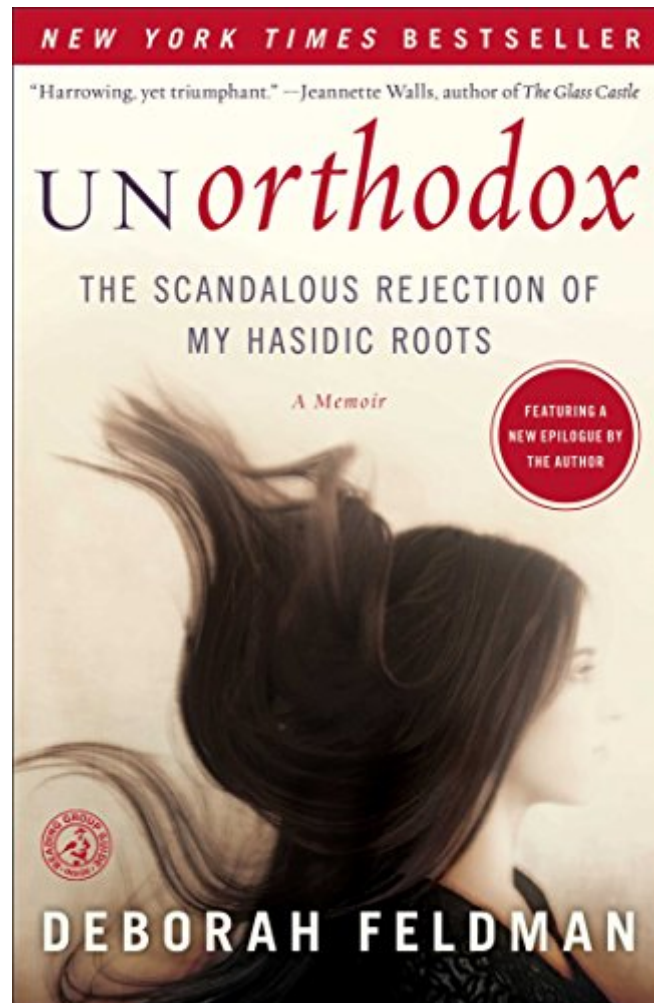


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Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection Of My Hasidic Roots



Synopsis

The instant > bestselling memoir of a young Jewish womanâ€™s escape from a religious sect, in the tradition of Ayaan Hirsi Aliâ€™s Infidel and Carolyn Jessopâ€™s Escape, featuring a new epilogue by the author. As a member of the strictly religious Satmar sect of Hasidic Judaism, Deborah Feldman grew up under a code of relentlessly enforced customs governing everything from what she could wear and to whom she could speak to what she was allowed to read. It was stolen moments spent with the empowered literary characters of Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott that helped her to imagine an alternative way of life. Trapped as a teenager in a sexually and emotionally dysfunctional marriage to a man she barely knew, the tension between Deborahâ€™s desires and her responsibilities as a good Satmar girl grew more explosive until she gave birth at nineteen and realized that, for the sake of herself and her son, she had to escape.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I start with this title, because after reading many of the reviews below, it seems that most people have not, and there is a not so subtle battle ensuing as people are defending their belief system against those that offend it. The reviews below remind me of those surrounding "The God Delusion"

by Richard Dawkins, which simply became a battleground of atheists vs believers. Take most reviews and ratings with a grain of salt. About the book: WHAT I LIKED 1) This is a rare glimpse into the Satmar world, unique among books because a) The author is the rare person who got out b) She had the courage to write about it c) Has the decent enough English skills to do so (Yiddish is the first language for Satmar Jews) 2) It exposes the darker side of the Satmar sect, where religion is more a matter of appearances than true spiritual growth. It shows religious hypocrisy at its worst. WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE 1) While the book is most certainly authentic in a general sense, I wonder about how much exaggeration there might be. The author is passionate and clearly has a very personal agenda. It remains a question how much the author allowed her emotions to stretch the truth at times. The incredulous murder story, (since debunked?) certainly lends some credence to these doubts. 2) The book seemed to delve into detail when such detail was boring, but often devoted only a short paragraph to matters that begged for more. Overall, there was too much on her childhood, not enough on the story of how she left. 3) While impressive for an ex-Hasid, it is not written particularly well.

This is a very intriguing book because it gives an insight into growing up in the Orthodox Jewish Hasidic community of Satmar. Although I was familiar with other Hasidic sects, the Satmar were new to me. She explains it mostly through the eyes of a child so I had to do a bit of on-line research to learn more about them. The biggest surprise is their complete opposition to Israel - they believe they must wait for the coming of the Messiah to return to their homeland - but much of the daily life seems similar (to me) to other Hasidic communities. From childhood, she longed for more in both learning and reading. She had to sneak to read English language books as they were forbidden but her hunger drove her to take the risk and she became fluent in English. This would help her professionally but also cause her to keep questioning what she saw around her. (Perhaps her elders were right - English leads to trouble, particularly for women!) I know there will be criticism from some in the Jewish community who consider Ms. Feldman an apostate for leaving Orthodoxy, but leaving aside those ideological issues, there is a lot to learn from this book. I think she is careful to write very kindly of her grandparents (who raised her) even though her leaving must have been a great blow to them (she does not write about that) but she is frankly critical of the rigid rules and some of the hypocrisy she saw. I admire her honesty. And in her defense, this kind of expose could be written about many other closed groups - Amish, Mormon, Christian fundamentalist, Muslims, Catholic monasteries, etc. In such an insular environment anyone who rebels against the group must appear to be a traitor to those who remain.

Ms. Deborah Feldman's memoir drew me in immediately and held my attention throughout. Eleven-year-old Deborah is living in Williamsburg, NY in the Satmar Hasidic Jewish community with her grandparents, Bubby and Zeidy, who have raised 11 children, and aunt, Chaya, as primary care givers at the time this tale begins. Her father is mentally disabled and her mother is not in the picture at this point. Deborah is in the "smart" sixth grade class at the Satmar girls' school, where her aunt is principal of the elementary division. As the story continues to unfold throughout Ms. Feldman's teenage years, it becomes clear she is being groomed like the other Hasidic girls to marry at a young age, raise a large family and submit to the will of the elders in the church and community. She is an inquisitive child who loves to read a variety of secular books, something that is forbidden. She relays fond memories of working in the kitchen and talking with Bubby. Though she also has fond memories of Zeidy she recalls his severe frugality, forbidding her grandmother to buy new things to replace those that are worn out, such as threadbare carpets, even though he is a wealthy man. We learn that Bubby is a Holocaust survivor "near death from typhus by the time liberation came" and "whose every relation was brutally murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz while she labored in the factories of Bergen-Belson." Deborah graduates early without a New York State high school diploma, "for I will never be allowed to find work beyond the few positions available for women in our society." She does get a job teaching sixth grade in the girls' Hasidic school, while her aunt and grandparents undertake the search to find a husband for Deborah employing the services of a matchmaker.

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