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All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir



Synopsis

Named one of "forty-two books to read before you die" by the *Independent* (UK) 2015 National Jewish Book Award Winner 2016 Winner of the GLCA New Writers Award in Nonfiction One of Star Magazine's "Fab 5 Can't-Miss Entertainment Picks" A moving and revealing exploration of Hasidic life, and one man's struggles with faith, family, and community Shulem Deen was raised to believe that questions are dangerous. As a member of the Skverers, one of the most insular Hasidic sects in the US, he knows little about the outside world--only that it is to be shunned. His marriage at eighteen is arranged and several children soon follow. Deen's first transgression--turning on the radio--is small, but his curiosity leads him to the library, and later the Internet. Soon he begins a feverish inquiry into the tenets of his religious beliefs, until, several years later, his faith unravels entirely. Now a heretic, he fears being discovered and ostracized from the only world he knows. His relationship with his family at stake, he is forced into a life of deception, and begins a long struggle to hold on to those he loves most: his five children. In *All Who Go Do Not Return*, Deen bravely traces his harrowing loss of faith, while offering an illuminating look at a highly secretive world.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Graywolf Press (March 24, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1555977057

ISBN-13: 978-1555977054

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 1 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 466 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #34,800 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in *Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Movements > Orthodox* #3 in *Books > Religion & Spirituality > Judaism > Hasidism* #30 in *Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Jewish*

Customer Reviews

Named one of "forty-two books to read before you die" by the *Independent* (UK) 2015 National Jewish Book Award Winner 2016 Winner of the GLCA New Writers Award in Nonfiction One of Star Magazine's "Fab 5 Can't-Miss Entertainment Picks" "Astonishing. . . . Deen's harrowing story . . . is also an indictment of those who are standing by and allowing it to be."

“With this book Deen has laid to rest the idea that a Hasid from New Square could never become a great writer in English, or an articulate chronicler of his own experiences.”

“All Who Go Do Not Return is an extraordinary memoir. The writing is beautiful. The journey it chronicles is poignant, relatable-and also unlike anything most readers will ever have experienced. . . . His voice is an important one in our generation.”

“A heartbreaking read as Deen fights to reconcile his identity and love for his family with his loss of faith in God. But it is also one of great courage and hope as Deen aspires to live openly and without fear for the first time.”

“In this moving book, Deen lays bare his difficult, muddled wrestling with his faith, the challenges it posed to everything he thought he knew about himself, and the hard-won redemption he eventually found.”

“A clash of cultures made fascinating and personal.”

“I understand that even if I did visit New Square I would have no greater access to Hasidic life than my occasional walk through Williamsburg, where I can see but can’t penetrate its appeal, or its secrets. Deen’s memoir, however, does grant me that access. It is the book’s ticket to mass appeal as well as the seat of his disquiet in its writing. Though he writes because he has a story to tell, Deen’s work, especially in his memoir, is clearly crafted to benefit others dealing with a wavering faith.”

“Shulem Deen has a fascinating story to tell, and he tells it with exquisite sensitivity. All Who Go Do Not Return gives us not only an insider’s glimpse into a shrouded world few outsiders get to see, but also a movingly told narrative of one man’s struggle toward intellectual integrity. The setting may be the world of Hasidic Judaism, but the drama and the insights are universal.”

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*

“All Who Go Do Not Return is a deeply honest and moving story about a man’s decision to do something both so simple and so radical - to live in accordance with his own beliefs. Shulem Deen has written an enormously powerful and important memoir about faith, doubt and freedom.”

“On the eve of his marriage, at eighteen, Shulem Deen knew how to slaughter an ox in Jerusalem’s ancient temple, but he knew less than most seven-year-olds do about sex and movies and technology and literature--about the world that lay only miles away from him. Among the Skver Hasids, all who go do not return, but in writing this memoir, Deen has returned, and brought us, his lucky readers, with him. This is a heartbreaking book, and an important one, about the consequences of being true to yourself, and about a world and a community few of us know.”

