Red Letter Days

En route to Williamstown for her 10th reunion, Amy Butler Greenfield '91 almost asked her husband David to turn the car around and head back to their home in the Boston area. As much as she wanted to reconnect with her classmates, her life had changed in ways she never could have anticipated since graduating from Williams. And not all for the better.

As a student, Greenfield had been a Tyng Scholar, creating a major for herself in environmental studies that included spending a semester at Williams-Mystic for maritime studies. She took contradance lessons, was a house officer and participated in a variety of musical and choral groups. She graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. She wanted to teach history at a college like Williams and received a Marshall Scholarship for graduate study in the U.K.

Then, at the age of 26, having just completed a research master's in modern history at Oxford and partway through a doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin, she was diagnosed with lupus, a debilitating, potentially life-threatening disease that afflicts more than 1.5 million people in the U.S.—90 percent of them women. Lupus strikes more Americans than several other diseases combined, including multiple sclerosis and cystic fibrosis, according to the Lupus Foundation of America.

Newly married and living in England at the time, Greenfield didn't share the details with many of her friends. She was unable to walk for several months, and she couldn't write or type

By Resa Nelson

Photography by Jon Roemer

for several years. Initially, she didn't know if she'd survive. Still, she was determined to re-map her life and figure out what she wanted to do if her health improved.

Laura Aust '91, who met Greenfield during a Winter Study class on contradance, says her friend dealt with her diagnosis "in a very matter-of-fact way: identifying but not dwelling on her limitations, finding alternatives that allowed her to continue living her life as normally as possible."

It was during a period when Greenfield was bedridden that she realized with "perfect clarity" that she wanted to write books that people would read for pleasure. She could work at her own pace and in her own environment. As she regained her strength, she learned how to use voice-recognition computer software that freed her hands from typing. She published two articles in *Cricket* magazine and wrote a manuscript for a children's novel titled *Virginia Bound*, about a 17th century London orphan who's kidnapped, sold as an indentured servant and shipped to colonial Virginia.

On a bleak winter's day, just months away from her 10-year reunion at Williams, Greenfield again took stock of her options. Unsure if she wanted to write another novel, she stared at a pot of geraniums on her windowsill. She wondered what the world would be like if those flowers were the only source of red in existence, and she began thinking about the importance of color.

Greenfield remembered something unusual she stumbled upon while at Oxford. She spent several weeks in Seville, Spain, conducting research for her thesis about the introduction of chocolate to Europe. Poring over centuries-old ship registers in the Archive of the Indies in search of records of imported chocolate, she discovered something else: entry after entry of cochineal, the natural dyestuff that produces the most potent shade of red.

A love of color and fabric runs in Greenfield's blood. In the late 19th century, her great-grandfather emigrated from Scotland to the U.S., where he studied dyes and chemicals, worked in textiles and ultimately became a professor of textile chemistry at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Her grandfather worked for dye companies and married a woman who owned a yarn shop. And her mother studied textiles and married a man who worked in physics and chemistry.

Thus Greenfield thought cochineal's history would make an interesting read. No one had ever written about it before, so she landed a top-notch agent who struck an international book deal for *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage and the Quest for the Color of Desire*, published in May by HarperCollins.

The book begins with an introduction to the art of dyeing in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a time when the textile industry played a major role in the economy. The greatest demand was for the most rare of colors—red, associated with royalty and power. Finding a dyestuff that would produce a vivid red that could withstand sunlight, wash and wear could make or break guilds and even entire villages dedicated to textiles and dyeing.

In 1519, conquistador Hernán Cortés came across cochineal in the great Aztec marketplaces and sent a sample back to the king of Spain. The king immediately recognized the dyestuff's value and went to great lengths to control importing cochineal from the Americas to Spain and exporting it to the rest of Europe, making it one of the most valuable commodities in the world.

Driven by the desire for scientific fame and commercial profit, the English, French, Dutch and other Europeans struggled to answer questions about cochineal. Was it derived from plant, animal or mineral? Could it be transplanted from Mexico

to their own colonies? It would be 300 years before 18th-century microscopes would reveal cochineal's source: a scale insect native to Mexico and its host plant, nopal.

A Perfect Red traces the wild, clandestine attempts by adventurer naturalists to cultivate cochineal, as well as the changing meanings of the color red over time—from the luxurious robes of kings and cardinals to its later incarnation as the garb of the "scarlet woman."

