



Sister Golden Hair

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When Jesse's family moves to Roanoke, Virginia, in the summer of 1972, she's 12 years old and already mindful of the schism between innocence and femininity, the gap between childhood and the adult world. Her father, a former pastor, cycles through spiritual disciplines as quickly as he cycles through jobs. Her mother is dissatisfied, glumly fetishizing the Kennedys and anyone else that symbolizes status and wealth. The residents of the Bent Tree housing development may not hold what Jesse is looking for, but they're all she's got. Her neighbor speaks of her married lover; her classmate playacts being a Bunny at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club; the boy she's interested in fantasizes about moving to Hollywood and befriending David Soul. In the midst of it all, Jesse finds space to set up her room with her secret treasures: busts of Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare, a Venus flytrap, her Cher 45s, and *The Big Book of Burial Rites*, which she reads obsessively. But outside awaits all the misleading sexual mores, muddled social customs, and confused spirituality. Girlhood has never been more fraught than in Jesse's telling, its expectations threatening to turn at any point into delicious risk, or real danger.

Sister Golden Hair Details

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From Reader Review Sister Golden Hair for online ebook

Jill says

Sister Golden Hair is a coming-of-age book. Nothing new there; coming-of-age books, including Catcher in the Rye, To Kill A Mockingbird, Skippy Dies, She's Come Undone, This Boy's Life, A Prayer for Owen Meany and so on – have long been staples of American and world literature.

In fact, there are so many great coming-of-age books around that I always approach a new one somewhat skeptically. Fortunately, Darcey Steinke has a good story to tell and she tells it well.

Pre-teen Jesse is a child of the 1970s, growing up in Roanoke, Virginia. Her defrocked minister father and emotionally-fraught mother move to a duplex area, inhabited by a number of down-on-their-luck fragmented families. The 1970s takes center stage here: the fascination with Cher, TV rage (Welcome Back, Kotter and The Carol Burnett Show), Patty Hearst kidnapping, Nixon resignation, Playboy Bunny phenomenon, Lynyrd Skynyrd and more – all woven seamlessly into the narrative.

But the beauty of this book is its pitch-perfect character studies. Ms. Steinke, in a first-person narration, provides snapshot interactions with five characters: Sandy ("to me, she was as exotic as a lizard soaking up the sun") in her leopard-print bikini is just about stone-broke and relies on her sleazy oral surgeon boyfriend to financially care for her. Jill is Jesse's BFF with the "spark and intensity of a downed electrical wire", eccentrically trying to survive despite an uncaring, absent mother.

There's Sheila, the unapproachable beauty who is inappropriately acting out, and whose friendship comes at a steep price. Julie, who is her mother's BFF, a wannabe dancer whose narcissism alienates her daughter yet holds Jesse's mother in thrall. And Dwayne, one of the school's bad boys, whose claim to fame is that he looks like David Soul...and who is more gullible than he would ever want to reveal. Lastly, there is Jesse herself: trying to figure out where she fits and her place in the world.

If you think you know these characters from other books ("the school beauty, the bad boy, the wannabe"), well, maybe you have. Yet the insights and perceptions are so real and their stories are so compelling that you forget all that and want to read on. It was so enjoyable to inhabit Jesse's world for a few magical days.

Julie says

Steinke's '70s coming-of-age novel is told through adolescent Jesse's attachment to four separate friends (whose names section the novel), all of whom are sometime residents in Jesse's downmarket Virginia apartment complex, Bent Tree. Together these characters construct something of a universal adolescent '70s for us. Everything both loveable and unfortunate from that era is here, from the messiest kind of parental dysfunction to the skeeviest dentists to corduroy jeans and Camaros(?) (with Skynyrd blasting seemingly constantly). In its cultural references, the book itself is a "bent tree," heavily laden with the era's low hanging fruit. Cher and Skynyrd, for example, are ubiquitous. Too much? Too bad. Steinke skillfully walks a line here that keeps one of contemporary lit's most delicate narrators from absorbing the worst this much maligned era offered up. It's an often graceless and difficult walk, and Steinke pulls it off sweetly, without once being cloying.

