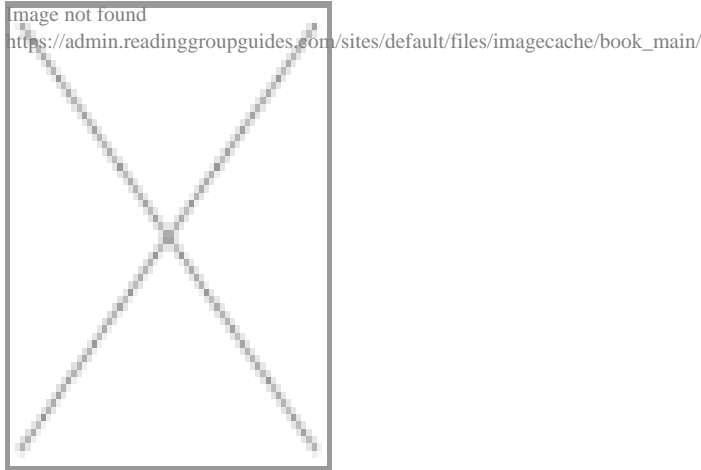


# Free Spirit: Growing Up on the Road and Off the Grid

by Joshua Safran

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## About the Book

When Joshua Safran was four years old, his mother --- determined to protect him from the threats of nuclear war and Ronald Reagan --- took to the open road with her young son, leaving the San Francisco countercultural scene behind. Together they embarked on a journey to find a utopia they could call home. In *FREE SPIRIT*, Safran tells the harrowing, yet wryly funny story of his childhood chasing this perfect life off the grid --- and how they survived the imperfect one they found instead.

Encountering a cast of strange and humorous characters along the way, Joshua spends his early years living in a series of makeshift homes, including shacks, teepees, buses, and a lean-to on a stump. His colorful youth darkens, however, when his mother marries an alcoholic and abusive guerrilla/poet.

Throughout it all, Joshua yearns for a "normal" life, but when he finally reenters society through school, he finds "America" a difficult and confusing place. Years spent living in the wilderness and discussing Marxism have not prepared him for the Darwinian world of teenagers, and he finds himself bullied and beaten by classmates who don't share his mother's belief about reveling in one's differences.

Eventually, Joshua finds the strength to fight back against his tormentors, both in school and at home, and helps his mother find peace. But *FREE SPIRIT* is more than just a coming-of age story. It is also a journey of the spirit, as he reconnects with his Jewish roots; a tale of overcoming adversity; and a captivating read about a childhood unlike any other.

## Discussion Guide

1. What's the effect of beginning the book with the prologue about the harrowing incident driving home with Leopoldo?
2. Consider the various ways Claudia talks to Josh about the event of his own birth. What value is it as mythic story? What of the initial disappointment about him being a boy?
3. What are your thoughts about Claudia asking Josh not to call her "mom" because it is too limiting a name?
4. Claudia's mature honesty about Josh's father seems helpful to him, while details about nuclear warheads clearly cause him great anxiety. How much of difficult truths should be shared with children?
5. How is "Uncle" Tony, the "soft, dreamy intellectual," a positive influence on Josh?
6. How is Uncle Tony's complex inner world—one that considers concepts like parallel universes—and his less successful outer world experience as a janitor relevant to Josh as he matures?
7. Claudia refuses Uncle Tony as a husband to find a "real boyfriend" who is less domestic and more committed to the revolutionary struggle. What do you think of this?
8. How would you describe Bob DiNardo's philosophy? What are the disadvantages of such a world view? Are there any benefits?
9. Claudia gave Josh a remarkable amount of freedom as a child. What of this was positive? What of this was negative? How much freedom is too much for a child?
10. At one point, during a "fifth-gear whiskey-ganja party," Josh concludes that "adult exuberance rarely correlated with anything actually exciting." What do you think he means?
11. How might it be that Claudia is intelligent and informed about political issues, and seems a loving mother, but can't see Leopoldo for the harmful and deceitful man he is?
12. What insight do we get about Josh from his interaction with Karina Katherine Cheese?
13. What's the difference between a passionate or heroic person and one who is chaotic or out of control? What do they have in common?
14. Textbook abusers initially charm their victims and gain their trust before manipulating and abusing them. How did Leopoldo conform to this character type?
15. At a certain point in Stanwood, Josh develops positive feelings toward Leopoldo consistent with "Stockholm Syndrome" or "traumatic bonding." Why do you think this type of bonding occurs?

