

Gretchen Whitmer tells her story — and not a moment too soon

In her memoir, “True Gretch,” the Michigan governor talks about responding to Trump, running toward catastrophes and getting “weird” at home.



Review by Amanda Uhle

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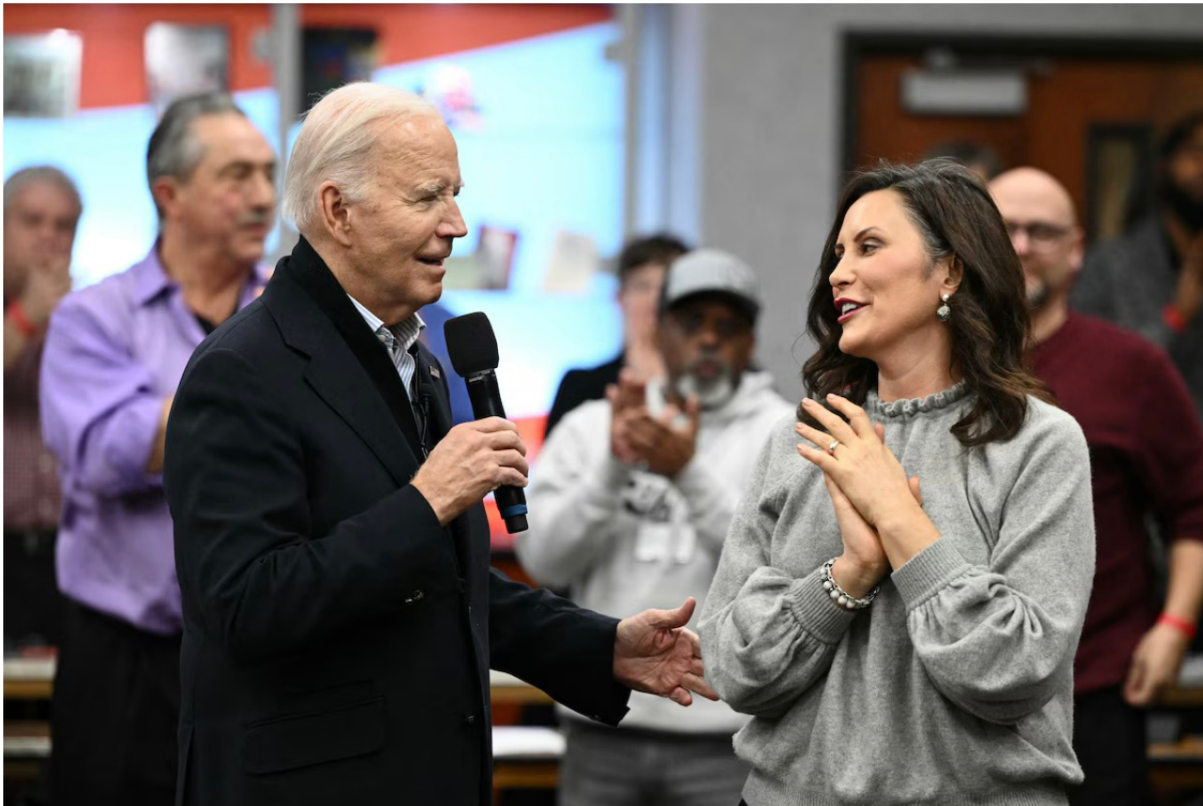
Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D) delivers her State of the State address in January at the Capitol in Lansing. (Al Goldis/AP)

If Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D) had not yet managed to capture your attention, last month’s presidential debate may have stoked new curiosity. The much-discussed stumbles of President Biden on the stage left many Americans wondering: What about that woman from Michigan?

This summer, American confidence in the two major-party candidates is at a low. As Democrats plunge into panic about Biden’s fitness for office, Whitmer’s accomplishments are alluring: She has won two gubernatorial elections by a wide margin in a decidedly purple state and pushed through an ambitious slate of legislation. When her science-based responses to the coronavirus pandemic spurred President Donald Trump to antagonize her, she unhesitatingly hit back with sharp wit. Trump’s name-calling — he dismissively referred to her as “that woman from Michigan” — not only left Whitmer unscathed, it worked to her

benefit. As she notes in her new memoir, “[True Gretch: What I’ve Learned About Life, Leadership, and Everything in Between](#),” she also benefited from the raft of merchandise that embraced and reclaimed Trump’s dismissive moniker. “It was not only good for me, you could argue that it’s been good for Michigan’s Etsy community,” Whitmer writes. “I refused to let the president define me. I took his insult, flipped it, and made it my own.”

If you’re looking to understand the real Whitmer — pioneering executive leader, plain-spoken progressive, Midwestern mother, target of a right-wing assassination plot, co-chair of Biden’s reelection campaign and, perhaps, future presidential hopeful — your best bet is to spend some time as a constituent in her state. If moving to Michigan isn’t feasible, your second-best bet is to read “True Gretch,” a candid, funny and compact collection of Whitmer lore and her advice.



