



Gimme Shelter

Mary Elizabeth Williams

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"Of course I want a home," writes Mary Elizabeth Williams, "I'm American." *Gimme Shelter* is the first book to reveal how this primal desire, "encoded into our cultural DNA," drove our nation to extremes, from the heights of an unprecedented housing boom to the depths of an unparalleled crash.

As a writer and parent in New York City, Williams is careful to ground her real-estate dreams in the reality of her middle-class bank account. Yet as a person who knows no other way to fall in love than at first sight, her relationship with the nation's most daunting housing market is a passionate one. Williams's house-hunting fantasy quickly morphs into a test of endurance, as her search for a place to live and a mortgage she can afford stretches into a three-year odyssey that takes her to the farthest reaches of the boroughs and the limits of her own patience.

"Welcome to the tracks," she declares at the outset of yet another weekend tour of blindingly bad, wildly overpriced properties. "Let's go to the wrong side of them, shall we?" As her own quest unfolds, Williams simultaneously reports on the housing markets nationwide. Friends and family members grapple with real estate agents and lenders, neighborhood and quality-of-life issues, all the while voicing common concerns, as expressed by this Maryland working parent of three: "The market was so hot, there were no houses. We looked for years at places the owners wouldn't even clean, let alone fix up."

How frustrating is the process? Williams likens it to hearing "the opening bars of a song you think is 'Super Freak.' And then it turns out to be 'U Can't Touch This.'" Told in an engaging blend of factfinding and memoir, *Gimme Shelter* charts the course of the real estate bubble as it floated ever upward, not with faceless numbers and documents but with the details of countless personal stories -- about the undeniable urge to put down roots and the lengths to which we'll go to find our way home.



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Jarred Chisolm:

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