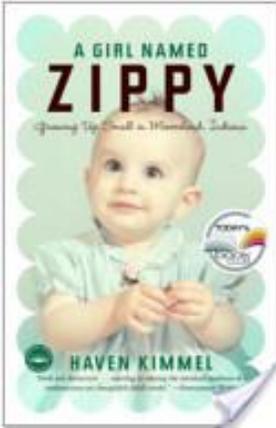


A Girl Named Zippy

By Haven Kimmel



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A kindergarten report card summed up the young Haven Kimmel as someone who "is disruptive in class. Colors outside of the lines. Talks out of turn." Instead of registering disappointment, her parents promptly congratulated her for this achievement. Encouraged, their daughter developed a distinctive personality through her own characteristically sprightly rules. This same infectious anarchic spirit animates *A Girl Named Zippy*, Kimmel's autobiographical recollections of her childhood in a small midwestern town. It is a memoir that disrupts other memoirs, colors outside of the lines, and talks out of turn before skipping down to the drugstore for a twenty-six cent lemon phosphate.

In a series of hilarious yet poignant vignettes, Kimmel painstakingly recreates the quirky world of her childhood. Affectionately nicknamed after a roller-skating chimpanzee, Zippy Jarvis finds her whimsical name only the beginning of her unique adventures in tiny Mooreland, Indiana. Whether getting hypnotized by a carnivorous rabbit or watching her father borrow thirty-six hunting hounds and a raccoon to prove the restraint of his own dogs, Zippy brings to life her entertaining experiences and colorful characters with charmingly offbeat flair.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Taken from readinggroupguides.com

1. Zipp's numerous pets include Sam the Pig, Speckles the Chicken, dogs Kai and Tiger, a pony named Tim, cats PeeDink and Smokey, and Skippy the Hamster. How does Haven Kimmel develop the animals as sympathetic characters or villains (such as Chanticleer, the abusive rooster)? How does a child's bond with animals differ from that of an adult? Which of Zippy's pet stories was the most memorable for you? Discuss the significant animals of your own childhood.
2. At first glance, *A Girl Named Zippy* appears to be a collection of assorted scenes, almost like a scrapbook. Yet the chapters unfold as if they were part of novel. What themes thread their way through the work as a whole? What recurring predicaments are resolved as Zippy gets older?

3. Haven Kimmel introduces us to a slew of eccentric Mooreland residents, from the grumpy drugstore owner to the postman who only delivers the mail he approves of. How do various communities--big cities and small towns alike--define eccentricity? Were Mooreland's attempts at homogeneity and clean living successful? How does Mooreland compare to your town?
4. The introductory quote from Emerson asks, "Is there no event...which shall not, sooner or later, lose its adhesive, inert form?" Which portions of *A Girl Named Zippy* do you perceive as being precisely accurate, and which ones seem slightly embellished by the process Emerson calls "soaring from our body into the empyrean"?
5. Consider Zippy's family: her gun-toting but sensitive dad, bookish mother, adored big brother, and mercurial big sister. In what ways is the Jarvis family dynamic both typical and unusual?
6. Does Haven Kimmel seem to approve or disapprove of her upbringing?
7. Zippy often discusses religion. How does her mother's Quaker community differ from her father's "church in the woods"? Is he really as godless as his wife thinks he is?
8. Numerous memoirs have been published that expose deeply painful childhoods. Haven Kimmel alludes to a few dark aspects of life in Mooreland, such as poverty, a lecherous teacher, and her father's gambling problem. How do Zippy's coping skills compare to those of other children you've read about?
9. The chapter entitled "The World of Ideas" introduces us to Zippy's maternal grandmother, described as "a moneyed old woman in a small, depressed city." What insight does this section give us into Zippy's mother, who was raised in an environment that was very different from Zippy's?
10. How was Zippy changed by her friendship with Dana, whose parents worked in a factory, were atheists, and seemed uninterested in their child?
11. A few aspects of Zippy's childhood would be hard to find in today's households. Which of her recollections best represent the late 1960s and early 1970s?
12. Zippy had an unusual bond with Julie, her snaggletooth friend. How do you suppose Zippy was able to interpret Julie's silence, even over the phone? Why did Julie hit Zippy three times in the chapter by the same name?
13. Petey was Zippy's nemesis, abusing animals and even raising a carnivorous rabbit. Discuss the grade-school bullies in your past. What sort of adults did they become?
14. What is it about Haven Kimmel's tone that makes even everyday events seem compelling? How does she balance humor and poignancy?
15. Were the Jarvises poor?
16. In light of the book's beginning, what is the significance of the story in the final chapter, in which Zippy receives a piano from Santa? What do the closing sentences "thank you for not losing faith" and "thank you for being so brave tonight" reveal about Zippy and her parents?