President Biden with Whitmer during a visit to a United Auto Workers phone bank in metropolitan Detroit in February. (Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)

The sixth chapter, titled “Run Toward the Fire,” details the many instances in her career when she has marched into the scariest and most uncertain places, including a harrowing story about racing to the scene of the tragic shooting at Oxford High School in November 2021. Here, and throughout the book,

Whitmer balances humility and wisdom. “I have no idea what to say,” she remembers thinking as her SUV sped toward the school. As is her regular practice, she called in counsel, phoning former Connecticut governor Dannel Malloy, who navigated the Sandy Hook tragedy in 2012, to seek his advice. Throughout the memoir, she asks a lot of questions and does an uncommon amount of active listening — much as she has throughout her various terms as an elected official — and not just to other politicians. (Another chapter is titled “Learn to Listen.”) *Why do you feel that way?* and *Tell me more* are her favorite conversation starters with both constituents and adversaries.



(Simon & Schuster)

She’s also known in our state as unusually dogged. Her first moment in the national spotlight came in December 2013. As a state senator, she spoke on the floor in opposition to a bill requiring a separate insurance rider to cover abortion. A few minutes into her prepared remarks, she set them aside and spontaneously revealed that she had been sexually assaulted as a college student, and she went on to call the bill, which she termed “rape insurance,” one of the most misogynistic legislative proposals she’d ever seen. The bill passed. Nine and half years later, as governor, she signed the historic repeal of Michigan’s 1931 abortion ban, to much fanfare. The following six months brought the Reproductive Health Act — numerous proposals to expand and enshrine women’s health-related rights. On Dec. 11, 2023, 10 years to the day since her emotional speech as a state senator, she signed the bill eliminating

rape insurance. “The moral of this story is, don’t stop fighting for what you know is right,” she announced from the podium that day.



Whitmer, center, laughs with others after signing the final bill in the Reproductive Health Act on Dec. 11, 2023, at the Michigan Capitol. (Ryan Garza/Detroit Free Press/AP)

It’s rare to hear Whitmer speak, even off the cuff, and feel confused about where she stands or what she plans to do. She won her first statewide campaign on the slogan “Fix the Damn Roads” and raised eyebrows when that four-letter word was displayed on her bus. But in light of that frankness, it’s glaring that she never mentions the presidency, or even hints at her own plans, in “True Gretch.” She could have cleared up all the speculation about a possible presidential campaign if the book had ended with a fervent wish to retire and pursue fly-fishing or watercolor painting when she’s termed out in 2026. She provides no such clue.

Still, there’s something direct enough about the book that it’s hardly necessary for her to utter the P word. Whitmer makes her case in less than 160 pages with almost no highfalutin language. Written with Lisa Dickey, the chapters are short, and for those of us who have watched her for years, it’s largely familiar fare. Her storytelling is relatable and natural. Readers will find a pop music

playlist and a recipe for her grandmother’s clover dinner rolls. Whitmer’s distinctive accent echoes across every page.

There are a few surprises. She declares her fondness for her ex-husband, a professional photographer who often covers her campaign events and takes family portraits of Whitmer, her husband, Marc Mallory, and their children. Whitmer also proclaims herself “weird” and says she is unfortunately compelled to behave (relatively) normally during her work life as governor. “When I get home, I set the weirdness free,” she writes. She owns a cardboard cutout of herself from a recent campaign and hides it in closets in the house to “scare the crap out of visitors.”

In “True Gretch,” we meet one of the few politicians who might be equipped, and possibly even willing, to tackle what’s ahead. The book is welcome reassurance that *someone* might be courageous and capable enough to run toward the fire that’s making kindling of our democracy. “We must never be afraid to show up,” she writes in her characteristically aphoristic style. “You’re not going to get everything right immediately, but you’ve got to get in there and try.”

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True Gretch

What I’ve Learned About Life, Leadership, and Everything in Between

By Gretchen Whitmer with Lisa Dickey
Simon & Schuster. 159 pp. \$26.99

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/07/09/gretchen-whitmer-true-gretch-review/>

Quite clever, making a principal rival for the Democratic nomination co-chair of your reelection campaign. Not the brightest move on Gretchen’s part, but she was playing the game for the 2028 nomination. Now let’s see if she has the political chops to do the right thing here. She needs to have “a little chat” with the President. Otherwise, having propped him up in 2024 will be a millstone around her neck thereafter. But maybe she is playing to the Democratic establishment too, trusting that they will carry her through for “services rendered.” What a disgusting bunch of sell-out hypocrites, even Barack Obama.

Gretchen has always seemed to me the best alternative to Biden. Kamela Harris is not. Ferocious as Kamela can be, Trump knows she is a sitting duck for his attacks, dog whistle or explicit. Biden ruined Kamela by sidelining her as Vice-President, now shackling her to him. Trump would be unsettled by The Gretch. Joe Biden is still smart in a cunning way—which will not prove to be the way American voters want. He is done. His support will erode. Shame on him. TJB