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Book Report:

The Blue Sweater: Bridging the Gap Between Rich and Poor in an Interconnected World
by Jacqueline Novogratz

In her beautifully written autobiography, Jacqueline Novogratz details her journey to learn and contribute to the interconnectedness of people around the world, living out her destiny to help the world's disadvantaged. She begins as a new college graduate working for the Chase Manhattan Bank, flying around the world reviewing the bank's loans. In Brazil, she meets residents of a Rio de Janeiro hillside who inspire her to pursue her true desire in working with and lending to the poor, an idea which Chase rejected. Despite the prestige, she quits Chase and begins working for a nonprofit for women based in New York, in a position working with poor women in Africa.

In her first big commission, Novogratz works to promote economic growth with the African Development Bank, with whom she travels through northern Africa, including Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire. She soon realizes she had been resented by the African women leaders she was sent work with, unsupportive of a younger American advising them.

In Kigali, Rwanda, Novogratz works with UNICEF and finds her footing with welcoming Rwandan women, with whom she works to create a credit system. She struggles to get lenders to seriously commit to repaying, but sees progress in a few months, and eventually sets up Duterimbere, their new microfinance organization. Beginning to make loans, Duterimbere was a success. We fall in love with her character as she attempts to convert shy Rwandan women into forward, assertive sales agents at a local bakery, despite cultural differences. She sees transformation in the women, along with herself.

After two years in Africa, Novogratz returns to the United States to work with the World Bank in Washington D.C., when she ends up back in Africa, specifically Gambia. Here, she witnesses the waste of financial and human resources by development agencies that mean well, realizing that governments often do not allocate money evenly.

Novogratz meets Professor John Gardner while in the Stanford Graduate School of Business, who becomes her mentor and deeply influences her next step in life. She accepts a fellowship at the Rockefeller Foundation, where she discovers low-income citizens of her own home nation facing similar challenges to poor abroad, working to create strategies to develop enterprise within these communities.

After 20 years from when she first arrived, Novogratz returns to Rwanda, seeing how the nation she grew to love had changed in the aftermath of the civil war. She reconnects with old colleagues to understand the genocide and the fates of other colleagues — a heart-wrenching moment in the plot.

The creation of the Acumen Fund is Novogratz's global venture capital fund that invests in entrepreneurial strategies to help the poor, applying business principles to social change. Novogratz remains ever optimistic in even further interconnecting the world, emphasizing the importance of empathy and daring to “imagine together.”