

Gittel

Laurie Schneider

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In Laurie Schneider's stirring historical novel *Gittel*, a young immigrant makes her way in a small town where some people are hostile to differences.

Once, Gittel's family lived in fine circumstances among a proud Jewish community. After a pogrom tore through their city in Tsarist Russia, though, they fled. They wound up in the farming community of Mill Creek, Wisconsin—one of thirteen Jewish families to resettle there. While most in their melting pot community welcome them, differences and all, the family of a classmate, Karl, is the exception: He taunts her with epithets, and his father, a fire-and-brimstone preacher, rails against all that he considers evil, including Jews, from pulpit and barstool alike.

Sharp-tongued and quick-witted, Gittel refuses to cower beneath Karl's cruelties—in fact, she throws them right back at him. She also worries about what her life will become when eighth grade ends. Though she's a gifted student, there's no upper school in Mill Creek. Still, she prepares to wow crowds with a poetry recitation at a local festival; practices Jewish traditions beside her supportive grandparents and parents; saves her community from a roof collapse; and experiences the starriness of first love. When she has the opportunity to see what undergirds Karl's hurtful behaviors, fresh compassion is added to her growing list of accomplishments.

Gittel is an irresistible historical novel. Set between 1911 and 1912, the book captures a Midwestern town's coming-of-age in the prewar period well. Yiddish words are sprinkled across its pages, fleshing out Gittel's family life, and details as of Jane Addams's suffragism, teetotalers breaking saloon bottles, and Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" give shape to the growing pains and values of the era. *Gittel* is the perfect guide through these complex times—self-aware, determined, and eager to flourish.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2025)

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