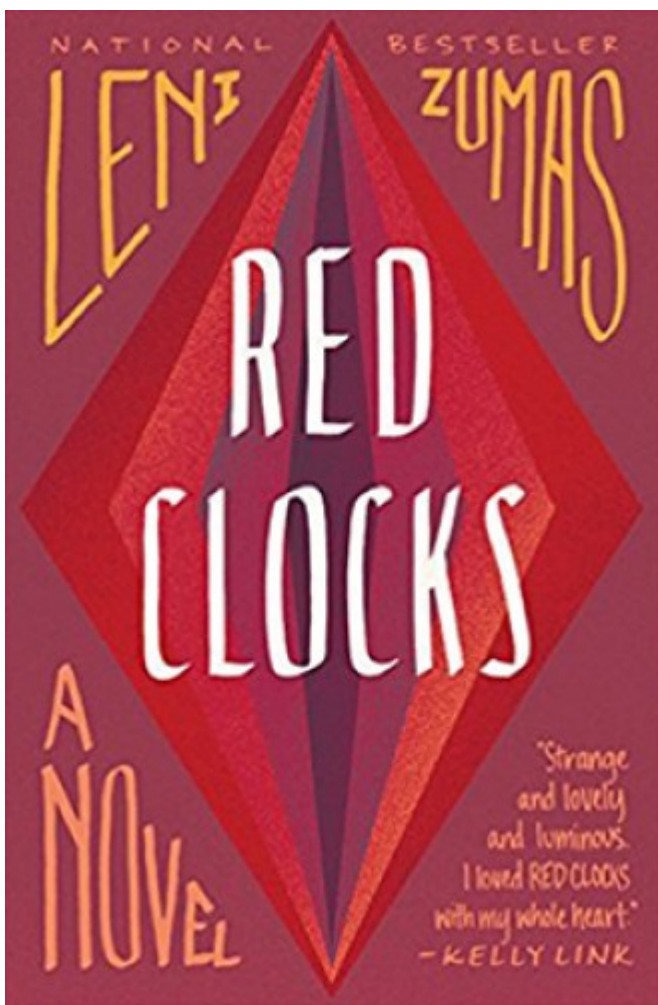


A fictional world where abortion and IVF are illegal—and the women who live there

Leni Zumas's novel makes a political point. More importantly, it cultivates empathy.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 25, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Red Clocks

A Novel

By Leni Zumas

Little, Brown

In the midst of a plethora of new novels reflecting on the fate of women's reproductive freedom, it would be easy to read Leni Zumas's contribution primarily through a political lens. Like others, she uses the genre of near-future dystopia to imagine women's lives and choices when reproductive rights have been curtailed. But to read *Red Clocks* as essentially a political novel is to miss its beauty and the depth of its reflections on desire, love, and choice.

Following the unexpected outcome of a presidential election, a Personhood Amendment to the Constitution is ratified, which gives the right to "life, liberty, and property to a fertilized egg at the moment of conception." Not only does the amendment outlaw abortion, it also bans IVF treatment because embryos "can't give their consent to be moved" from laboratory to uterus. A further law about to go into effect will prevent unmarried persons from adopting children. This law is intended to "restore dignity, strength, and prosperity to American families."

Zumas spends little of the book explaining these laws or how they came into being. Instead, she plays out their consequences in the lives of four women who offer distinct narrative perspectives. One of them, called "the daughter," wants an abortion. "The biographer" wants a child but cannot conceive. "The mender" uses herbal medicine to help women who want to conceive and those who want to illegally abort. The fourth woman stands out as someone whose options are not directly affected by the laws. "The wife," as she is called, is married and has two biological children. Still, she finds herself desperately unhappy.

Zumas weaves together these four lives—all in the same small town on the coast of Oregon—by giving us each woman's perspective in an intimate way. This is what makes the book stand out: its delicate and creative balancing of the inner life and the outer world. Realms of thought, word, and deed frequently contradict one another as the narrative draws us into the human questions: What do I want from this life? What is love? What is truth?

The biographer is the town's high school history teacher. She is also writing a book about the life of Arctic explorer Eivør Mínevudottír. The biographer is a single woman who desperately wants a child. She endures humiliating and unsuccessful fertility treatments, even while she constantly questions her motivations and her

prospects.

To the world, she presents a face of determination and fearlessness. Standing at the counter waiting for her fertility medication, she tells the pharmacist's assistant, "This medication is going to make me have a foul-smelling vaginal discharge."

"At least it's for a good cause," he drily responds.

But in her notebook, she writes a list of what she calls "Accusations from the world," which are also self-recriminations. The list begins: "1. You're too old." It ends:

10. Your body is grizzled husk.
11. You're too old, sad spinster!
12. Are you only doing this because you're lonely?

The daughter also experiences a gap between thought and action, although in a significantly dreamier way. On the fateful afternoon when she has sex with her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend, she is thinking mostly about a black fin that she saw off the coast and wondering about what kind of creature it might have belonged to. She is an adolescent who has not yet grasped the relationship between action and consequence. Even as it gradually dawns on her that she is pregnant, she still drifts off into thoughts of *Moby-Dick*, "Of all divers, said Captain Ahab, thou hast dived the deepest."

The novel's rich exploration of the strangeness of characters' inner lives means that readers are asked to suspend judgment on nearly all of them. We feel for the teenager's adopted father, who (not knowing about his daughter's pregnancy) is glad for the new abortion laws. He reminds his beloved daughter that her mother could have terminated her pregnancy, and thus she would not have existed. To him, that would have been a tragedy. His voice in the daughter's head is an important one.

Similarly, we feel for the wife, whom others experience as bitter and judgmental, because we are allowed to see the world through her eyes. Choices, even freely made, can be costly.

The mender is perhaps the strangest of the novel's characters. She has escaped societal conventions and lives by herself in the forest. She sometimes has twigs in her hair. She warms herself naked by the fire. But she too struggles with her place in

the scheme of things.

The excerpts from the biography of Mínerudottír suggest that the purpose of this novel is to cultivate empathy. The biographer tries to imagine herself into the sound of narwhals, the taste of *skerpikjöt*, and the experience of having your research rejected simply because you are a woman. This project in empathetic imagination extends across the whole novel, and it compels its readers' participation.

Empathy may seem less important than political action. It can feel too slow, too soft, for the calamitous realities we face. But the most effective political change comes through the ability to see how politics plays out in the lives of those who are different from us. Such empathy is one gift that fiction gives us, and *Red Clocks* provides it generously.