A CONVERSATION WITH HAVEN KIMMEL

[A hand reaches out and depresses a knob on a little blue tape recorder. Someone says "glamorous park bench." Tapping sound. Throat clearing.]

Hello, and welcome to Interview. Let's just go straight to our guest, author Haven Kimmel, and have her answer a few questions about her book, *A Girl Named Zippy*.

You had some unusual experiences in the beginning of your life--a near fatal staph infection, baldness until almost three, and, most memorably, your first words at three years old: "I'll make a deal with you." How did this unusual start affect your life?

I'm of the opinion (I share this with some contemporary literary theorists, I think) that the word "text" is both broad and deep metaphorically, and thus we can, without much shame or sense of personal responsibility, litter our conversation with it. So let's say an individual life is a text; in *A Girl Named Zippy* I simply read my life backwards. The person I am now is essentially that weird little mute bald girl, only taller. And with hair, obviously. James Hillman, in his book *The Soul's Code*, proposes the "acorn theory" of psychological development. Everything in my book is revelatory of my acorn. If I may say such a thing.

You describe the career aspirations of your friends--Rose the artist and Maggie the "Solid Gold" disc jockey--and your own fluctuations between the Mafia and co-owning a farm with your best friend Julie. At what point did you realize you wanted to write?

Oh, I never wanted to be a writer. My only real dream was to be a rodeo star. Wait, that's not true. There was a time I thought I'd make a good prison guard, and my sister agreed with me. I remember that the first time I heard the phrase "legislate morality" I thought that was probably for me, and so I announced to the world at large that I was going to be a Supreme Court justice. I had some ideas about what was moral, and they didn't seem to be in keeping with the rest of the world. Finding a way to inflict my values on the innocent greatly appealed to me. However, I was never able to fulfill any of my career goals because I am essentially free of talent.

I started writing at age nine--automatically and without intention--like a savant; much the same way, I imagine, Rain Man couldn't help himself from counting jelly beans and match sticks. When I say I started "writing," what I mean is that I copied Ray Bradbury's stories out of *Twice-22* onto my own paper and then showed them to my mom, declaring them my own. It is, perhaps, rare for a person to be both a savant and a plagiarist, I don't know. My mom was very supportive (some might even say enabling) of those efforts, and of other examples of my creativity, such as the way I liked to recite whole episodes of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, lying, each time, about the ending. Sometimes the *Hillbillies* all died in a plane crash, sometimes they were mauled by rabid possums. That sort of thing.

The turning point for me, the place I parted from Mr. Bradbury, was the moment I looked at a story of his--let's say it contained a little girl doing little girl things--and as I was copying it I decided that the story could greatly benefit from an explosion out of the girl's nose. Perhaps it was a special gift of hers. I'd veer away from the plot I was copying in order to accommodate the nose eruptions, and soon I wouldn't be looking at *Twice-22* at all. Eventually I stopped copying and just began inventing and then things really got ugly.

One of my favorite sections in the book described your agitation over the power of poetry, particularly the famous repeating line of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which everyone has wrestled with at some point. Did you ever reconcile with poetry? Or even perhaps become inspired by it? Who are some of your literary inspirations?

I would say, with only a slight measure of hysteria and hyperbole, that by the time I was twenty-one I had given my life over to Poetry. (This prose thing I'm doing is really an act of infidelity and I'm terrified Poetry will find out.) I wrote poems exclusively and with great seriousness for at least fifteen years, but as with all those other vocations, I wasn't good enough. The level of my talent was egregiously distant from my aspirations. I wanted to write as well as John Donne, Emily Dickinson, Rilke, Elizabeth Bishop. (Elizabeth Bishop once said to Robert Lowell, "When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived." That's a perfect epitaph for a poet, as opposed to mine, which would be: "She was ridiculous.") There are some contemporary poets who are so good I don't think I would be able to sit in the same room with them without hyperventilating. I'm thinking specifically of Geoffrey Hill, Louise Glück, Kay Ryan, Denis Johnson, and most especially, the brilliant Gjertrude Schnackenberg, who is not only maybe the best poet alive, but has a first name that begins "Gj."