Jen says

The strongest element of this book was the nostalgic walk through the 1970s era it provides. This alone makes up somewhat for the strange, seemingly aimless plot.

Jesse is 12 years old in 1972 and attempting to navigate the confusing world of her unhappy parents, her depressing neighborhood, her peers, and her own sexuality. Each chapter focuses on her relationship with a person in her neighborhood. Just when that relationship is starting to flesh out and a plot developing, the author drops it and moves to the next person in Jesse's life. It leaves you with a bit of a dissatisfied feeling.

However, the author's writing was strong and kept my interest. The novel just felt a bit aimless, with just one heartbreak, depressing scenario after another. Excellent for anyone wanting a trip down 1970s memory lane...

Sian Lile-Pastore says

Love a coming of age story. Love a story set in the 1970s. This is both.

This is told from the point of view of 12 (when the book starts) year old Jesse, whose father has left the church and is now lying on the couch reading Alan Watts books (I know, I know, I'd totally date him too), with the whole family having moved to a new house no location. The story is told through her relationships with other people which makes it a little disjointed, but perhaps more realistic. I really enjoyed reading this, and enjoyed the writing style too, but it did lose me a little midway and hasn't left a big impression. Lovely drifty, easy summer read.

Kristine says

Original review can be found at <http://kristineandterri.blogspot.ca/2012/07/review-bent-tree.html>...

I received an advanced readers copy of this book from Tin House Books via Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review. Thank you!

This book is definitely a coming of age story about Jesse from the age of twelve to fifteen. It begins with her family in limbo after her father loses his job as a pastor. After travelling from place to place they end up in a duplex in the Bent Tree housing development. From here Jesse struggles with all different kinds of young problems in an effort to figure out who she is and where she fits in. Through interactions with neighbours and the kids at school, we learn about her struggles. Not only is she at an age of great change while living in a new community but at the same time she is trying to balance her somewhat unbalanced family. Her father doesn't seem to know what he wants to do with his life and her mother is obviously suffering from some sort of mental illness. It does not specifically say that she has an illness but gathering from the fact that Jesse rates her moods by numbers it is easy to infer.

What I enjoyed most about this story is all of the references to trends, music, television and fashion of that time. Although it took place a few years before I was born I could identify with the majority of things

mentioned. The only thing that was referenced quite frequently that I wasn't sure on was a jelly cup. What the heck is a jelly cup?? Did I miss out on something great during my childhood?

What I wasn't too fond of was that with all of Jesse's trials and tribulations during this time frame there never seemed to be any resolution or real moment of clarity for her. Perhaps this was intentional with the story ending when she was only fifteen and there is still so much growing to do, but I found it just kind of ended abruptly. There was no real beginning, middle and end.

In the end I did like the book but I was left wishing there was just a little more something to make it great.

Mary Lins says

I was a young teen in 1972, just a little older than the narrator, Jesse, in Darcey Steinke's new novel, "Sister Golden Hair". Is this historical fiction? You be the judge, but for me it was a wonderful evocation of memories from that era:

- Hitchhiking Hippies!
- The controversy over the war in Vietnam
- Nixon
- Baby oil and iodine for a tan
- No seat belts in older cars
- Young girls loving, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" (I hope they still do!)
- "American Pie" on every radio station
- Macramé hanging plant holders
- Puka shell necklaces (why are they now the universal symbol of a jerk?)
- "The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour" (I was obsessed with Cher, too!)
- Charles Manson
- "Dark Shadows" – Barnabas Collins
- "Jonathan Livingstone Seagull" (what WAS that?)

And this is just a partial list!

