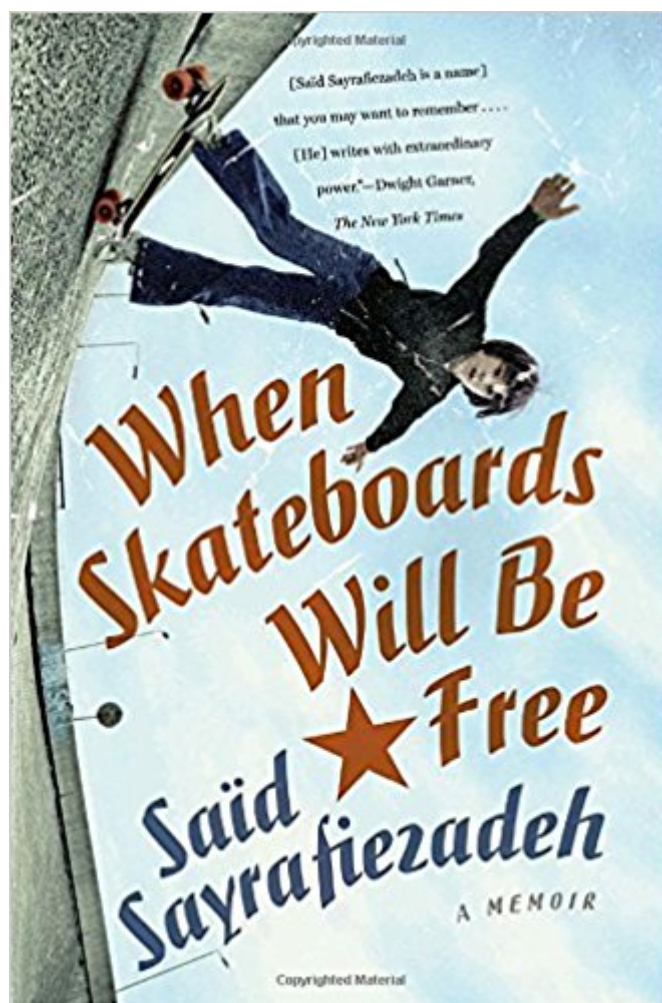


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# When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir



## Synopsis

“The revolution is not only inevitable, it is imminent. It is not only imminent, it is quite imminent. And when the time comes, my father will lead it.” With a profound gift for capturing the absurd in life, and a deadpan wisdom that comes from surviving a surreal childhood in the Socialist Workers Party, Saïf d Sayrafiezadeh has crafted an unsentimental, funny, heartbreaking memoir. Saïf d’s Iranian-born father and American Jewish mother had one thing in common: their unshakable conviction that the workers’ revolution was coming. Separated since their son was nine months old, they each pursued a dream of the perfect socialist society. Pinballing with his mother between makeshift Pittsburgh apartments, falling asleep at party meetings, longing for the luxuries he’s taught to despise, Said waits for the revolution that never, ever arrives. “Soon,” his mother assures him, while his long-absent father quixotically runs as a socialist candidate for president in an Iran about to fall under the ayatollahs. Then comes the hostage crisis. The uproar that follows is the first time Saïf d hears the word “Iran” in school. There he is suddenly forced to confront the combustible stew of his identity: as an American, an Iranian, a Jew, a socialist... and a middle-school kid who loves football and video games. Poised perfectly between tragedy and farce, here is a story by a brilliant young writer struggling to break away from the powerful mythologies of his upbringing and create a life and a voice of his own. Saïf d Sayrafiezadeh’s memoir is unforgettable. From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Best of the Month, March 2009: While images of athletic and Hollywood celebrity decorated the rooms of his classmates, the walls of Said Sayrafiezadeh's youth were adorned with fierce glares from heavily-bearded revolutionaries. As the son of an Iranian father and Jewish-American mother--two souls united by a commitment to an impending socialist revolution--young Said spent his childhood working to make the comrades proud. He hawked the movement's rag, embraced a moniker of "the little revolutionary," and even embarked on a confusing trip to Cuba to spark his political awareness. Despite the seriousness of his cause, *When Skateboards Will Be Free* describes a politically-charged childhood with an innocence that forces smiles in unexpected places and reveals the heartache of a home soaked in idealism. The arrival of a socialist state not only promised to bring skateboards in bubblegum-bright colors to the masses; it also pledged to repair the rifts within Sayrafiezadeh's own home. - Dave Callanan Exclusive .com Q&A with Said Sayrafiezadeh

