



The Last Circle

Gretchen Blickensderfer

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"If you will not be saved, there will be consequences." Based upon platforms and quotes from Conservative political and church leaders, The Last Circle chronicles the rise to power of a United States Evangelical theocracy and the small group of Pagan and LGBT friends who must escape the country to survive. A terrifying chase through the southern states tests the limits of their friendship and someone from among them is secretly tipping off their pursuers.

The Last Circle Details

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From Reader Review The Last Circle for online ebook

Susan Lulgjuraj says

As the current-day United States fights toward legalizing gay marriage across all 50 states, The Last Circle looks at a “what-if” world if the opposite happens. However, it’s not just about gay marriage, but paganism and anything that is deemed un-Christian, even Cinderella.

The fundamentalist Christians have won in The Last Circle and those that do not follow their beliefs are not safe in this dystopian future.

The message in The Last Circle is very heavy-handed with an almost preaching-like quality of what will happen to the country if Christians take over. This could be a real turn off to many readers, including myself, but not for the reasons you think.

It just seemed so much was painted in black and white. If you’re a Christian, you’re an evil person who doesn’t want anyone to be happy and you will go to dire lengths to ensure that salvation comes to everyone even if means they have to give up their freedoms to do so. On the other hand, if you are pagan or Wiccan and your friends are gay and outcasts from their families, you’re inherently good.

Life does not work this way.

While I appreciate Gretchen Blickensderfer’s fight for a better society, it just seemed many of the scenarios were outlandish and many of the characters were walking stereotypes. It’s a bit more complicated than good versus evil especially when painting with such a broad brush.

The book also seemed to jump around a bit too much and felt disorganized.

**Originally written for "Books and Pals" book blog. May have received a free review copy. **

Awesome Indies Reviewers says

I will not be finishing The Last Circle. I have read 3 chapters (25% of the book) and find it insufferable. The characterization relies so heavily on caricature and stereotypes it’s hard to believe there was any attempt to write it so anyone could relate. This isn’t just an issue with the individual characters but the “sides” of the story. Honestly, I’ve never read something so obviously intended as propaganda.

Now, I’m not a Christian. I enjoy transgressive books especially ones that challenge the status quo of the dominant culture (see my review of Good Prayers, Great Sex for an example). But this novel is simply offensive. The characters representing Christians are simply insane. They have no redeeming qualities, invoke no sympathy and have no growth. They are cardboard cutouts of the FoxNews/Westboro Baptist Church mentality without any subtlety.

It’s so extreme that a huge part of the story - Shelby and Roshan’s relationship - is completely unbelievable. Not a single part of me believes that they would have ever gotten together, let alone engaged, let alone stayed together this long.

On the other side, the stereotyped pagans are just as bad. The Pagans are right and smart and justified and powerful in their own right as well as gay and single parents and every thing you'd want on a liberal checklist. The gay characters were the only ones with any kind of variation, but really all you get is the domesticated couple and the outlandish bear/fag. Oh and then there's Roshan, who works in a theatre and as far as I can tell is bisexual. Insert limp wrist here.

Again, this is not prejudice on my part. I am liberal, I am queer, and I am a feminist. However, I don't enjoy being a stereotype.

In addition to the terrible characterization, the book is riddled with errors, missing words and horrid head hops all over the place, and a plot that doesn't really make sense. It's also clearly written by a Brit and no attempt seems to have been made to avoid phrasing that makes the book stand out as not-American despite the entire plot being set in America. (i.e. Queing instead of waiting, mum instead of mom, etc)

The entire first quarter of the book is lead up to a summary at the end of the third chapter. In many ways it nullifies the need for the preceding chapters existence at all.

The plot is weak, with juxtaposed characters Shelby and Laura. Both women in relationships that don't work, both committed to their way of thinking and closed to opposing opinions, both annoying. When they meet, the climactic blow up is so over the top unbelievable it's laughable. If Shelby hadn't been a certifiable unsympathetic lunatic before that point, she is now.

The chapters are way too long, not broken up in any kind of logic and the third not only has Laura and Shelby but Palmer whose section is pure info dump. And then there's an inexplicable and unmarked transition back to the characters from the prologue which requires a skip in time a year forward.

I don't recommend this book at all, it is overwritten and offensive.