Jesse's father is a former Methodist Minister who is now floundering on a quest for spirituality. The family has been booted from their parish and has moved into a duplex complex in what I'd call a "struggling class" area of Roanoke, Virginia. Jesse's mother is most likely bi-polar and her moods (Jesse assigns them numbers) direct and dominate the family dynamic. We are introduced to the denizens of this complex via Jesse's experiences.

Jesse, from 12 to 15 in this story, leads a rich and imaginative inner life. Maybe we all do at that age but many of us have forgotten. Steinke's gorgeous and evocative writing, along with the pitch-perfect narrative voice of Jesse, treats the reader not only to a visit to the past, but also a visit into the mind of a burgeoning young woman.

I thoroughly enjoyed this novel. I identified with Jesse on many levels; I too, had an early obsession with a library book (for me it was, "A Candle in Her Room" by Ruth M. Arthur), I can confess now that I wrote down what I wore every day of junior high so as not to repeat outfits, I related to Jesse's quest for popularity,

the desperation to “fit in” but at the same time, being beguiled by the “outsiders” – the eccentrics and the rebels. This novel reminded me that your experiences between 12 and 15 can often be more fraught and transformative than anything that happens to you in adulthood. Thank you Ms. Steinke, for this time machine of a novel.

Maria says

I love coming of age novels set in the 1970s, my own childhood years. If you enjoy these types of books as much as I do, try *Ticket to Ride* by Paula McLain, *An Egg on Three Sticks* by Jackie Fischer, *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Summer of Naked Swim Parties* by Jessica Anya Blau, and *A Crime in the Neighborhood* by Suzanne Berne.

Robyn Markow says

If you want to read a book that invokes a time and place perfectly;read "Sister Golden Hair". It's 1972 & 12 year old Jesse's father has just left the ministry so she and her family;her now-disillusioned with organized religion dad,depressed,status-obsessed mom & younger brother Phillip move from Philadelphia to Roanoke,Virginia after her dad accepts a job counseling at the local Psychiatric Hospital. The family moves into a Condo Development called,appropriately, Bent Tree. Gawkly & insecure Jesse tries on new friends and identities as her dad tries on new philosophies,mostly by emulating the other female residents such as Sandy,the young mistress of a sleazy Oral Surgeon, Jill,the Goth-fixated oldest daughter of a irresponsible divorced mother and Shelia,the once-popular Golden Girl who experiences a fall from grace after her dad leaves her mom for a man and wants to be a Playboy Bunny.(this was before Gay was O.K) Told in first person,Steinke describes each friend/Role Model with a refreshing matter-of-factness as well as effectively referring to the musical icons and clothing from the early to mid 70's. However,the best thing about this book is the setting may be that particular era,but the story of a young girl trying to discover her place in a confusing world fraught with conflicting messages is timeless.

christa says

I've read enough Darcey Steinke that parts of this felt familiar: The Instagram filter backdrop, the religious figure of a father, the voice of the narrator -- a young, curious girl with her own shade of humor. This one uses familiar ingredients to create something new, fun and nostalgia-inducing.

Steinke's coming-of-age novel “Sister Golden Hair” is a delicious collection of stories about Jesse, a young girl growing up in an apartment complex in suburban Virginia. It's a place where it's cool to walk along the highway to the mall, say. Her former minister father uses a sort of yoga-style evolution to continually shift to a new religious position. Her deeply dissatisfied mother finds a friend and damn-near crushes the woman. Her brother is constantly playing and Jesse is negotiating the politics of what it means to be, simultaneously, this specific girl in the 1970s and all specific girls ever.

Jesse's story is broken into chapters starring a singular friend or neighbor -- a woman who plays a major role in the featured character's development. Her first attraction is to a woman living in the complex who has a

young son. She spends her days tanning and her nights out with her married boyfriend. This is all very sexy and glamorous to Jesse, and sometimes both women seem to forget that she's the babysitter and a beer fetcher, maybe not a confidante.

