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Greetings From Utopia Park: Surviving A Transcendent Childhood



Synopsis

In this engrossing, provocative, and intimate memoir, a young journalist reflects on her childhood in the heartland, growing up in an increasingly isolated meditation community in the 1980s and '90s—a fascinating, disturbing look at a fringe culture and its true believers. When Claire Hoffman's alcoholic father abandons his family, his desperate wife, Liz, tells five-year-old Claire and her seven-year-old brother, Stacey, that they are going to heaven—a "Iowa"—to live in Maharishi's national headquarters for Heaven on Earth. For Claire's mother, Transcendental Meditation—the Maharishi's method of meditation and his approach to living the fullest possible life—was a salvo that promised world peace and enlightenment just as their family fell apart. At first this secluded utopia offers warmth and support, and makes these outsiders feel calm, secure, and connected to the world. At the Maharishi School, Claire learns Maharishi's philosophy for living and meditates with her class. With the promise of peace and enlightenment constantly on the horizon, every day is infused with magic and meaning. But as Claire and Stacey mature, their adolescent skepticism kicks in, drawing them away from the community and into delinquency and drugs. To save herself, Claire moves to California with her father and breaks from Maharishi completely. After a decade of working in journalism and academia, the challenges of adulthood propel her back to Iowa, where she reexamines her spiritual upbringing and tries to reconnect with the magic of her childhood. *Greetings from Utopia Park* takes us deep into this complex, unusual world, illuminating its joys and comforts, and its disturbing problems. While there is no utopia on earth, Hoffman reveals, there are noble goals worth striving for: believing in belief, inner peace, and a firm understanding that there is a larger fabric of the universe to which we all belong.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

• With honesty and sincerity, this account of coming of age within the ostensible confines of an alternative lifestyle delivers valuable knowledge of another phenomenon of cultural divergence. • (Library Journal) • A clear-eyed critique that generously accounts for humanity's profoundly sincere and motivated quest for happiness and peace. • (Kirkus Reviews) • In both a compelling memoir and a valuable testament, Claire Hoffman tells of the struggle to find her own path to truth while growing up amid the distractions and contradictions of a guru's prescribed utopia. Her triumph, and the reminder for us all, is in excusing the external guru and trusting the guide within. • (Melissa Coleman, author of *This Life is in Your Hands*) • In both a compelling memoir and a valuable testament, Claire Hoffman tells of the struggle to find her own path to truth while growing up amid the distractions and contradictions of a guru's prescribed utopia. Her triumph, and the reminder for us all, is in excusing the external guru and trusting the guide within. • (Lawrence Wright, Pulitzer Prize -winning author of *The Looming Tower*) • Claire Hoffman brilliantly captures a world that is at once familiar and exotic, yet it is more than that. It is about the meaning of faith in the modern world and how the simple desire for spiritual connection can sometimes lead to devastating consequences. I love it. • (Reza Aslan, author of the #1 New York Times bestselling *Zealot*) • As fascinating and unsettling as discovering a magical Oz in the middle of Kansas, Hoffman's unflinching memoir presents a remarkable landscape unlike any we're familiar with, one in which its narrator navigates her troubled way through a youth colored utterly by the cultlike atmosphere in which she finds herself. Dark, powerful, and ultimately uplifting, *Greetings from Utopia Park* is a book to be pondered and savored. • (Val Brelinski, author of *The Girl Who Slept with God*) • [A] wise, funny, and fascinating book. • (San Francisco Chronicle) • Wonderfully intimate: a cautionary tale that develops into one of inspiring self-determination. • (Booklist)

