



## Amy Butler Greenfield

**A Perfect Red**  
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**Q: In the prologue to *A Perfect Red*, you write: "[R]ed represents events and emotions at the core of the human condition: danger and courage, revolution and war, violence and sin, desire and passion, even life itself." To what extent do you think that the color red derives its psychological power from our collective association of it with blood?**

A: I think blood is probably at the root of it. In many languages, the connection is obvious, because the word for "red" is related to the word for "blood." But even when the two words aren't linguistically connected, the visual and symbolic link is there. The association with blood is what connects red with the key passageways of life: with birth and death and sickness and sex and war. Blood also distends and reddens our bodies when we're in the grip of rage or shame or passion, and scientists theorize that these physiological responses are the basis for our emotional reaction to the color red.

**Q: You come from a family of dyers. How have they and their professional colleagues responded to your account of the history of the color red?**

A: My mother's father and grandfather worked with dyes all their lives, but I never had a chance to meet them, since they died before I was born. My mom, however, is thrilled that I've brought their profession and its history to life. I also get marvelous emails and letters from color chemists and natural dyers who enjoy reading about the adventurous background of their work. Since early science and puzzle-solving are a big part of cochineal's story, I was especially pleased to hear that the book had helped a modern-day European chemist crack a puzzle concerning the analysis of historical carpet fibers. I'm also delighted when I hear from readers who have been inspired to experiment with cochineal themselves.

**Q: In *A Perfect Red*, you argue that the Spanish conquistadors' neglect of cochineal was attributable at least in part to their own conflicted ambitions and to the complex morality of empire-building. Can you talk a bit more about how these competing urges slowed the spread of cochineal?**

A: When I started researching the book, I was puzzled by the nearly 25-year gap between the conquistadors' first encounter with cochineal and the point when a steady supply of the dye finally became available in Europe. Given that the Europeans were eager to get their hands on new red dyes, why did it take so long?

It turns out the conquistadors themselves were to blame for the delay. They longed to be grand gentlemen, not insect farmers, so they ignored the little bug and set their sights on gold and jewels. In the long term, the insect actually turned out to be the more valuable commodity, but that wasn't something that the conquistadors could appreciate for many years. In building a new empire, they were relying on dreams from the Old World, rather than observing the New World they were in and learning from its inhabitants—a common mistake made by empire-builders throughout history.

What made things worse was that the conquistadors were trying to rush the job. They were determined to get rich quick because back in Spain the whole morality of empire was being questioned. As the debate progressed, there was a real possibility that the whole imperial project would be shelved or drastically altered, and the conquistadors would have to come home.

The empire survived, of course: Spain was desperate for American booty, and it couldn't find a politically workable way to reverse course. Even so, most conquistadors never became very interested in cochineal. Instead they left the business to the Spanish merchants who followed in their wake.

**Q: What was one of the most surprising facts about cochineal production that you learned in the course of your research?**

A: I was astonished and then fascinated by how long it took people to figure out that cochineal was an insect, not a berry or a seed. It's wonderful to me that the Indians knew all along, even as Europe's top scientists were baffled.

**Q: Can you imagine a future time when red might supplant the color black for formal occasions?**

A: In some countries and regions, red is already a popular choice for women's formal wear. But will it ever truly surpass black? For my money, it's hard to see that happening in some parts of the planet. (New York City comes to mind.) Still, I've learned never to say never when it comes to fashion. Modern dyes are based on coal and petroleum derivatives, and there may come a time when coal and oil are too precious to be used for fabric dyes. At that point, colorful clothing may become a status symbol again. You might even see wealthy men wearing red suits, just as aristocrats did centuries ago—a true revolution in style.