There is a queen bee classmate who falls from her place in the hierarchy when it's revealed that her father is gay. Sheila turns their friendship into a sort of S&M sitch that lands Jesse sitting in Sheila's closet waiting for her next move. In the meantime, the two are honing their Playboy bunny skills to impress Sheila's mother's boyfriend, a major bunny hound. There is also Jill, whose mother stops coming home and learns to subsist on the foods Jesse steals from the family pantry.

Along the way are all sorts of David Cassidy and Cher references and the lifestyle choices that didn't retain popularity into the next millenium. It's the kind of period piece that makes you want to consider all the Cindys and Jennifers who modeled what it looked like to be a girl.

Beth says

Oh, wow. This is in my top five of 2014. This was like time traveling to the 70's. If you liked this, try *In Zanesville* by Jo Ann Beard or *Miss American Pie* by Margaret Sartor.

Afro Madonna says

I just finished reading this and I am mad as fuck! That ending had me like

I'm sorry Darcey but that ending was trash and unfulfilling. MAYBE there was a deeper connective meaning to everything else that happened in the story which she was shooting for but that certainly did not work for me. Like how you gonna cut everything off like that? Do you not care about the reader's feels and connection to the characters and to the story?? Like could i have had more closure?? That was all i was asking for ! Jeez.

I am actually very hurt , mad, frustrated and i want to cry. I legit refused to believe it was over and kept flipping the last page back and forth in disbelief. I even tried to pry apart the page because i just couldn't accept that that was it!

But, all that aside, an actual review. This book was assigned by my professor for my class and i went into it very hesitant and just plain skeptical per usual. I had no idea i was in for a most refreshing and inventive ride. The protagonist or our heroine (i use protagonist in the most lightest sense as she was not very likable in the latter part of the story in my opinion) Jesse, is a 12 year old with the inner voice of an 18 year old if you ask me, and an enjoyable curiosity about everything who, seeks to find herself in a world ridden with questionable fashion fads, 70s music, teenage angst, hippies, religious zealots, you name it.

When it comes down to it i really liked the book. The diversity of characters, character quirks and overall intensity of the story and events were really engaging. It also made me think a lot about my own childhood and transition to adulthood or womanhood and the different joys and pains that brought. Although i was not really that obsessed with the changes that happened in my life as Jesse was with hers. Darcey Steinke will be coming to my college soon and I'm pretty excited and can't wait to let her know that I AM STILL MAD

ABOUT THAT ENDING and JUST WHY?!

Judy says

The story in this novel falls outside the mainstream usual narrative we get in popular fiction about the lives of girls. While I find much to enjoy in some of the popular fiction I read, I don't often find myself, so I tend to gravitate towards a book like *Sister Golden Hair*.

In 1972, Jesse is 12 years old when her family moves to Roanoke, Virginia. Her father had been a Methodist minister who was an early adopter of long hair, folk music played in the church service, Gestalt workshops for parishioners, and Vietnam protests. He even "married" a gay couple. After the clergy trial, he was defrocked and began moving his family once a year as he studied history, science and psychology, while holding down semi-menial jobs. The family was told they would figure out their own relationship to God.

Jesse misses her formerly close relationship to both her dad and God. When no new understanding is forthcoming, she turns to neighbors and school friends in their downscale Roanoke neighborhood for clues. Since that is what most adolescents do anyway, the novel is a microcosm of both a decade in American life and of the ways some of us go outside our family narrative as teens.

You fear for Jesse because she is so innocent. She goes through experiences no mother wants her teenage daughter to go through. The parental units are not actually paying much attention and by the end of the novel, I wondered if that might not have worked out in her favor. She had a freedom of sorts but she also did have a home to go back to every evening; clothing, food and shelter were provided. While her mother was focused on finding her dream house, her dad came and found Jesse both times she ran away.