I received this book from the author in return for an honest review.

S.L. Saboviec says

Note: I received a free copy of *The Last Circle* in exchange for an honest review.

The quote that encapsulates the book's premise opens chapter fifteen:

“When the Christian majority takes over this country, there will be no satanic churches, no more free distribution of pornography, no more talk of rights for homosexuals. After the Christian majority takes control, pluralism will be seen as immoral and evil and the state will not permit anybody the right to practice evil.” — Gary Potter, writer, Catholics for Political Action

The Last Circle creates this vision in vivid detail. Social and economic conditions have become difficult, and people are looking for guiding light. A man named Stephen Palmer is all too happy to step into the shoes of

President and transform the country into a place he had only dreamed about.

That place is a place of concentration camps named “Salvation Centers.” It’s a place where homosexuals and Pagans must flee to the Mexican and Canadian border for amnesty. It’s a place where neighbors turn on one another, and where hatred and fear and starvation are the currencies. It’s Auschwitz; it’s the Crusades; it’s every terrible condition under every despotic regime man has ever created.

On the book’s website, the author describes how she researched the beliefs of extreme right-wing evangelical Christians to create this book. But I would need to do no research to know that what she presents is fact; I am quite familiar with this rhetoric. This was the atmosphere I grew up in, a small town in the Midwest where condemnations and judgments were espoused regularly in sermons, in casual conversation, in after-school Bible studies. None of the extreme belief encapsulated in the book surprises me. It all hits home a little too hard.

Still, all of this begs the question: Why? Why does *The Last Circle* assert such extremes? In this day and age, we as reasonable people living in a technologically advanced society would never allow that. Or would we? That’s a question you will have to answer for yourself after you read it. My answer is that it’s the only solution. If you promise your followers to root out evil, you’d better be willing to take each and every measure necessary. Fear-mongering. Lying. Torture. Killing. Otherwise, how else will you get the job done? It’s one of the reasons I tried so hard for years to force myself to believe, only to be unable to accept this philosophy. It’s one of the reasons I walked away.

The Last Circle made me think. A lot. It made me think about the past I came from and what I believe now. It’s a powerful book with a message for all of us, one that we hopefully will never have to face.

But. As books go, I found it a tad frustrating. The writing was visual and distant, reminding me more of a movie than a book. I found the enormous cast of characters (the Pagans and LGBT group escaping the Palmer regime) difficult to keep straight. One of the big reveals—who is this Gwen that is telling the story of the last circle to the media?—was confusing because I thought I’d simply missed her introduction, losing her in the shuffle of so many people.

However, I feel that this book has a big enough idea presented in a realistic, albeit confrontational manner, that I would recommend it as food for thought. If you’re interested in the political and religious hot button issue of church versus state, I would give this a read. If nothing else, it will give you something to chew over long after you’ve finished reading.

Also published on my blog, Magic & Mayhem Book Reviews.

Sandra Wagner says

I am not usually interested in alternate histories such as what if Hitler got his posting as an artist, or what if Hannibal didn’t cross the Alps. And dystopian stories are not my cup of tea either unless there is some redemption in the story. I feel we’re living in a dystopia already so I don’t need to see any more of them.

However...

Except this one could come true. As a member of the LGBT community I have always feared a Kristallnacht

type of event. Like many in my community, I have been subjected to hatred and bullying throughout my life. Nothing that we have achieved in the LGBT community is impervious to the stroke of a pen. It could all get wiped out tomorrow. The white christian fundamentalist males NEED to have someone to hate in order to fund their political agendas. And anyone who isn't a white christian fundamentalist male is a target for their hatred.

The trigger for the main characters to be set on their paths is a very believable crisis in the middle east that causes economic ruin in the United States. Out of this chaos rises the "revangelsit" movement which promises a quick fix to the problems of the U.S. Simply put by them, the U.S. was founded on christian mores and blessed by God himself and the country has strayed from those founding principles and have incurred the wrath of God the Almighty. And the cause of this wrath are those who spit in the face of Jesus and flaunt their lifestyle choices for all to see.

Through a program of "enlightenment" those who are different are invited to visit Salvation Centers where they are gently shown the way of the word and the love of Jesus everlasting.

In reality it is a pogrom of spiritual and racial cleansing and the Salvation Centers are a euphemism for euthanasia camps.