I know you studied creative writing in college. Did you draw upon your wealth of childhood experiences? How did this book get its start?

I didn't write much about my childhood when I was in college because I was a poet and too cool for that.

The first essay I attempted to write was about Edythe Koontz, the old woman who lived across the street from my house and who hated me for inexplicable reasons. I started the essay in the autumn, twelve or thirteen years ago, and did it secretly. I didn't even really let myself catch on that I was doing work that wasn't poetry. Something about that particular season caused me to remember Edythe, and I found that there was something about her I very much wanted to say. She had recently died and had left no family, so I began by writing down everything I knew about her. What I discovered was that what remained the most vivid about Edythe for me were the things my parents repeated to me, the details about her behavior and personal habits that my mother and father had sorted out from the infinite details that make up a real life. I had heard my mom say countless times in conversations with people not from Mooreland, "Edythe walked to the post office every morning at seven, where she would salute the flag while whistling 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'" It's a small detail (just one of Edythe's eccentricities) but brilliantly precise. Added to the other things my parents had recorded--the way Edythe bathed only twice or so a year; the way she played hymns on her discordant piano late in the night; her bathtub full of old newspapers--the little picture of Edythe whistling at the flag became more resonant. I began the essay and it went disastrously wrong; there was, in fact, nothing right about it, it stunk to high heaven, and I put it aside.

Over the next few years I worked on the essay sporadically. Sometimes at night I told stories about Mooreland into a small tape recorder, just so I wouldn't forget them. As I was telling them I tried to remember the facets my parents considered the most cogent, and built from there.

Years after first writing about Edythe, I took a writing class while in seminary at the Earlham School of Religion. The professor, Tom Mullen, made as the course requirement that we all begin a book-length project. I began the manuscript for what I would later call *Qualities of Light* (and which is now titled *A Girl Named Zippy*) in that course, completing about fifty pages. When I left seminary and moved to North Carolina I put it aside for three years, during which time I became pregnant, had my son, Obadiah, and spent a year exclusively with him. After his first birthday, when it became

clear that mothering would not, strictly speaking, be enough of an occupation for me, I started writing in the evenings, after Obadiah went to bed. I decided to look over those essays I had written for Tom at Earlham. None of them made it into the finished book (because they were lousy), but some events were recycled.

Jane Austen famously said that "3 or 4 Families in a Country village is the very thing to work on." You grew up in Mooreland, a small town in Indiana; in fact, the book begins with a description of the strange mathematic principle that maintains the town's population of 300. Why do you think that small towns are particularly rich in material?

Just for a moment I'd like to savor the fact that a question posed to me contains the words "Jane Austen." Also I'd like to consider the Austen-village in relation to Mooreland. Oh, dear.

The simple answer, I think, is that in a small town more can be known about people and events. I lived in Mooreland for sixteen years, in the same house on the same corner, so I enjoyed a certain continuity (in terms of information), as did my friends and neighbors. In some ways my own continuity was multiplied by that of other townspeople, so that when I talk to the woman who is still my best friend (I call her "Rose" in the book) her history is as available to me as my own. Rose's story is not in any way the subject of the book, but informs it. I once heard Vanessa Redgrave say in an interview that she prepares for a part by deciding what her character carries in her purse. The contents of the purse are never revealed to the audience, but they are integral to the way Redgrave understands herself in the role. There's a famous story (maybe anecdotal) about a stage production for which an entire kitchen was built off-stage in order that the audience would hear a tea-kettle whistle. There are limits, obviously, to the depths to which realism can be provocative, but I know what a lot of people in Mooreland were carrying in their pockets, their wallets, their purses when I was growing up. In writing *Zippy* I didn't need to make an itemized list; I just needed to stand, in memory, where I really stood and say what I saw and heard.

Why do you think the memoir has become such a popular genre for both writers and readers?