Many of my friends and I had a much closer watch kept on us in high school and had to venture into the unknown after we were away at college or married or working. Who's to say which is worse, which is better. In the end, Jesse follows her best friend but she is still only 16. You are left to contemplate how that is going to work out for her.

Darcey Steinke was raised with religion and as far as I can tell has spent her writing career working out the areas where religion meets the so-called real world. *Sister Golden Hair* is her latest novel and I want to read her earlier books. Some of them look even more gritty than this one but I think she is on to something, as were a few other of my admired female authors: Simone de Beauvoir, Mary McCarthy, Joyce Carol Oates, etc. She seems to be the literary descendant of those women. Religion, women, and middle-class white society are a potent brew of belief, confusion, disruption and a life-long search for what it is all supposed to mean.

I loved Jesse with ferocity. I read her story in one feverish hot summer day. It was my seventh female authored book in a row in July. I felt like I had been to a special summer camp.

Linda says

I usually enjoy coming of age stories. Not this one. I kept reading and waiting for something to happen but it never did. Is there some deep religious theme I missed? Because religion kept coming up. My one word review? Meh.

Melissa says

Although it wasn't particularly lengthy, it felt aimless and rambling. People came and went during the narrative with no explanation as to where they went or why. Although I have seen the technique of having a chapter for each character, or even separate characters narrating each chapter, in this book it just didn't work. To me, it had the effect of introducing each character, we got to know and love them, then they were abandoned without explanation or fanfare.

Lots of questions arose and were left unanswered. What did her dad end up doing for a living after leaving the church? What was the 1-5 rating system for her mother's moods, I assumed 1 was bad and 5 was good but she never really explained it, you just had to figure it out. Did the narrator have an attraction to girls or did she just have typical preteen "crushes" modeling herself on close friends? Did she end up re-friending Jill? What happened to Sheila anyway? And Pam was around, then ignored, then faded in...sort of. Again, with each chapter devoted to getting to know each friend intimately then dropping them, it reminded me of being at a party where people walked in and sat down and talk to you, talked to you intensely and then just sort of wandered away, never to be seen again.

Honestly, I only finished reading the book to enjoy the flashbacks to my own childhood in the 70's, but most of the time it was like listening to a 12 hr recollection of every minute detail of someone else's childhood and adolescence. She actually was quite a clever writer, very descriptive, but in the end it was all about people, places and situations I didn't know and couldn't work up the energy to care about. After awhile I stopped listening to her words and just enjoyed the references to things that I myself remembered. Then before I knew it, the book was ending, just as randomly as it began. It's as if she said, OK I'm going to write about three years in this girl's life I'll just start ::pointing:: HERE and I will end it ::closing eyes and stabbing the calendar:: HERE. And maybe I missed it, but I never understood the meaning of the title either. It's a nice title though..

I was torn between giving it 2 stars or 3 stars but added the 3rd star just for nostalgia's sake. I had forgotten little things mentioned in the book - for example, that fire hydrants were painted like little people during the Bicentennial (1976). Unfortunately, I am about 8 years younger than the character in the book, so the 80's is more "my decade" I didn't pay that much attention to things during the 70's. It is definitely a "place in time" book, the insider references are endless, so if you are the exact age of the protagonist, and lived in the U.S., you will probably connect with this book. But for me, the characters have already faded from my mind. I am however, fairly impressed with the writing itself, so I would consider reading another book by this author in the future.

Vanore says

I thought I would love this book - because I'm the same age as the main character and wanted a chance to re-live the 70s through the vignettes of her life. Some of it was lovely - endearing and observant. Really did identify with Jesse, (although her name is spelled with the male variation which is weird). The author need to

pay a bit more attention to her fact checking though - Lynard Skynard were not yet big in 1972 and Earth Shoes came later in the 70s - and did not exist as a fashion trend in 1972 either. I get distracted by these details. Anyhow - I did somewhat enjoy the first 3/4 of the book - and then ended up skimming the last 2 chapters just to get it over with - I'd lost interest by that time.
