
Book Review: *Dillard's Promise* by Gilbert Leslie

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Crime, mystery, and generational justice, *Dillard's Promise* by Gilbert Leslie, has it all as a very intriguing read that leaves the reader hooked, wanting to find out more about how the story pans out, which I felt when reading this great work of literature. This story follows the traumatic experiences of a family through the turbulent Jim Crow South to the modernized era of Los Angeles. Houston Jenkins, the story's protagonist, is slowly exposed to his family's history through the death of the women who raised him. Houston is unsuspecting until her dying words lead to a sequence of events that unravels a series of unsolved murders that happened decades prior and across the country. These events bring justice and closure but not in the way one might expect. The author of this thrilling novel is Gilbert Leslie, a current student at California State University-Los Angeles. He previously graduated from California State University-Dominguez Hills, obtaining a degree in Interdisciplinary Studies while minoring in Labor Studies. *Dillard's Promise* is his first time authoring a book as well as being published. In addition to authoring this novel, Leslie was in the process of obtaining his Master of Arts in Political Science and will graduate in May 2025, with hopes to become a professor while concurrently having writing as a second career. Being a single parent at a young age, Leslie's priority was raising his daughter, working in the life insurance industry while pursuing his degrees. Throughout all of this, Leslie has always been passionate about writing as a way to explore how to bring the experiences of criminal and societal justice reform into believable life stories. His dedication to justice is very much showcased within this story.

Dillard's Promise is a very educational read that provides context on both the historical and criminal justice fields of study. The book focuses on the struggles and traumas of a minority family trying to achieve their hopes and goals in a system that works against them. Throughout the story, we jump through different periods of time that shows the hardships specific to that respective era of America. Simultaneously, Leslie also shows how

crime solving has evolved over the years and how with the advancement of forensic technology, crimes can be solved that have been abandoned over the decades. From a little piece of Houston's DNA from a traffic stop, the FBI were able to piece a murder suspect from a series of murders that occurred in the 1970s. I do believe that the overall theme of this story is that justice will always be given, even after death.

The sociological relevance that this book provides is easy to spot, while broader elements of criminal justice are also sprinkled in. Leslie does make it clear how each of the characters are influenced by their social spaces regardless of the time period, as well as how these societal factors affect these individuals. The characters undertake roles and responsibilities endeavor hardships that they face while also navigating the feeling of expectations that many of the characters hold over themselves. Members of the Jenkins family take on certain societal roles that they believe will raise them to a higher social status. In the 1960s-1970s portions, the characters join the military, not to serve the country, but to receive the benefits that enlisting provides, especially providing for the family. The book does graphically show the horrors of racial violence and displays how racist governments plague their communities with blind hatred toward those of a different race. Leslie shows how evil racism is and how dehumanizing it can become if it becomes too deeply rooted. The notable white family in this story is demolished because of the father's lustful racism. The son learns to despise his father's racism and strives to be the complete opposite from his hateful father, which leads the son on a path of self-perceived justice. Overall, the 1940s-1970s storyline shows just how horrible the Jim Crow South was to the Black population through the lens of the Jenkins family.

There are also of course the criminological elements of the story that show the scientific possibilities highlighting how powerful DNA can be in solving a decade-old murder mystery crime. As well as critiquing elements of law enforcement which the reader can compare two enforcement agencies to one another. The two agencies that are showcased are a local police department that is shown in the past, while decades later the FBI brings back a cold case left unsolved by this small local department. By showcasing two law enforcement agencies from past and present

perspectives, it helps the reader understand how law enforcement has evolved over time. A local department relied on the determination of investigators in the past while the FBI in the present day has access to state-of-the-art forensic technology.

The story of the Jenkins family over a half century's time frame is well written and organized in a way that satisfies story arcs that are happening at different periods of time. As Houston's story progresses, the 'flashback' portions provide much needed information or context for Houston's dilemma and the FBI's aggressive motives to solve the cold case. The periodic structure of the storytelling does not weaken the progress of the main storyline but compliments it. Revelations and connections are made in a rather satisfying way. Overall, it keeps you invested in each storyline and enables the reader to want to know what happens next.

The only thing that I must remark on is that certain sequences may be too intense for some readers. There are scenes explaining the graphic nature of the murders, which are described in a very detailed way. Additionally, the use of profanity or derogatory words may be too intense for some readers. I argue that these are needed to convey a larger picture of the narrative within this story as well as showcasing the societal problems that have plagued our society. The story shows how these problems evolved and taken form over the years, which have adapted to the times.

Dillard's Promise is a phenomenal read, it highlights the struggles and obstacles one faces in society and how they overcome these adversities. The novel is inspiring in the way that brings hope and relevance to the many issues individuals face in society. Justice is something that comes in forms one might not accept, while the perceived idea of justice stems from what institutions dictate justice to be. But this novel shows us justice is beyond the common definition conveyed by mainstream social institutions; it is not manufactured but a human ideal. In conclusion, I highly recommend this novel to any looking for a crime-based mystery, *Dillard's Promise* is such a great read!

REFERENCES

Leslie, Gilbert. 2024. *Dillard's Promise*. Cambridge: Pegasus Elliot Mackenzie Publishers Ltd.