Joshua Henkin

Shulem Deen is a former Skverer Hasid, and the founding editor of Unpious. His work has appeared in the The Jewish Daily Forward, Tablet, and Salon. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

[SPOILER ALERT: I found it difficult to write this review without discussing some of the major aspects and events of the book. I don't think that these are exactly spoilers: we know from the jacket cover and picture of the now clean-shaven author that he ends up leaving a Chassidic sect and the book opens with the author and his family getting ousted from the New Square community. I refer to most specific events in general terms but, even so, I just wanted to give readers the heads up.] Shulem Deen's *All Who Go Do Not Return* is the author's memoir of leaving an Orthodox Chassidic sect. I was riveted from start to finish. This is a powerfully written book that is even more gripping because it is not fiction. Moreover, it has intrinsic interest because it opens the door to the inner sanctum of the insular, Skverer Chassidic community located in New Square, New York. However, I found the book equally intriguing as it was disturbing to me. I am not Hasidic, but I am an observant Jew. Although I hate labels, Deen would probably peg me as 'Modern Orthodox.' (For those who are not in the know, this moniker cuts a large swath, describing anyone from the most liberal Jewish Orthodoxy--just to the right of Conservative--to a graduate of Yeshiva University's rabbinical school. If this is the range, I would definitely fall right of center.) As such, I am familiar with Hasidim and Hasidic communities. I have not lived in such a community nor am I drawn to do so. But just as I am able to appreciate the authenticity of Deen's point of view, I also have a great respect for and know many Hasidim who are, indeed, pious and live rewarding and productive lives within communities that are similar to New Square. Nevertheless, that does not mean that everyone who is born within a Hasidic enclave will fit in. For most of us that live in the United States, we tend to think of communities like New Square as quaint, anachronistic, recreations of the Eastern European shtetl. A sort of Fiddler-on-the-Roof, Anatevka experience, where the citizens live beatific, humble, dedicated lives and perhaps break out into song in full colorful costume when the moment strikes them. Of course, we know that this is not true. Any community, no matter how religious, how small, or how insular, is rooted in the real world. Hasidim who live in places like New Square, the Amish, the Hutterites, and other similar types of communities have their joys but also have their strife. They have their celebrations but they also have their own internal politics. Those who live this life may seem constrained to us, but having strict guidelines in life may give them a sense of purpose or godliness that we may lack with all of our freedoms. As we see with Deen's account, however, there is little wiggle room and those who do not fit in are destined suffer a life of repression or need to leave. The author's break from the Skverer community began with

disillusionment. Starting off as an ardent adherent, Deen starts to question his insular world when he reaches the age of 19, and there is undue social pressure for him to get married. At first he cannot understand why he needs to get married at such a young age. Deen doesn't feel ready to get married and also quibbles with the way his bride is selected. As is the tradition, he gets married after meeting the bride only once. Once married and after having a number of children, the world starts to crack around him. Deen finds it more and more difficult to keep his family financially afloat and finds the Skverer community lacking in terms of support. Deen had somehow felt that as he reached each expected step of his rabbinic education, things would all just work out. Instead he finds a world of debt, food stamps, community food vouchers, and not even being able to live check to check. In desperation, he resorts to moonlighting as an elementary school teacher and a tutor, jobs where it is expected to falsify documents so that he will get a paycheck cut by the government. He even makes a vain attempt to start a business. Deen finds the Skverer Rebbe to be a distant figure who doesn't care about his followers and doesn't take Deen's plight seriously. Deen starts thinking about New Square as a kind of pyramid scheme, with Deen suffering at the very bottom while the Rebbe (and the Rebbe's cadre) benefiting enormously at the top. As he tries to hold his family together, Deen finds himself in search of something outside the pale. He buys a computer for work, cracking open the door to the outside after he discovers chat rooms of the internet. He buys a car for a job and finds himself enjoying the forbidden radio and driving outside of New Square, exploring a vast new world. He finds a friend who has partially 'escaped' who gets him hooked on movies. The pull of the outside world exceeds the ties that bind him to Skver and Deen loses his faith in the Skverer community and his faith in God. Deen describes his remarkable emergence from the Skverer community as one would describe time travel. This is not an exaggeration. Although Deen is becoming a Talmudic scholar, he has poor command of the English language (his first language is Yiddish), he has maybe a fifth grade secular education, and he has never watched TV or seen a movie. He has had glimpses of the outside world, but has lived within the Hasidic community and is unacquainted with modern American social conventions and culture. Deen's 1800s, Eastern European persona is not ready for the 20th Century. And his exploration of the outside world and subsequent loss of faith separate Deen from his family and his community. All this happens more quickly than Deen expects and in ways that he is not fully prepared for. Deen's wife, Gitty, makes a valiant attempt to stay loyal to her husband but she is too moored in the Skverer community to embrace a larger world. Both try to keep the family unit intact, but it is apparent even from the beginning that this is doomed. Deen is unprepared for the greater world practically, educationally, and emotionally. This basic lack of knowledge and social tools is an invisible barrier