Against this as backdrop, our two main characters weave a story of intrigue, betrayal, and hatred.

Each chapter is prefaced with an actual quote from a current public figure describing how those with "alternative lifestyles" are personally responsible for the destruction of society. And how much better we would all be if all those nasty homosexuals just disappeared.

Don't ever say "It can't happen here".

Cissa says

This is a rather long but very compelling thriller, set in a near-future American dystopia. What could happen if all of the fundamentalist Christian wing-nuts got it all their own way politically? This, like the very different "Handmaid's Tale", shows a version of the results, and why we need to take their sometimes ridiculous rhetoric seriously. I know this is a political comment, and I make it because the politics of the book are unavoidable. If you are sympathetic to the extremes of right-wing political rhetoric and its aims, you will hate this book.

It's very focused on the action, which is fast moving with strong tension- so much so that I finished it in 2 days, even though it's almost 500 pages! (Don't be too put off by the length; it moves very fast, plus the type size is large and the line spacing very open.) The plot is very twisty, too, and primarily character-driven... which leads to one of its problems.

The characters of the Bad Guys, especially Shelby, are more like caricatures. They're definitely sociopathic, and possibly (especially Shelby) literally insane. I do not see how a pragmatic, if sociopathic, leader like Stephen Palmer would allow someone as basically unhinged as Shelby into the top circle of power. But then, we don't see enough of him to know if he's also psychotic; he may be, and just hides it better.

The Good Guys are better drawn- generally sympathetic, but flawed and they quite often irritate both each

other and the reader. The main problem I had with them is that they did not seem consistently flawed. Sometimes their attitudes and responses didn't seem coherent to what had gone before. However, compared to the kind of action story in which all the Good Guys seem to be of one mind and always in accord, this is refreshingly realistic. I also did enjoy reading a thriller where modern Pagans were definitely the Good Guys!

I liked the way the setting addressed the idea of what the USA would look like if extremist fringe of the right wing got their way. This was pointed up by the quotes that start each chapter- actual quotes from actual public figures, cited at the end of the book- though I wished the cites had been included with the quotes themselves, and think that would have made a stronger point that people are really talking about doing these things, here and now.

Dystopias tend to be exaggerated, and that's true here. I really don't think that the USA would slide into becoming a nation of fanatics in 5 or so years, especially not to the degree depicted. Mostly people are far too apathetic for that...and if they were going for the apathetic as well as the "unbelievers", they would not have much popular support- especially after they took away all the raunch in the media! I could be wrong about this, but very much hope I am not.

My final quibble has to do with the writing style, especially some of the word choices. They were odd in their rhythms and connotations. For example: "...[Texas] closing its borders to all but the most loyal paramours of Jesus." (pg. 454) "Paramours" implies a far more carnal relationship than I think the author meant! Similarly, "She was screaming in berserk agitation as a third [agent] hammered a baton onto her gunshot wound." (pg. 362). The nuances of neither "berserk" nor "agitation" really seem to fit the described scene. Also: "All were tacitly organized and, under Lilyan's covert direction, assuaged their outraged guilt..." (pg. 377) It's really awkward, since the adjectives do not match up well with the nouns they're paired with. These are 3 examples, but this dissonance permeated the book. It's as if the author used a thesaurus to find a fancier word with an arguably similar meaning, rather than choosing a plainer word that fit the sentences more comfortably.

I got this book for reviewing from paganbookreviews.net and I'm glad I did. I enjoyed it a lot despite its flaws, and would be interested in more from Blickensderfer.

Florence says

This book has powerful subject matter and is relevant to anyone who has ever felt different and had to flee to survive. The Wiccan Coven in the book is described beautifully. The interactions of characters explores loyalty and what it means to have doubt outside of a group and some betraying the innermost part of a group. This is a great book, and I wish there were more books on these subjects.

Sally says

Last summer we saw something new hit the shelves in terms of dystopian fiction, a novel about the rise of a Christian theocratic state, and the persecution of alternate faiths and sexualities. While Christian Nation was an interesting read, however, it was also very dry, very black-and-white in its heroes and villains, and surprisingly misogynistic in its persecution of gay men over all others (including militant terrorists).