It seems to me that, ultimately, the study of history is our attempt to find out how we are to live. Things are going very badly for a lot of people--economically, spiritually, phenomenologically (by which I mean that as a species we seem to suffer from the grief of temporality without evolving from that suffering)--and others seem to have inherited more than their fare share of grace. Memoir is flat out interesting, on the one hand, and at another level it can be a tangible, artistic reckoning with this most basic question, the question of how we are to live, a reckoning and a sort of comfort. I'm thinking specifically of a memoir published in the last year, Barbara Robinette Moss's *Change Me Into Zeus's Daughter*. There was so much in that book I treasured (courage, beauty, delicacy), but the most amazing thing to me was the way Moss revealed events in her life that were so odd and so idiosyncratic--in some cases so extreme--that few people, I'm guessing, would recognize or understand their content. But again and again I thought of my own sister, Melinda, and the way Melinda and Barbara Moss seem to share a certain posture in relation to life, and I knew immediately that the book would be a comfort to Melinda. I sent her a copy and by the time she finished it she was a little speechless (very unusual for her, I must say). When she called me to talk about it, I said, "Who knew?" Memoir is the voice of our common humanity, even in the most uncommon lives.

I also have the impulse to say, as many people are currently saying, that memoir is so popular among readers because as a culture we are unrepentant and unreconstructed voyeurs, and that as writers we love it because we're lazy and narcissistic. It does seem that as the genre du jour, memoir reveals the best and the worst in our nature as consumers of literature.

Something that distinguishes your book from other memoirs is the narrative voice. Whereas many authors look back at their childhoods from an adult point of view, you maintain the viewpoint of your younger self, giving weight to situations that many adults would otherwise bypass and vice versa. Did you make a conscious choice to stick with this voice?

There is no single element in Zippy I worked on harder, longer, or with more conscious deliberation than the voice. And, as you've noticed, the voice dictated the content. I once heard Robert Morgan say that the voice of a child is the hardest to get right, because one must be accurate and convincing, which demands a kind of ignorance, but the adult intelligence has to be the guiding principle. It's a tough mix to produce consistently.

Have your family and friends from Mooreland read the book? What do they think?

I think that most of the people who appear as characters in the book couldn't love it more. My sister owns a diner called The Blue Moon just outside of Mooreland, and she has the book cover framed and hanging on the wall there. I feel certain that as the book produces more artifacts Melinda will eventually put together a little shrine. My mom is the same: just unabashedly supportive and delighted. My favorite reaction, though, came from my old friend Andy Hicks, who is featured in the essay, "Favors For Friends." I gave him the book in manuscript, and he and most of his family read it. He sent me a letter and said they all wept when they finished it, because they realized that someone had actually seen them; their family had meant something to someone else. That feeling of having been seen is so important to us all, I think, but consistently a surprise.

I agree. The way that you "see" each character shows that you clearly have a deep bond with all of them; even evil Edythe and Petey Scroggs get no less a loving treatment than, say, Andy and Julie and their families. Related to that, I loved the inclusion of photographs. It made the memoir more of a family album experience than just a regular book reading.

The photographs in the book were the idea of my fabulous editor, Amy Scheibe, and I owe their inclusion to Doubleday's generosity. I love how they look, and the way they complement the stories. I also had a great time locating them. My sister and mom and I spent hours going through the defunct ammunition box in which family photographs are stored. I am too limited a writer to describe our reaction upon finding the photograph of Edythe, for instance (none of us knew any pictures of her existed), but suffice it to say our response was some combination of glee, pity, and terror.

Are you working on anything now?

I'm always working. I write like a fiend. My work ethic as a writer is a direct outgrowth of the knowledge I'm virtually unemployable in every other field.

In addition to Zippy, Doubleday has purchased my first novel, which is titled (so far) *The Solace of Leaving Early*, the first book in a projected trilogy. *Solace* is scheduled to be released in February, 2002. My impression is that having two books released within a year of one another qualifies, within the classical definition, as an "invasion." I'm working on the second book in the series now. And Houghton Mifflin has picked up a children's book, which should be out in two years or so.

And, finally, does anyone still call you "Zippy"?

I have the feeling that over the next few months, everyone will call me Zippy.

Well, I guess we'll sign off. That's all for Interview. Good night, folks.

[Static, a giggle, some crunching sounds, and then tape is shut off. They weren't really sitting on a park bench. But that doesn't make it any less glamorous.]

--Kelley Kawano