that he has to overcome before he can leave New Square. The fallout of losing his family scars him. Deen is deeply wounded by the hydraulic, social pressure from the Skverer community on his children to separate themselves from him and is blind-sided by the legal machinations of the Skverer community that physically alienate Deen from his family. Deen has a knack for being simultaneously heartbreaking and humorous. The account of his wedding night, where as a student he was learned in the Jewish laws of intimacy but completely ignorant of the actual physics of the act, is a perfect example of this. His writing is engaging and he is an excellent story teller. His goal is simply to tell his story the way he sees it, and he mostly succeeds. Of course, if Deen's ex-wife was writing the book, the narrative might have been completely different. But it is the veracity of Deen's narrative that rings throughout. Deen is always conscious that he is telling his version of the truth. Because of this, he makes his best effort to tell the unvarnished story, even if this means highlighting his personal failures. Nevertheless, even though Deen takes great pains to describe his experience in a distanced, journalistic way, he is unable to completely do so. Memoirs, of course, are always written from the point of view of the author and this one is no exception. The wounds are still too raw, and even Deen knows that he cannot be completely objective. This is, perhaps, the greatest strength of the book and the thing that makes it stand out from the crowd in what appears to be a new genre of non-fiction describing an authors 'escape' from ultra-orthodoxy. Books by Deborah Feldman and Leah Vincent, for example, describe similar trials and tribulations. Deen's circumstances, however, are less outrageous and more relatable. Some have questioned the truth of some of the claims in Feldman's book and Vincent actually came from a far less insular brand of Orthodoxy than Deen. Moreover, the other books are chock full of bitterness--an emotion that is understandably present but that does not dominate Deen's memoir. The danger of Deen's book, I suppose, is that some may see it as demonization of Hasidism, Judaism, or religion in general. Those who have a drum to beat on these issues will use the book as a way to reinforce their negative stereotypes of Hasidism and by extension Orthodox Judaism. Moreover, there are those in the Jewish community who will see Deen's book as just another in a series that shamefully disparages Orthodox Jewish practice to a wider audience. Deen instinctively tries to steer away from this, but, even as he strives to be even handed, he still can't help taking a few pot shots. For example, he is repeatedly dismissive of what he considers the triviality of Talmud study--for example having in depth knowledge of just exactly how to write a legally binding contract in 5th century Babylonia. The Talmud does contain instruction and arguments regarding very minute points of Jewish law. However, the purpose of Talmud study, and the reason the arguments therein were written down for posterity, was not only to elucidate the specifics of Jewish law but to demonstrate

the analytics involved in reconciling real-world problems using Jewish law. Deen decries the perfunctory experience of ritual, law, and prayer in Judaism. Some may experience things this way, but part of appreciating the deeper meaning of an Orthodox Jewish life has to come from within. At times he invokes the old saw (brought up many times by others, such as Bill Maher), that there could be no divinity to the Five Books of Moses because the character of God therein is too ruthless and cruel. Religious people, of course, interpret the Torah in a different way. These points are sometimes a distraction from the narrative, but they are not the purpose of the book. One odd reference was his interpretation of a story referred to in the Talmud of the four rabbis who entered the garden ('pardes' in Hebrew), where only one--Rabbi Akiva--emerged unscathed. Deen states that this was an admonishment against studying Filosofia (philosophy), whereas the standard interpretation is that the story is a warning against studying Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) when one is unprepared. Another interpretation, closely aligned to this, would be an admonishment against using one of the secret names of God to elevate one's soul to a higher level than one is able to tolerate. It makes sense that a more modern interpretation might be used as leverage to deter people from secular culture or philosophy, but that seems far flung from the original meaning of the story. However, I can easily imagine that Deen might have learned this interpretation by his Skverer rebbes. Of course, given that Deen felt forced to adhere to Jewish law and tradition, he did lead a perfunctory existence that lacked any real soul. Nevertheless, just because a Hasidic life lacks meaning for Deen personally, this doesn't mean that it isn't meaningful for those who live it every day. He mentions the portrayals of Hasidim by Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Elie Wiesel and 'wincing' at how these authors 'romanticized' Hassidic life. Not having lived among the Skverers, I can't comment on what life is like in that community. I will say that there is acknowledgement that there is an overabundance of stress on ritual and law rather than spirituality in greater Orthodoxy. It is ironic that such a problem exists within Hasidus today: that specific branch of Judaism was started in the late 1700s by Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer (known as the Baal Shem Tov or 'Good Master of the Name') specifically as a spiritualist backlash against the rationalist brand of Judaism practiced in Eastern Europe at the time. Remarkably, the rabbinical school of Yeshiva University--a non-Hasidic Jewish institution of Jewish higher learning that is an extension of the Eastern European rationalist tradition--is now actually teaching courses in what they call 'neo-Chassidus.' Through neo-Chassidus, Yeshiva University is trying to reintroduce the mystical and spiritual aspects of Hasidus back into Jewish life; to bring the 'inner light' back into daily religious practice and the study of Torah. I believe that this is the inspired approach to Judaism that Buber, Heschel, and Wiesel were referring to. More remarkably, one of the course directors of the

