Media Packet

Part of the Solution: A Counterculture Whodunit

Elana Michelson



About the Book

Agatha Christie meets Woodstock in this witty, whip-smart mystery.

It's 1978, and Jennifer Morgan — a sharp-tongued New Yorker on the run from graduate school — has traded a dissertation on Emily Bronte for lava lamps, craft shops, and boysenberry muffins in Flanders, Massachusetts, a countercultural haven that smells faintly of patchouli and revolution. Then a body turns up, and Jennifer's hard-won idyll cracks wide open.

With Dylan on the stereo and a joint making the rounds, Part of the Solution is a sharp, funny, unexpectedly moving trip back to the 1970s.

More than a mystery, Part of the Solution brings us back to a living, breathing world whose offbeat charm and literary soulfulness can't stop the past from intruding on the present or stop time from moving on.

Target Audience

Part of the Solution's most obvious reader is a Boomer with fond memories of the 60s and 70s, a love of mysteries, and a wish that "The Thursday Murder Club" mysteries came with a bit more edginess and boho cultural panache. The book will also draw younger readers who connect with the current retro vibe and love the music, clothes, and spirit of the counterculture. But the book is really for anyone who loves snappy dialogue, clever plotting, and vivid, oddball characters.

About the Author

Elana Michelson is a native New Yorker now living in the Hudson Valley, where she writes, reads, gardens, and volunteers with local social justice organizations. After thirty-five years as a professor, she has put down a beloved career of academic writing (and student papers) in favor of writing murder mysteries. She earned a PhD in English from Columbia University, but she gained her knowledge of the life and times of Part of the Solution by … well, having been there. She's a warm, gracious, and lively guest and an experienced interviewee and public speaker.

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Interviewing Elana

Elana is a polished public speaker who can move easily from humor to a nuanced consideration of issues. The has talked on radio programs, appeared on podcasts and done interviews on numerous aspects of Part of the Solution – everything from the origins of the book (themselves a facinating story), to 1970s fashion, to 1970s TV detectives, to the contending meanings in the book of justice and loyalty.

Suggested Interview Questions

1. What was your impulse in writing Part of the Solution?

2. In their various ways, many of the characters in Part of the Solution claim to be working for social justice. How do you understand social justice as a theme in the book?

3. The book is set in 1978 but is framed by a Prologue and Epilogue in the present day. Why did you provide that present-day framing?

4. There is always music playing in the background in Part of the Solution. Why? How do you understand the role of music in the book?

5. What reader did you have in mind as you were writing Part of the Solution?

6. The title of the book comes from a famous quote by Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panther Party. Why did you give the book that title?

7. What do you understand the book to be saying about the counterculture of the 60s and 70s?

8. The subtitle of Part of the Solution is "A Counterculture Whodunit?" Given the rebelliousness of the time, isn't that an oxymoron?

Reviews

"Sassy and soulful … Part of the Solution is a gem of a mystery novel with an effusive cast, feisty language, sharp cultural insights, and a moving love story that transcends tragedy and time."

—Foreword Clarion Reviews, 5 Stars

"Michelson captures the messy idealism of the counterculture era with charm and also with a sharp pinch. I kept nodding because the book understands something about how people try to build a better world and then stumble right over their good intentions. The spiritual seekers. The radicals. The shy intellectuals who think too much and then think even more. I felt the book's tenderness toward them, and I felt its frustration too. The tension between hope and disillusionment had real weight."

— Literary Titan

"Michelson … defies expectations and invites contemplation about the nature of justice, and what it means to leave something in the past."

—Booklife Reviews, Editors Pick

"Michelson's strengths lie … in her ability to re-create a specific cultural moment … The Café Galadriel and its eccentric patrons feel luminous and alive … Michelson captures both the intimacy and the corrosive weight of long-held secrets."

—Kirkus Reviews

"Delightful, compelling, and unexpected."

—Midwest Book Review

"Michelson's novel does more than solve a crime. It captures a moment when music, politics and personal identity were inseparable, weaving references to the era's soundtrack and ideals into every chapter."

—New York Trend NYC

What readers are saying

Amazon Customer: 5 out of 5 starts.
"What a treat! As a fan of mysteries (and one who has become a bit jaded) I was impressed with this clever and complex murder mystery. … Part of the Solution is a welcome addition to the mystery genre and I'm hoping for more from Michelson."

M. Reid on Amazon: 5 out of 5 stars
"A wonderful escape. This book was such a fun read! … I loved the retro time frame, so lovingly described with delightful details of clothing, dining, and late-hippie lifestyle. The characters are a rogue's gallery … that are charming, annoying, surprising and mysterious in turn. The murder mystery was a beguiling challenge. I actually sussed one of the "how-done-it" clues, but the perpetrator was a puzzle until the satisfying reveal."

D. Signer on Amazon: 5 out of 5 stars
"I loved reading this! … The literary and cultural allusions are beautifully intertwined with the dialogue and plot, and the descriptions and mood at times made me think of Louise Penny's writing. I didn't want to put it down."

A. Schindler on Amazon: 5 out of 5 starts
"I want to say how much I enjoyed reading 'Part of the Solution'. The near contemporary setting, the ethos of the time lovingly yet unsparingly captured, the characters and their profiles all had a genuine resonance for me. It wasn't just that I had sympathy for the main characters and familiarity with the zeitgeist. The author had such a snappy, sarcastic, smart alec take on their ….well, characters. The element of mystery was so well done; it became a page turner for me. The final revelation was a satisfying release of the tension."

