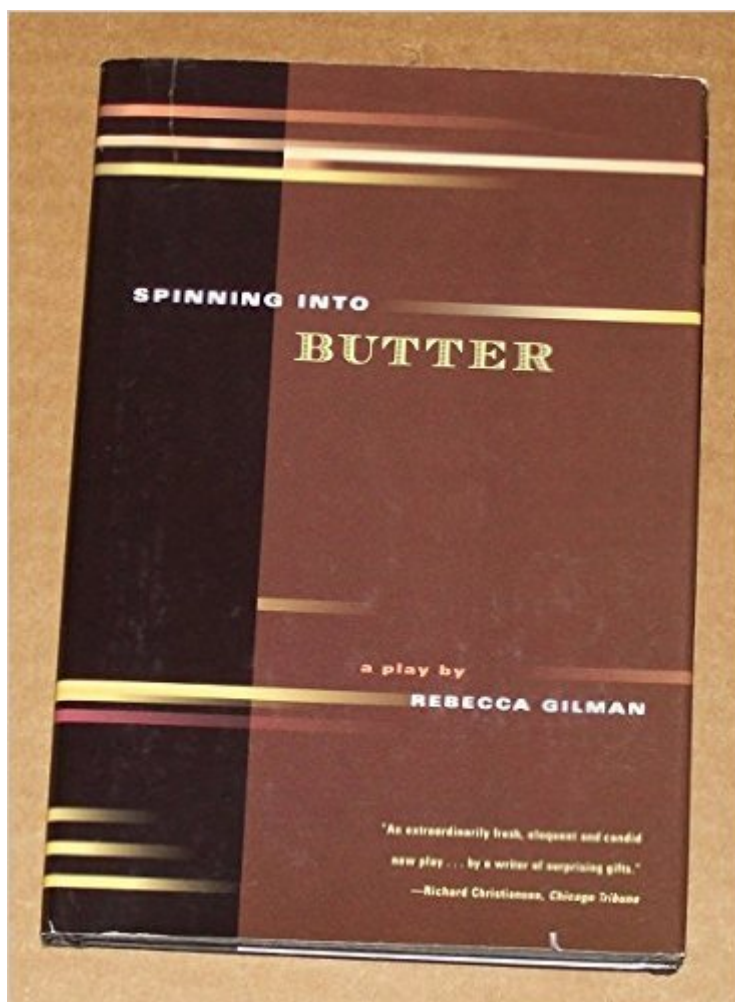


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Spinning Into Butter, A Play



Synopsis

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Rebecca Gilman is a true dramatist of ideas, and hence very adept at pulling the rug out from under an audience's feet. In "Spinning Into Butter" she subverts the otherwise smooth workings of current American identity politics with her stage writer's sure instinct that individuals, circumstances and motives alter cases. Though much of the published commentary on the play singles out merely one liberal's "confession" of racism, it is fairer to the play, I think, to recognize that the dramatist sees all her characters in their different ways as racists, those who arbitrarily privilege themselves or other members of formerly oppressed or ignored groups as much as those who covertly oppose them. In such an environment, the playgoer finally has to ask, "Are the characters (and by extension we ourselves) incapable of seeing particular persons as individuals, or have we all been rendered crazy by the imperatives of groupthink?" Equally disturbing, the college at which the play takes place is one where those who prosper, whether students or administrators, are simply those most savvy at whacking a system set up by money grubbers bent on student retention and their odd allies, the thought police. From such an environment, the more sensitive and intelligent must either flee or else be banished. Gilman's insights here bear affinities to those in recent campus novels by Philip Roth, Francine Prose, and J. M. Coetzee where rightist bottom line considerations are shown to have joined forces with leftist PC dictates straight out of the Chinese Cultural Revolution to produce startling new hells. The story of "Little Black Sambo," which gives the play its title, is a marvelously apt and ironic controlling metaphor for this dramatic action.

Using the old, and politically incorrect, story of Little Black Sambo as her controlling metaphor and the inspiration for her title, Gilman provides a look at the hidden racism within the white community, specifically a college community in rural Vermont. Students, deans, and faculty all examine their attitudes and behavior when Simon Brick, one of the few African-American students on campus, finds a hate note tacked to the door of his room. Dean of Students Sarah Daniels, in whose office the action takes place, is quick to respond with outrage, as is the politically correct faculty and administration. Though all have good intentions, everyone has an agenda, and the on-campus dialogue they hope to establish becomes increasingly emotional. As in Little Black Sambo, the "tigers" soon begin to chase each other furiously around the tree, until they spin themselves into a pool of butter. The characters are painted with a broad brush, and for each one we know only what will further the message or provide humor to leaven the didacticism. Sarah Daniels's on-campus affair provides plenty of opportunities to hold male characters up to humorous examination for their sexual biases. The administration wants to keep the racial incident out of the press. The Dean of Humanities proposes innumerable campus meetings where students and faculty will publicly examine and confess their attitudes and biases. A student founds Students for Tolerance because it will look good on his law school application, stating, "Where I'm from, I do not think people are racists."

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