know what these are, at that age?

Bjork, “Army of Me”

Bjork blew everybody’s minds when we first heard her. What I remember about this album is that none of my male friends could stand it. “She’s soo weird,” they’d complain, and switch the CD to Pearl Jam or Tom Petty. There was something about this brainy, noisy pixie woman that scared the crap out of them, or made them

feel somehow left out of the joke. Bjork throws down a gauntlet in this particular song, too yet: Watch out, or you'll discover the full force of my female rage! It captures pretty neatly the sentiment that riles up the young women in my novel.

Great Lake Swimmers, "Catcher Song"

GLS is a Toronto band whose playlist I listen to, on shuffle-and-repeat, whenever I'm writing. I do most of my work at cafes, so I need something to drown out the phone calls and moms'-group reunions around me. Nearly a decade of listening, almost daily, to the same 30 songs has made me bond viscerally with Tony Dekker's voice. He is my brother, my father, my lover, my alter-ego. I had a very hard time choosing a specific song title because I don't know any of them by name. Single lines of lyrics are jotted everywhere in my writing notebooks, as a string of words will occasionally penetrate my writing fog.

Bikini Kill, "Double Dare Ya"

A confession: I'd never listened to this band until composing this playlist. I'd heard them in the background at bars and friends' houses, but I vastly preferred folk or indie music, which I felt was more, you know, subtle, than punk. However, in painting the riot grrl backdrop of 90s campus feminism for this novel, I felt it was imperative that I mention the band somewhere. After all, one of their albums was called "Pussy Whiplash!" So there's a potluck scene in which Dyann sits on the arm of the sofa wearing a Bikini Kill t-shirt, "surveying her encampments" before herding everyone downtown for the "Our Streets Too" rally and march. Having used this band, and "Double Dare Ya" in particular, to animate my characters, I've come to adore it for the sheer energy of its in-your-face defiance.

Indigo Girls, "Closer to Fine"

How could any list of 1990s college music be complete without this song? Earnest, angsty, and delivered with those signature close harmonies. The sheer wordiness of IG's songs conjures up for me the intensity of the late-night, beer-fuelled discussions I'd have with my college friends about things like Louis Althusser's vs. Roland Barthes' concept of hegemony.

Mountain Goats, "The Sign" (Ace of Base cover)

I've always liked this chill, West-coast redemption of the horribly overplayed 90s mega-hit. On Youtube you can hear some of the stories that inevitably accompany John's live performances of the song. For me this version is more of a treeplanter song than a college song. In every camp we had some dude with a guitar who would while away the off hours playing ironic covers of Top-40 hits as well as the old favorites like "American Pie" and "Hotel California."

Sarah Henstra and The Red Word links:

the author's website

Kirkus review

Publishers Weekly review

Quill & Quire review