

February 2, 2006

To Whom It May Concern:

I write in praise of Gerda Lerner's *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, for use in college courses at the undergraduate and graduate level. I have taught with *Fireweed* twice at University of Wisconsin, and consider it among the very best works available for courses concerning women's activism, social movements, and 20th Century European and US history.

I used *Fireweed* first in a lower-level undergraduate history course titled "Women and Activism in Global Perspective." The course was designed almost entirely around autobiography and, while we read a range of excellent works, virtually all students in the class found Lerner's to be the most provocative and engaging. Many students were also inspired by the grace with which *Fireweed* helps put ordinary people in the context of massive social change in Europe and the United States. Several, additionally, felt that it helped them gain comparative perspective on political conditions in Europe and in the United States, and a greater appreciation for the relationships between movements in the United States and other countries.

I taught with *Fireweed* again in an upper level history seminar on women in social movements. History students at that level had already read numerous works on social movements in Europe and the United States, but many reported that Lerner's book finally helped it all make sense. As one student wrote, "this book finally opened my eyes about things I have been reading about for three years: I understand—with more compassion and more concern—how fascism spread in Europe, and how people in the United States participated, and also how people have resisted and worked for justice. Governments and ordinary people may not be as separate as I used to think they were."

For me, teaching *Fireweed* is deeply satisfying because students take so much away from it: they gain insights about complex histories and ordinary people, and they continue to be moved both by the intellectual offerings of the book, and also by Lerner's life example. It is the only book that has not received a single complaint, and student papers that involve *Fireweed* have been among the stronger, as well. I have received letters from students in each class specifically referring to *Fireweed*. The most recent, written two years after the course, read, "I think so often about *Fireweed*. I learned from all the books we read, but I think that one changed my life and my way of thinking about everything. Especially these days, I wish everyone would read it to understand this country better NOW as well as in the past, and also have hope to change."

In short, *Fireweed* is tremendously rewarding for students and also for me as a teacher, and I consider it an invaluable resource in the classroom.

Sincerely Yours,

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