From: Book Reviews from an Avid Reader:
https://bookwomanjoan.blogspot.com/2025/11/part-of-solution-by-elana-michelson.html
"If you lived through the era, much will be familiar and like a trip down memory lane. If you are younger, reading this mystery will give you a good sense of life for young adults at that troubling time."

Meet the characters: Excerpts from Part of the Solution

from Chapter One: Jennifer and Zach

Around them, the unmatched wooden chairs and tables of the café held the usual Monday afternoon crowd. Brownley (Philosophy) and Krasner (Sociology) sat over a game of chess. The Western Massachusetts Women's Anti-Violence Task Force occupied the round table in the center of the room. Samir Molchev, self-styled seeker of truth, was alone at a corner table reading Suzuki's The Field of Zen. On the deep peach walls, a pre-Raphaelite poster of the Lady of Shallot hung beside a poster of Che Guevara. "It will be a great day," read the sign above Wendy's bakery display case, "when schools get all the money they need and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber."

"I remember you guys," Jennifer was saying. "You were all practicing to be Leon Trotsky, and you polished your rhetoric and your steely gaze on girls like me who were stuffing envelopes for the cause."

Beside her, Zachery Lerner grimaced.

"We weren't really that bad. We were just showing off for each other."

"Well, you could have fooled me. But anyway, I think it's amazing that Williams College actually hired you to teach the impressionable young."

Zach's reputation had preceded him, not only at Williams but among anyone who remembered the decade just past: Berkeley in the late sixties, a first book on working class resistance to the war, three years in Leavenworth for refusing induction. Jennifer had recognized him, both by reputation and by the studious features that reminded her of all the budding revolutionaries she had always figured she would marry. His curly hair, already a premature salt-and-pepper, circled a rounded face with deep-set brown eyes and broad features. The lumberjack clothes that covered his burly frame would clearly win no friends among the board of trustees. His face, under horn-rimmed glasses, was that of a Russian Jewish revolutionary, which, at several generations removed, he was.

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From Chapter Four: David and Annie

"Don't hand me that crap," David Sullivan was saying over the Outlaws tape on the café stereo. "So what if it didn't grow in the ground? I don't understand you at all, you know." He peered across the table at Annie. "You can't get enough of those little green weeds that dry up and look like parsley. . . "

"And which grow."

"Alright, which grow. You'd plant the north forty in psilocybin mushrooms if you thought you could get away with it . . ."

"That's right. I'd plant."

"And," his voice rising against Annie's interruptions, "after the revolution, you're planning to be the Minister of Hashish. But let anything be so much as breathed on by a Bunsen burner, and you won't get within fifty feet of it."

"That's right," said Annie firmly. "So you see, you do understand."

David, the self-pronounced poet laureate of Flanders, threw up his hands theatrically. He was dressed, as usual, all in black, thus acknowledging his debt to the Symbolists and the Beats and, less sublimely perhaps, making the most of his black hair and blue eyes. He was seated, as usual, at the carved maple table where he held court on the weekends with other poets, invariably male, almost as invariably in matching goatees. They would drink Jennifer's wine late into the night, regaling each other with stories of drunken evenings at Polly McGuire's in Paris and that funky old bar – no one remembered the name – off the Spanish Steps in Rome. Jennifer was convinced they made most of the stories up, overcompensating, she told Wendy, for being born too late and missing Kerouac and Cassidy by a decade.

David regarded Annie through wireless eyeglasses. "Now the virtue of this particular substance," he intoned, "is precisely that it did not grow in the ground. It is the masterpiece of centuries of European science, the culmination of Swedish engineering, the true elixir of life."

"What's an elixir, big shot, and stop using words I don't know."

"The elixir, my dear illiterate, was the object of the alchemists' search, the secret of the life force, the power that would turn lead into gold, prose into poetry --"

"And bullshit into reality," she interrupted him again. She sat back, staring down at her dirty fingernails. "Did they ever find it?" she asked after a pause.

"Did they ever find what?"

"The elixir."

"Of course they never found it! How the hell could they have found it? How could anyone turn lead into gold?"

From Chapter 24: Jennifer and Ford

"You know," Jennifer admitted, "I think I have a totally schizophrenic view of the police."

Ford waited, knowing that if he was quiet, she would explain.

"I mean, on the one hand, they're the pigs – they make war on people for being black, or against the government, or different. They have no moral scruples, they don't care about minor details like guilt and innocence, and they would be even more dangerous if they weren't so inept. But on the other hand, I am perfectly well aware that I have this totally idealized view of you. I mean, I see you as some bizarre combination of gumshoe, cowboy, and altar boy."

She stopped, hoping she hadn't gone too far.

I'm just a guy, he wanted to tell her, who is curious, and horny, and a little bit dazzled, and maybe even a little bit in love, but I can't be here if you don't take my life seriously. But she had already gotten up from the bed and was digging around in a blue glass box on the dresser. She returned to the bed and straddled him, placed a sheet of rolling paper on his chest, and began tapping out marijuana from a plastic bag.

"Uh, I'm not sure I'm ready for this," he said hurriedly. "I mean . . ."

"Oh, right," she protested. "Let me get this now. You walk in here – and this time you came to me, let's remember --, and you think you are going to sit around and, oh, I don't know, burn incense and listen to Magical Mystery Tour and read Siddhartha by the light of a lava lamp. But of course there won't be any marijuana around."

"I guess I didn't think about it."

The last thing he remembered, when he woke up the next morning, was sitting on her bed in the candlelight, listening to Jimi Hendrix and eating peanut butter with a spoon.