**16.** The "cycle of abuse" between abuser and victim typically involves (1) a buildup of tension, (2) an abusive incident, (3) an apologetic reconciliation, and (4) a calm honeymoon phase. How did Leopoldo and Claudia's relationship conform to this cycle?

**17.** How realistic is it for Claudia to "heal" someone like Leopoldo? What's the difference between supporting and enabling?

**18.** Claudia identifies herself as a "feminist." How did she reconcile that identity with being the mother of a male child in San Francisco and a wife to Leopoldo in Washington?

**19.** What is it that gives Josh his strength when left on his own, for example during the stormy time on the mountain?

**20.** Claudia is extremely critical of traditional education, while Josh grows up to value it highly. What does it provide for him?

**21.** What are the potential effects when adults act like children in the presence of actual children?

**22.** Tony tells Josh he will say his mantra for him every night even if they are separated. What other ways do the two maintain connection despite so much chaos and distance between them?

**23.** Josh says that he felt "trapped on an island" between straight society and the counter-culture. Why do you think he felt that way?

**24.** How did Josh use humor as a child to get by? What role does humor play in this book?

**25.** Consider the many animals Josh encounters and talks about in his life. What do they provide or teach him? How did Josh's life story mimic Tony's? How did it differ?

**26.** As an adult, Josh says "Judaism became my rebellion." What does he mean?

**27.** In what ways is the story about Deborah Peagler relevant to Josh's lifelong experience?

**28.** For years, all Claudia would say about the Leopoldo era was: "He didn't kill us. He made us stronger." Do you agree? When do you think traumatic experiences do not serve to make one stronger?

## **Author Bio**

Joshua Safran is an attorney, writer, speaker, and occasional rabbi, and was featured in the award-winning documentary *Crime After Crime*, which premiered at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and had its television debut as part of the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN)'s Documentary Film Club. He is a nationally recognized champion for women's rights and a zealous advocate for survivors of domestic violence and the wrongfully imprisoned. For his work he has received national media coverage and numerous awards. He lives in Oakland, California.

## Critical Praise

"Raised by a woman (Claudia, never mom, whose quest to flee modern society survived long after hippie idealism became passé), Safran spent the 1970s and 1980s in communes, cabins, and the occasional bus. The author didn't regularly attend school until he was 11, when his bucolic upbringing made him a target for bullies. Adding to the misery was Claudia's big heart and idealism, which allowed for a series of bad relationships, culminating in a tumultuous marriage to an alcoholic ex-Salvadoran revolutionary named Leopoldo. The young Safran can only sit helplessly as this sporadically employed thug regularly beats Claudia, apologizes, and starts the cycle anew. As he gets older, Safran recognizes that education is his way out—and that he can confront Leopoldo. Safran, an attorney, has written a beautiful, powerful memoir that shows how a son and his mother both grew up and survived amid chaos. Even better, he recalls events without condemnation or condescension. This assured debut is reminiscent of David Sedaris's and Augusten Burroughs's best work: introspective, hilarious, and heartbreaking."

? *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Haunting and beautifully written, **Free Spirit** draws you into the gritty, white-knuckle ride that was Joshua Safran's childhood. Spellbinding. A must-read."

? Liz Murray, author of the *New York Times* bestseller **Breaking Night**

"Rich in detail, humor, and compassion, **Free Spirit** is an eloquent coming-of-age story about a mother's well-intentioned, but flawed, search for utopia and the impact her chaotic journey had on her son. Thankfully, Joshua Safran emerges from his impoverished, rootless childhood resilient, resourceful, and wise. A transformative book."

? Mira Bartók, author of the National Book Critics Circle Award winner **The Memory Palace**

"Some writers search everywhere for a great story, and others have a great story happen to them. Joshua Safran's tale of his upbringing among radicals, revolutionaries, and renegades is equal parts hilarious and touching. Strap yourself into the green bus for a whirlwind tour of the American underground through the eyes of an impressionable young storyteller-to-be."

? Thomas Mullen, author of **The Last Town on Earth**

"Joshua Safran's **Free Spirit** provides a mesmerizing coming-of-age story for one of the next generation's most inspired spiritual progressives."

? Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor, *Tikkun*, and chair, The Network of Spiritual Progressives

"**Free Spirit** is a stranger-than-fiction look at an absolutely fascinating childhood."

? Sam Apple, author of **Schlepping Through the Alps**

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