We caught up with the author of *When Skateboards Will Be Free* to discuss his present-day perspective, writing influences, and politically charged father. Has your childhood caused you to embrace or run from politics today? I have a difficult time thinking for myself when it comes to politics. Considering what my childhood was like I suppose this is a natural consequence. I try to stay up on the news as much as I can but I'm wearied by a lot of it. I'm also uneasy. Especially around election time when my anxiety is inflamed by the extreme urgency of both Democrats and Republicans. As a little boy, politics moved at a feverish pace. According to the Socialist Workers Party the world was always on the verge of total collapse, and it was up to us to do everything in our power to forestall that collapse. So as an adult I try to live above the fray as much as I can. My wife and I recently went to Washington D.C. for a week's vacation. We took every tour we could: The Supreme Court, the House, the Senate, even the Pentagon. It was fascinating to actually visit these places that I had only ever seen at demonstrations. I found that I had a lot of respect and admiration for our political process. But this was countered by a certain amount of guilt, and, rightly so, reproof at some of the more egregious misrepresentations of American history. I have a curious relationship to my country that I haven't entirely sorted out yet. How do you feel about the revolutionary heroes of your youth - Castro and Che, for example - as an adult? I have a soft spot in my heart for them. I think I always will. Castro, Che, Malcolm X. These were the main revolutionary figures for me when I was a child. I considered them less like heroes and more like family. And I don't think I'm overstating that. In fact, at times they were more personal to me than my family. Certainly more personal than my father whom I didn't really get to know until I was eighteen. They acted as stand-ins for him. Even though

Che and Malcolm X were already dead by the time I was born, I saw them as living, breathing companions, and I imagined that they were working to rescue me and my mother somehow. I felt comforted by this. Even to this day I cringe when I hear disparaging comments about them. But I'm not able to handle criticism about my father. You recall some very personal memories in this book. Would it have been easier to fictionalize the names and dates and write a debut novel? Probably. But that's not what motivated me to write this story. I was driven by a desire to have the truth be known precisely as it had occurred. To fictionalize it would have been an act of cowardice. The Socialist Workers Party has always prided itself on speaking out regardless of the consequences. In many ways I've become the ideal party member. That's the irony. Who has influenced your writing the most? There is no shortage of eloquent thinkers in your family. I don't really know. Perhaps it's a combination of things. The theatre had a big impact on me, for one. I acted in plays as a child and I was profoundly affected by the experience of dramatizing events. And my uncle, Mark Harris, was a successful author, so I saw that it was something that was possible to do. On the other hand, my mother was consistently frustrated in her desire to be a writer. I would often see her working on short stories or taking classes. She had little or no success, but at least writing was a part of our household. I knew she had other aspirations besides socialist revolution. How has your father reacted to *When Skateboards Will Be Free*? In the fall of 2005, I published an essay in *Granta* about my childhood, and which ended up becoming the foundation for this book. My father hasn't spoken to me since then. I'm sure he was offended by what I said about him and the Socialist Workers Party. Maybe he was also mortified about the consequences of his abandonment. I'd like to think so. My father's still a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, and his reaction has not been much of a surprise since politics have always trumped family. Which is essentially what my memoir is about. So in some ways my point has been proven. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"[Sayrafiezadeh is a name] that you may want to remember. If this exacting and finely made first book is any indication [He] writes with extraordinary power and restraint. [His] prose has some of [Isaac Bashevis] Singer's wistful comedy, and good deal of that writer's curiosity about the places where desire, self-sacrifice and societal obligation intersect and collide. •New York Times [Sayrafiezadeh] writes with grace and clarity about growing up juggling deprivation and desire. •Time "Sayrafiezadeh looks back with wonder, even humor, at the many difficulties he faced in his

childhood. [He] maintains a generous spirit throughout this eloquent memoir.

•Washington Post "A memoir is a bold thing to write so young, but the author pulls it off with pathos and humor, proving some histories are best written early."

•GQ "[A] wry, lovely memoir."

•O: The Oprah Magazine "Once I began *When Skateboards Will Be Free*, I couldn't put it down but to sleep. So reading a memoir, it reaches the reader's innermost consciousness. Its language has the fierceness and humor of a Charles Dickens story about childhood."

•Paula Fox, author of *Desperate Characters* and *Borrowed Finery* "Said Sayrafiezadeh has a wry, deadpan sense of humor, an exceptionally open heart, and the wisdom of a true outsider. *When Skateboards Will Be Free* shows us exactly how he came into possession of these rare qualities. This is a fantastic, beautifully written memoir."

•Scott Smith, author of *A Simple Plan* and *The Ruins* "When *Skateboards Will Be Free* is a brave, honest and elegant book. It felt like the story was being whispered in my ear. I haven't read a memoir in quite a while that has so skillfully made sense of an American childhood."

