

Susan Jane Gilman
Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven
(Grand Central Publishing)

a review by Kristianne Huntsberger

Stepping over the threshold between two rooms in a small house in Dinghai, China, was to stand at the point where past and future met. Susan Jan Gilman discovers that this liminal place is emblematic of the condition of the entire People's Republic of China, where Gilman and her college friend Claire set out on a daring gap year trek.

This is China, 1986, when Lonely Planet guide books were still in their fledgling state and had barely a fingernail's grasp on the enormity of China. Hotel rooms crawl with roaches, hospitals have unsettling resemblance to prison wards and gorgeous foreign men are cruising for adventurous women. This is the kind of journey you would expect from the frank and witty Gilman, who can leap skillfully from hilarity to panic and back again. Her previous memoir, *Hypocrite in a Pouffy White Dress*, won rave reviews all over the board, from *Bust* to *People Magazine* for her sharp style of observation and reflection. Here, she does it again. This time though, Gilman chronicles the experience of playing tourist in a non-touristy country, of being sometimes wretchedly sick or paralyzed with fear, but convinced that making a journey without the comforts of home is the only way to approach the future.

Even knowing to expect the unexpected when traveling, Gilman is shocked by the sinister turn that her journey takes. Dealing with illness, madness and the pressures of dashing into the unknown, she discovers that no matter how far you run away, life is still confusing and painful but it is sometimes also startlingly beautiful.