"It is a fascinating and largely unknown story of greed and subterfuge, mixing fashion, folly and ingenuity in equal measure," Sir John Elliot (head of history at Oxford when Greenfield was there) writes of his former student's book. "Amy … unravels its mysteries with all the skills of a detective."

Greenfield, in turn, says her Williams coursework in history, environmental studies, art history and Spanish was excellent preparation for her to research and write the book. "I was constantly challenged both to look for the big picture and to dive deep whenever necessary," she says. "That training really helped me as I wrote *A Perfect Red*, which delves into an enormous range of topics—including entomology, art, biography, maritime law, imperial history, early physics, anthropology, engineering and the history of science."

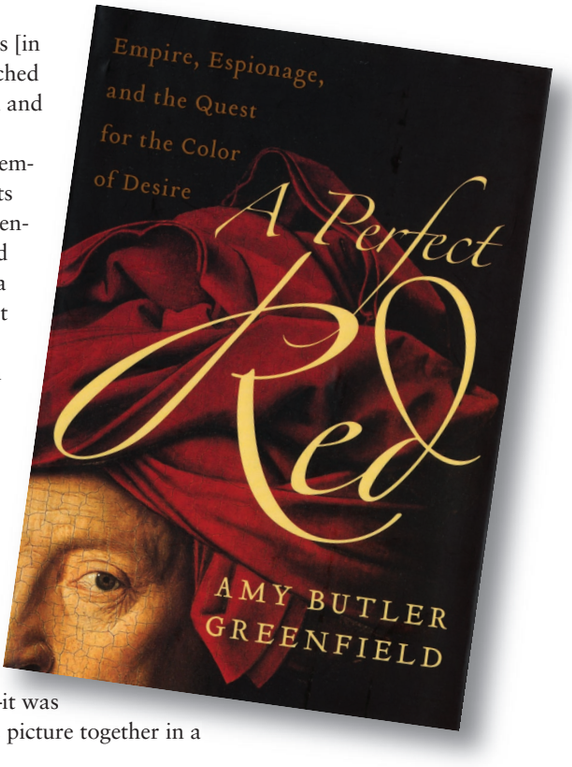
Researching and writing the book took Greenfield more than three-and-a-half years. And she had just begun her work when she embarked—with some misgivings—on her trip to Williamstown for reunion. Here it was, 2001, and she had dropped out of her doctoral program. *Virginia Unbound* wouldn't be published for another two years. She had written a couple of articles for a children's magazine. And she was dealing with a debilitating illness.

"Because I'd been so isolated with lupus," she says, "the list of accomplishments in the *Alumni Review* had made me feel distant and separated from my old friends."

But when Greenfield arrived in Williamstown, she was met with reassuring praise from friends who, only a few years before, she thought she might never see again. She left re-energized about and refocused on her work. "At reunion, I saw the people behind those announcements [in Class Notes], and I was touched by their candor and warmth and honesty," she says.

Mark Henderson '91 remembers Greenfield from concerts they attended, the environmental studies student group and her Santa Lucia Day party (a Swedish holiday tradition) at Garfield House—when she wore a wreath of candles on her head. Reunion helped him view his friend in a different light. "For so long I think we all had pictured her going on to a career as a history professor, and suddenly that picture was broken," Henderson says. "So when she turned to writing—using her background as a historian—it was wonderful to see her put the picture together in a new way."

Kathi Fisler '91 first met Greenfield when they were visiting campus as high school seniors who already had already been admitted to Williams. "I don't think I would have guessed that Amy had been ill if I hadn't known," says Fisler, who was a driving force in encouraging Greenfield to come to the 10th. "She had her usual sparkle and lively conversations—she was every bit as much in the heart of conversations as she'd been in college. I loved [reunion], because it felt like going home, and a big part of that would have been missing if she hadn't been there." ■



Opposite: **Amy Butler Greenfield '91 in her Waltham, Mass., home.**

This page: **The first picture of a magnified cochineal insect, published in 1694 by Nicolaas Hartsoeker.** *(By permission of the British Library.)*

***Resa Nelson** is a freelance writer based in the Boston area. **Amy Butler Greenfield** '91 has been a guest speaker for the Lupus Foundation of New England.*