With *The Last Circle*, Gretchen Blickensderfer approaches a similar decline in the American dream, but does so with greater balance and personality. Hers is a very human drama. There are no clear black-and-white distinctions here, no perfect heroes or villains, and no hatred of one 'abomination' above all others. In fact, while faith and politics play a significant role in the transition to a Christian theocratic state, it's individual relationships that drive the central conflicts.

The story itself is structured somewhat oddly, with a contemporary first-person interview framing a more traditional third-person narrative, but it works - especially once the true identity of Gwen is revealed. It's this framing that really brings the story home, providing a sympathetic viewpoint for the reader. As I said, the other characters are not perfect, and even the persecuted heroes have traits that make you want to just reach through the page and shake some sense into them, so Gwen is important as a sort of emotional anchor. Every time we begin to find ourselves frustrated with Laura and her coven, Gwen's story reminds of just how high the stakes are, and precisely why we have to rise above petty personal conflicts.

As for Laura, she's an interesting choice for a protagonist. An emotionally distant young woman with some serious relationship issues, she takes solace and comfort in her role as coven leader. That responsibility begins to wear on her, however, once the persecution starts, and her inability to reconcile her friendships with her sense of a larger purpose causes significant tensions. It is her stubborn insistence on illegally publishing an article critical of President Palmer's reforms that puts them all at risk, and her perseverance in holding an equally illegal pagan ritual (as a protest) that puts them on the run.

Personally opposing her is a woman by the name of Shelby, once a simple, if dangerously obsessive, church group leader with relationship issues of her own. Although she has no ambitions to rise above her station in life, a series of circumstances (including several broken relationships) put her side-by-side with President Palmer as his Director of the Bureau of Religious Protection. She is a dangerous woman, full of ideas and passions, but short on reason. As her obsession grows, fed by the evangelical propaganda of her husband, Shelby makes the final confrontation with Laura and her coven a personal one, despite the fact that the world is watching, and the stakes are far higher than she's possible of comprehending.

Not surprising for a story that's primarily about relationships, this is also a story that turns on a number of betrayals - spiritual, emotional, and physical. Many of them are subtle, with larger implications revealed later on, but a few of them are quite staggering. To say much more would be to spoil their power, but it all comes back to the idea that nobody is perfect, and that what should be black-and-white is really just shades of grey. It makes for an uncomfortable read at times, but reading about such a fundamental betrayal of the American dream should be uncomfortable.

While I thought the story could use a little more description - I sometimes found it hard to visualize who people were or what was happening - that's really my only complaint. I thought it was imaginative and well thought out, with the rise of the Christian theocratic state entirely reasonably and (sadly) almost logical. There's a lovely appreciation for history here as well, with several significant events recreated or echoed in the struggle of Laura and her coven. I'm still not sure how I feel about the climax - I appreciate it, but don't necessarily like it - but, overall, *The Last Circle* is absolutely worth reading for anybody with an interest in the struggle for equality and acceptance.

As published on Bending the Bookshelf

Bookdragon Sean says

I have won this book as a giveaway and shall update this review when I have received the book and read it.

Update: I never received a copy; therefore, I didn't read it or write a review.

Amanda Masters says

I so loved this book! Gretchen is a truly fantastic writer who kept me entertained throughout her entire story. Her characters were so great! I got a big kick out of Shelby in all her righteous indignation over every little thing and it actually made me laugh quite a few times. Shelby's use of J.K. Rowlings as a example of evil made me laugh so hard! (as she is one of my fav authors) you could practically see Shelby standing in front of you spouting off all of Rowlings evil ways! it was so funny!

Gretchen's pagan characters were so fun loving and so real. They all had their problems like normal people and they dealt with them in normal ways, even wishing they could rely on magic to fix it just like regular pagan people tend to do. They were wonderful and down to earth and I loved that about them right down to their faults.

I normally don't like when a book jumps from story to story and back again but I really enjoyed it in this book. it kept it interesting and kept the book flowing nicely. The twists and turns in the book were quite surprising and I could never guess what was going to happen next. There were many surprises and all fit the story to the extreme. I don't think anyone could have written it better!

Gretchen is such a wonder to have created this book and I highly commend her for it! I am glad to no only count her as a truly gifted and caring person but as a friend as well.

if you haven't read this book I highly recommend it! TBR Today!
