

Gold: As October Sunsets, a Stray Dog, and God's Good Plans

Linda Jane Niedfeldt

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A teenager on a farm shoulders increasing responsibilities to help her family and community in the moralistic historical novel Gold.

The fourth book in a series, Linda Jane Niedfeldt's standalone historical novel *Gold* is about an immigrant family in Depression-era Wisconsin whose members deepen their faith while helping those in need.

Lis works hard to excel in school and help out around her family's farm. While her father is away working sundry jobs, Lis and her stepmother Taty run their household with patience. Following a scuffle between Lis's brother Yurgi and a hungry boy (called a "hobo" throughout) over a chicken, the family decides to share their good fortune with those in need. They lean on the Bible as their model: the boy is pushed to steal because he's desperate to survive, Lis's father argues; as Christians, their family must help him.

As her family searches for the runaway boy among the local unhoused population, hoping to help him before the iciness of winter sets in, Lis's responsibilities double: she takes over injured Taty's sewing factory job in addition to her schoolwork and chores. She shoulders responsibilities that she's too young for and struggles to balance work, school, and her family's charity efforts. Still, she channels her faith for strength, seeking sources of joy and hope even as the Depression wreaks havoc on her community.

The prose is straightforward and detail-light, and the chapters are short. The previous books in the series are summarized early on; this volume is a standalone one. Its focus is on romanticizing Lis's family's existence, focusing on their consumption of lard sandwiches and apples, how they bond over a stray dog, and how they prioritize their Christian values and avoid selfishness. But in the process of idealizing the family, realism and tension are sacrificed.

Conversations are one of the text's primary vehicles. Lis and her father are prone to exchanging puns, even during dramatic moments, infusing their characterizations with some personality. Outside of these exchanges, Lis narrates, recounting events while pulling faith-based lessons from her experiences. Her focus is quite narrow, though; it's limited to her family's experiences, which are set against the vague context of period privation. Black-and-white photographs flesh out certain scenes in dramatic style, filling in gaps left by the text; some are stylistically anachronistic, however, distracting from the storyline.

In the historical novel *Gold*, a farm family with simple needs navigates the responsibilities of faith, community, and hard work in the midst of the Great Depression.

JOHN M. MURRAY (September 5, 2024)

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