

Hippie Chick: Coming of Age in the '60s

Ilene English

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Hippie Chick is a tender memoir that chronicles a bold search for love that is ultimately found within.

Ilene English's painful, prefeminist memoir *Hippie Chick* moves from her naïve impulsivity during the freewheeling sixties and seventies to her growth into wisdom.

Ilene English had a harsh 1950s upbringing on the East Coast. The last of six kids born to a critical, temperamental father and a mother with poor health, English looked to her elder sister, Carole, for guidance. After their mother died and English finished high school, Carole offered English a one-way ticket out of New Jersey.

So begins an eventful story of sexual exploration, love, therapy, and self-discovery. It traverses San Francisco's counterculture and moves toward Hawaii. It encompasses finding a talent for art and a sense of belonging in Eugene, Oregon. English winds up at Stephen Gaskin's Tennessee community, The Farm, as well. Back-and-forth points between arise, and everything is detailed with wide-eyed verve, even occasional moments of defeat.

Written with brisk efficiency, the text sometimes skips through time. It introduces roommates and lovers who are mere sketches on the page. Its focus is not immediate. But amid the sweeping drama of English finding her way—including her unexpected brushes with Dizzy Gillespie and Janis Joplin—a gradual, heartbreaking portrait of her broken self-esteem emerges.

The text zigzags toward English's adulthood, capturing the remarkable freedoms of eras when it was possible to befriend strangers and hitchhike, even if it was dangerous to do so. A boyfriend's heroin addiction and a near rape highlight the risks at the edges of English's otherwise carefree existence.

Watershed moments include loves lost, abortion, and Carole's death. These are written with spare reflection; English's younger self comes across as more resilient than later, vulnerable passages imply. Some episodic chapters conclude with life lessons that are odd fits with the rest of the writing. A chapter on seeking therapy unearths childhood memories and pain that are unresolved.

When the realization that there was never a need to stay "small in order to be loved" arrives, it's potent. Chapters on motherhood are raw and honest, and the aftermath of English's divorce is all about awakening, using fewer psychedelics, and finding a stabler job for the sake of her daughter. An epilogue is all about the mature center that English found: through mistakes and peripheral awareness of the women's movement, learning to speak out for herself, and not ceding her deepest beliefs and wants to others.

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KAREN RIGBY (August 29, 2019)

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