



## Red

by Mary Stack

Red is a provocative hot color.

Red lipstick suggests excitement, and I have always loved it glistening on the lips of movie stars or smeared on mirrors, but for a long time I didn't dare wear it. Until I was 40, I didn't possess even a single red item in my wardrobe because it made me feel too self-conscious – like a "siren."

An old man had once called me this when I was only 15 years old and I didn't know what it meant; when I discovered it was a sexual slur I was stung. The pain of his insult stuck and thereafter I tried to avoid undue attention by wearing loosely fitted clothes, even though I had a shapely body, and steered well clear of red!

Red still conjures up strange connotations in my head. Growing up, red was the color of the "Socialist Worker" newspaper sold by young pimply political activists on rainy Saturday mornings. Back then red, rather like the word "liberal," used to have a radical inference.

The original use of the latter word implied a certain kind of political enlightenment, someone who was a progressive thinker in the classic British style of William Gladstone, the famous Liberal prime minister in the 1850s.

Unfortunately, the term "liberal" went through a long unfashionable run until Obama ran for election in 2008, and the word was suddenly redefined and redeemed.

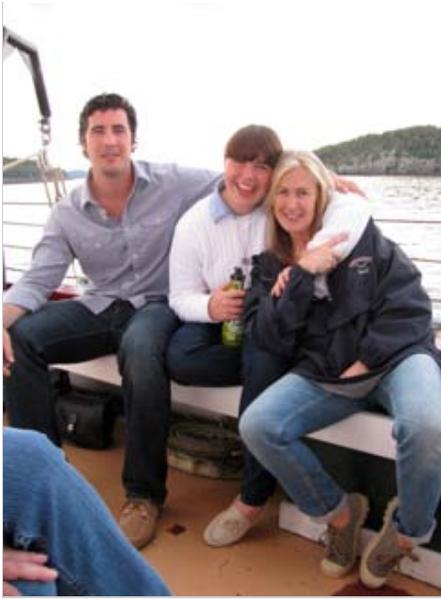
In the Sixties, being liberal or "pinko" implied you were left-wing, and so "red" underwent similar alterations in meaning. During the Cold War, propaganda was filled with political allusions to "reds under the beds" so the color became synonymous with Marx and Mao.

Most young people today are completely ignorant of the damning implications that a "red" label attached to you during this volatile political period. Nowadays, I doubt if many of my 16-year-old students would have a clue about who Karl Marx was – perhaps assuming that the moniker belongs to a new indie band or fashion label.

But then, who could have predicted our 21st Century hybrid fusion of Capitalism and Communism? Chinese and Russian officials never wear red these days, preferring designer suits instead, and whatever happened to those inflammatory little red flags that they all used to wave?

Latterly, the Gap discovered the political power of red and chose the color and the word as part of their AIDS awareness campaign on t-shirts for example, admiRED.

For me, red is instantly synonymous with blood – lots of it. When I delivered my first child, I lost 3 pints of blood when a doctor accidentally snipped an artery! Looking down, I went into immediate shock as I witnessed my precious life liquid soaking into the sheets.



**Mary (right) with her son Tom and daughter Margaux**

My hemoglobin dropped from 14 to 7 in a matter of minutes and I felt like I was drowning! How could one could one lose so much blood, nearly 50%, I wondered and still be alive?

Luckily, a transfusion saved my life. Initially I had refused the offer of blood because it was 1986 and nobody in the maternity unit seemed quite sure if the blood had been tested for HIV.

My delivery had come right on the heels of a huge scandal at the National Blood Bank in France which left thousands of hemophiliacs infected with contaminated blood and I didn't fancy being another accidental statistic.

Red is also a good choice for artists. Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans jump immediately to mind, as does Peter Gabriel's Red Rain, which formed part of the compelling soundtrack of the movie *The Last Wave*, about Aboriginal cultural beliefs.

Reds, the Oscar-winning film based on the famous Jack Reed book **Ten Days that Shook the World**, was Reed's autobiographical account of the Russian Revolution. He still remains the only American to be buried in the Kremlin.

The narrative also highlights the important contribution of Reed's companion and fellow-writer, Louise Bryant, who vividly demonstrated what could happen to a woman in 1917, if she lived her life without seeking male approval. For Bryant, it proved to be a lonely existence as a woman, yet liberating for her as an artist.

Red is a color I associate with roses and red wine in all their wild manifestations. Of course, who doesn't love the visual intensity of a freshly picked garden tomato oozing tasty goodness? And who can forget cousin ketchup, with its vibrant loud squirt onto your plate and its inevitable indelible stain on your whites.

Nowadays, I actually enjoy wearing the color and often receive glowing compliments when I wrap a particularly stunning cinnamon red around me. I also favor vermilion or flaming scarlet silk.

Red is an essential element for meditators who must focus on this color when picturing their root chakra at the base of the spine, which provides strength and vitality. Red is the color of passion, courage, will and desire and thus is linked to our most primitive and powerful emotions.

Red also symbolizes parts of my British childhood with its OXO cubes, the Royal Mail and old-fashioned phone boxes. Mail receptacles were called pillar-boxes, which as their name suggests were of a solid, sturdy, enduring construction.

For me as a journalist, the distinctive salmon pink of the *Financial Times* newspaper - always provided a slightly irreverent and arrogant presence on the newspaper rack alongside its more bland competitors; evidence of a clever and classic marketing gimmick.

*FT* used to be a defining status symbol; less so these days, but I still love slim feel of British newspapers - and of course the sound of the BBC.

I must have spent years of my life listening to the radio with my mother – and and it provided for me a semblance of intimacy. For me, "Afternoon Theatre" and "Woman's Hour" were as nutritious and reassuring as breast milk. All the while I was seated next to a woman who hardly ever wore lipstick and absolutely never wore red.

Mary Stack is a dual national. Born in London, her background was chiefly in the research and production of network documentaries for British television and in writing for a variety of publications, most regularly *The Guardian* newspaper.

She has lived and worked in a variety of places from Heidelberg to Houston but for the past 22 years, the South Shore has

been her home.

For the past decade, she has run two small businesses related to education; Kaleidoscope, a creativity and problem-solving summer camp, which she created for Milton Academy and Write Right Now, a tutoring service that provides individual help for high school students with their college application essays and SAT prep.

Mary is currently writing her own memoir entitled "Extraordinarily Ordinary" which she hope to complete by the end of the year. Her dream is to produce a quality weekly radio program for women and to secure a small hideaway in Europe. She would also love to meet the ideal companion and solve global warming – but then who doesn't?

Her kids are grown and launched: currently leading exciting lives in New York City.

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