

Unorthodox – Deborah Feldman

Summary:

This book is a memoir about a woman, Deborah Feldman (Devoiri was her birth name), who was raised as a Hasidic Jew.

To be a Hasidic Jew meant being raised in an environment with strictly enforced customs. They are told what language to speak (Yiddish), what to wear (uniforms/wigs), whom to interact with (sects/neighborhoods within the Jewish community), what to eat (kosher), and what was allowable to read (rabbi approved).

Deborah was raised by grandparents because her mom left the faith, and her dad was mentally disabled. As such, her upbringing was especially strident within the Hasidic community. At an early age, she began to challenge and rebel against the norms by teaching herself English, checking out secular books, listening to mainstream music, and educating herself on norms outside of Hasidic life. She went to great lengths to hide this from her family and community.

She was placed into a Hasidic Jewish marriage and had a son shortly thereafter. Against all the legal standings of the time, she found a way to divorce her husband and keep custody of her child. During this time, she pursued a college education and wrote this best-selling book (now a Netflix series).

General Themes:

Going against our training and upbringing is a difficult task that requires an enormous desire to chart a different path.

Pursuing authenticity and happiness is not without great cost (personal, professional, financial, emotional).

Disturbing the foundation of others for your own growth will be met with challenges from those who remain within the in-group, and typically isolation occurs. However, integrating into other groups is the opposite reward that occurs.

Notable Quotes:

“After shedding my old self, I didn’t suddenly discover a more authentic version of underneath. When you carve yourself out of your entire life, you are not left with much.” (254)

“Happiness has a way of playing hide-and-seek when you actively pursue it, but it often surprises you when you least expect it.”

“People want to know if I’ve found happiness, but what I’ve found is better: authenticity. I’m finally free to be myself, and that feels good. If anyone ever tries to tell you to be something you’re not, I hope you too can find the courage to speak up in protest.” (251)