When Claire Hoffman's alcoholic father abandons his family, his desperate wife, Liz, tells five-year-old Claire and her seven-year-old brother, Stacey, that they are going to heaven "Iowa" to live in Maharishi's national headquarters for Heaven on Earth. For Claire's mother, Transcendental Meditation "the Maharishi's method of meditation and his approach to living the fullest possible life" was a salvo that promised world peace and

enlightenment just as their family fell apart. At first this secluded utopia offers warmth and support, and makes these outsiders feel calm, secure, and connected to the world. At the Maharishi School, Claire learns Maharishi's philosophy for living and meditates with her class. With the promise of peace and enlightenment constantly on the horizon, every day is infused with magic and meaning. But as Claire and Stacey mature, their adolescent skepticism kicks in, drawing them away from the community into delinquency and drugs. To save herself, Claire moves to California with her father and breaks from Maharishi completely. After a decade of working in journalism and academia, the challenges of adulthood propel her back to Iowa, where she reexamines her spiritual upbringing and tries to reconnect with the magic of her childhood. *Greetings from Utopia Park* takes us deep into this complex, unusual world, illuminating its joys and comforts, and its disturbing problems.

It was surreal to read about my own teenage years in someone else's memoir. I am seven years older so I don't think our paths crossed. At first, I was hesitant to read this book because I thought it would either be too "negative" or sugar-coat the whole experience growing up there. But it was neither—it was a perfect balance. I found myself rolling my eyes along with Claire, laughing hysterically, and then at other times, sobbing remembering things I had forgotten. Thank you for the walk home, down memory lane. Great read!

Greetings From Utopia Park is one of the best books I've read all year. Claire Hoffman gives a beautiful account of her unusual and fascinating childhood growing up in Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's small meditation community in Fairfield, Iowa. This is such an honest, heartfelt and at times heartbreaking coming of age story and a search for her own truth. As a meditator and someone who has spent my life searching for my own connection to something more, I really identified with this book. Claire Hoffman gives us a front row look at the history of Transcendental Meditation in the 70s in America, and it does not disappoint. 5 stars all the way!

Impossible to put down. Once the story gets under way, you want to know what will happen to Claire and her brother in the alien world their mother drags them to. It's a sensitive and complicated portrait of faith, mystery, and family love. It's also filled with poignant descriptions of growing up that we all can relate to. Highly recommend!

I rarely write reviews, but I'll copy/paste my GoodReads write up here, because of the personal the personal connection I felt to this book...For years I've told friends that I should write stories about

Fairfield, Iowa and my childhood growing up in and around the Transcendental Meditation movement. Well last year someone beat me to it. Hoffman does an excellent job in this book, transporting me back to my childhood (she's about 7 years older than me). As someone who rarely gets nostalgic, I was overcome with that very emotion. The number of similarities between her personal story and my own are uncanny. There are many, many rhyming moments between her life and mine that had me shaking my head. Of course, I moved away at a much younger age and was not steeped in TM like she was. I experienced a broader buffet of new age Indian meditation movements. We have very different stories, but I found hers fascinating for personal reasons more than anything else. It was sort of a peek into an alternate reality where I remained in Iowa through high school. It gets 4 stars for that. 3 if I was a stranger to the subject matter. (These are my GoodReads ratings. I'm much more picky and critical over there, since it's for my personal recollection. My GR books rarely get 5 stars. If you found this on because it sounds interesting to you and you're considering it, then I wholeheartedly give it 5.) So can I recommend this to people as just an interesting book to read? Like you just encountered it at a bookstore out of the blue? Hmm... If you've ever heard about TM and want a simple, entertaining, and (in my opinion) relatively unbiased introduction to the movement's history and culture, this is a great book. Admittedly, I haven't read anything else on the subject, so I can't really compare. But this delivers a wonderful peek into that bizarre world nestled amidst the cornfields and pig farms of the Midwest. Hoffman is a strong writer and good storyteller. I will keep an eye out for her and see what she writes next.

I finished this book today and I absolutely loved it. I felt like I was right there with Claire as she described her feelings and her life. Her words drew me right in and at times my heart was racing. Before I researched this guru I sort of mixed him up with the other guru who settled in the northwest. When I read the general principles of Maharishi Yogi I thought they made so much sense ... Carrie's description of her mother's devotion really touched my heart. All along I felt she was such a caring mother. I felt her pain when she had to let them go later in their teen years. Time constraints keep me from writing further but I was very touched by this story, the struggle that everyone took on with an eye to a better life yet staying with it when that life didn't include riches and financial freedom. I was saddened and turned off by the apparent greed of the leader. That is too bad because I believe there is a lot of validity to the TM teaching.

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