neo-Chassidus program at Yeshiva University has stated that Hasidim often attend his classes to rekindle the fire of the Baal Shem Tov, because Hasidus for them had become a way of life, not a fire. The purpose of Deen's book seems twofold. First, writing the book was almost certainly a catharsis for him. Second, he wants to make sure that those who take the same journey as he did know that others came before them and that they can seek solace in knowing that they are not alone and have support. There are those in the Orthodox Jewish community who will want to censure Deen and will decry his book, but I think that this would be a grave mistake. The issues that Deen has brought up in his book are real issues that matter. Those issues will not go away if you ignore them. If we want to keep our children within the fold, we have to realize that Judaism is not a cookie cutter religion. There is real flexibility, we just have to own up to it. The fact that someone is not cut out for life in a small, insular, Jewish community doesn't mean that they have to leave their faith behind altogether. There are plenty of options--yes, even within Orthodoxy--that allow you to interact with the 'outside' world. Losing faith in 'ultra-orthodoxy' does not necessarily mean that you have to leave Judaism altogether. This is one of those books that is not only a great read but sticks with you long after you read it. It is not one of those true-life stories that ends with an all-out victory, but it is a gripping memoir that will keep you reading until you finish it. And when you're done, you will still have a lot to think about. Recommended.

I was first attracted to "All Who Go" by an excerpt in "The Forward" which related Shulem Deen's experiences as a teacher. I am a teacher, and his account rang true, an uncommon experience for me. I am well educated in Jewish life and texts, and I was delighted, charmed and enveloped by the story of Shulem's youth and young adult years in New Square. The scenes were so vivid and authentic, nuanced and accessible to this non-Hassidic reader. I have read so many pieces on Hassidic life that were patently dishonest or shallow; this was spot-on! Deen is a very adept storyteller, and the book would not let me put it down. The little crises of marriage, child-rearing, struggling with faith, rebelling -- all of the challenges captured my imagination, as I followed young Shulem working through problem after problem. He was indomitable. Until he wasn't. I did not expect the narrative to progress as it did. I don't want to spoil it for you, but understand that a clever, enticing little book develops layers and layers of thoughtful struggles and profound inner pain and potential. The Shulem Deen of the last chapter is much less entertaining, and much more important, than the pleasant fellow who welcomes you into his memoir.

All Who Go Do Not Return: A Memoir, is a Memoir like none I have ever read. It concerns the

religious, spiritual and community-wide struggle of the writer, Shulem Deen. He was raised and he lived in an insular, Orthodox Jewish life. Starting as a child, he challenged authority, questioned unproven "truth", and resented the constant scrutiny and control inside the small world in which he felt trapped. We come to know his childhood and parents in flash backs. As the book begins Deen is being matched with a bride. He will only meet her for a few minutes before they become joined for life. Deen carefully, and I believe fairly describes the life he led and what began to tear down the wall of fear and threats. He dares to go to a library! Listen to the radio, and other forbidden activities. I found the story so upsetting at parts, I kept setting the book aside and declaring to my husband that I would not read anymore!! And yet, I was draw back, again, to find out how our main character was surviving the disaster he had made of his life. Only when my husband told me the conclusion, would I dare to finish the story. Shulem Deen's life is a brilliant, brave, and yet tragic human journey. But it is one we must all take, when we are determined to live the truth, and not live a lie.

Dear Shulem, you may never read this, but....I need to thank you for writing 'my' story albeit I am a woman, chossid from a different sect and much older than you. I had to leave my own 5 children behind because rabbinical & secular court (following rabbinical advice) defined me as a "rebellious" wife for wanting to attend college & become the breadwinner as we also lived on all the govt. programs mentioned in your book. I have never been able to feel truly comfortable in the secular world; but I am still reading to see what you finally manage to do with your life outside. My son also went through the 'rational' Judaism which made his siblings and myself even more confused....anyway, thank you for giving voice to the thousands of us who are either too scarred or inarticulate to write as you have on behalf of former Hassidim.

Shulum's portrayal of his community , upbringing and education is precise and described well.I can attest to this, as a former member of a Chassidic community who left almost five decades ago.Yet Shulem's description made me feel and relive and emotionally feel those memories. Amazing how "vey haltmen" followed by the stick, still remains. The rabbi who feels that handing out candies to students as positive reinforcement, I experienced in my elementary Yeshiva, Be'er Shmiel in Boropark. That rabbi when I was in second or third grade was Daniel Goldstein, of Skver. In my opinion this book is written well and fairly describes that world.

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