



Dharma Girl: A Road Trip Across the American Generations

By Chelsea Cain

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This memoir by 24-year-old Chelsea Cain, who grew up on a commune in the Iowa outback, recounts her nostalgia for her toddler years, when her parents picked berries, puffed pot, and plucked the banjo while the outside world seemed to be going straight to hell. Deciding that her caffeinated modern life is a vile repudiation of her parents' admirable values--and shaken by her mother's bout with cancer--the author leaves southern California for Iowa. Not to establish or join a commune but to rent an Iowa City apartment and begin graduate school at the University of Iowa, as we learn from her biography. Along the road to Iowa, there are plenty of wry observations on the modern world and reflections on the more idealized values of "the hippie movement." The sanest characters in this brief book are Cain's clear-eyed and chastened parents.

From Publishers Weekly

When Cain, a 24-year-old student at UCLA, learned that her mother had developed cancer, the stucco walls of her prefab college house didn't seem enough to keep her body and soul together. She recalls a simpler time when, with the '60s raging in the background, she and her parents (now separated) lived on an Iowa commune. For Cain, getting back to her roots, and finding the elusive "Snowqueen"--an imaginary figure her mother told her about years before--was of paramount importance. And so off they went, mother and daughter, down the highways of the Northwest and Midwest, back to Iowa to see what they could find. The family history is fascinating, as are the descriptions of commune life, replete with home gardening, odd jobs and fear of the draft. The story of life on the road is neither Kerouac nor Thelma and Louise, but is a pleasant enough roll. Author Cain is her mother's daughter, so there's little generational conflict here. Get on board if you like pursuing nostalgia rather than forging ahead in the present. Cain would argue that she could not go forward without going back, and that's good enough reason for a road trip.

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From Library Journal

In her first book, promising author Cain sets out on a journey to recapture her lost self, last seen in an idyllic childhood on an Iowa communal farm. She revives the expectations she once had at age 24, when she was called Snowbird, and the memory of her mother, the Snowqueen. Cain's preoccupation with her not-so-distant past seems shallow and self-preserving, however, in comparison with her mother's illness. The Snowqueen has had surgery for melanoma; at the end of the book, we learn her cancer has metastasized. Cain attempts to re-create the hippie days of her parents, but the results are without substance. More appealing are her own memories of childhood--the porch light she takes for the sun shining into her room in the middle of the night, gifts from the Snowqueen, and a special friendship with the commune's odd man out. Cain describes her quest as the journey of a "psychonaut"; it's unfortunate that her road from California to Oregon to Iowa offers so little. --Janet Ross, Sparks Branch Lib., Nev.

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