•Colum McCann, author of *Zoli* "Sad, angry, hilarious, heartbreaking, and brave"

•When *Skateboards Will Be Free* does everything a fine memoir should, and more. That Said Sayrafiezadeh survived his childhood in one piece would be triumph enough, but this beautiful book expands that personal triumph into art. It belongs on the shelf next to the best modern memoirs."

•Dani Shapiro author of *Black and White* and *Family History* "Sayrafiezadeh's memoir is lucid, heartbreaking, finally uplifting. This is a jail-break of a book. I loved it."

•Thomas Beller, author of *The Sleep-Over Artist* and *How To Be a Man* "Do not pity Sayrafiezadeh his childhood of deprivation"

•wonder at his ability to transform poverty into comedy and genuine suffering into joy."

•Sean Wilsey, author of *Oh the Glory of It All* "This is a remarkable memoir of a fragmented childhood."

•Dalia Sofer, author of *The Septembers of Shiraz* "When *Skateboards Will Be Free* is fraught and funny and haunting. Sayrafiezadeh never flinches, but neither does he stint on compassion. A wonderful recounting of a childhood, this book is also a powerful exploration of how belief binds families, and tears them apart."

•Sam Lipsyte, author of *Home Land* "Haunting ... A memoir full of surprises."

•Booklist From the Hardcover edition.

There have been a number of articles in recent years criticizing the apparent trend of publishing books which are memoirs of rather young people. I'm sympathetic to this line of criticism but see it as refuted in part by books like this. Sayrafiezadeh comes from a very unusual background. His father is an Iranian immigrant to the U.S. presumably from a Muslim background. His mother an American

Jew whose brother was the fairly well known writer Mark Harris. Unfortunately for everyone concerned the two of them joined ,one could say converted, to the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP is a rather fascinating organization. At one time it actually had some credibility on the Left as an organizing force. No one disputes that it did impressive work in organizing Anti Vietnam War protests. However by the time the author was born I think it may already have been in the process of shedding any intellectual and political credibility that it had. Strangely enough the worm of decay may have been Cuba. The party was an active booster of the Cuban Revolution and at first this made this rather fusty old Trotskyite party seem "relevant". However if there is a law of left wing politics it is this , one Trotskyite party breeds many. The party's Cuba fixation led to all kinds of arcane disputes and splits. Shortly before Said S. was born a major split took place in which ,it's my impression ,the party faction that thought Cuba was really a deformed workers state rather than a true workers state split off. This seems to have fueled the party's evolution into the American Castro Cheerleading Society. This in turn alienated a lot of Trots who were willing to support Castro but only critically. The fatal blow seems to have been the turn to labor when the party began to insist that educated white collar workers abandon their jobs to go work in factories often in distant locales. Hundreds (and that's a lot for a little party) of the best educated party members left. Said S doesn't go into all of the political history and you can't blame him. He wasn't writing a history of the party. However the book might have gained from this. I think it explains something. When I was reading SKATEBOARDS I couldn't help but notice how Moonie like the SWP people sound. I don't think they were as zombies even as late as the mid 70's. My theory is that the more independent minded and intellectually serious members of the party were gone by the time Said was say 8 or 9. What was left was a cult remnant that included his mother and father. Although even his mother couldn't take it past a certain point. In all events this is a compelling story of an American counter culture most Americans have never even heard of.

This is my FAVORITE memoir ever! I adore the author's style of writing and admire the way in which he weaves his adult and childhood experiences so that the reader truly feels how his childhood has shaped him. A wonderful read, and one I've dipped into many times and never cease to be delighted at the story, the style and the author!

A sad memoir of a boy who grows up with hapless, self absorbed Socialist Workers Party parents. A quick and enjoyable read. What was missing for me was how the author resolved the conflicting messages he received. Interesting passages are when he has a little friend over for lunch who

argues with his Mother about capitalism vs. communism. The child clearly knows which he prefers but the mother will not back down, even with a child. And when Said realizes his father knows nothing of the details of the socialist stories he recounts, but only the rhetoric. A good read but lacking in introspection.

It was a cringe worthy revelation to the mind set of the hard core socialist believer. The circular socialist value system the author describes self justifies it's faults and failures by blaming the society it parasitizes. I didn't know that socialists encourage shoplifting from small businesses to "hasten the fall of capitalism". It's the fault of the business owner of course. Mr. Sayrafiezadeh, you are an amazing example of the resilience of children. Your book is very well written and your stories are poignant.

Unlike my brother and sister and even my mother I kept my unpronounceable last name because it was my only connection with my father. Thus writes Said who is born in New York and brought up in Pittsburgh from an American Jewish mother and a socialist Iranian father who never integrates with America and leaves his family when Said was nine months old. As a child he is poor and lonely and these conditions make an unusually deep impression on his sensitive mind. With great clarity and insight he describes the small circle of strangers who make up for the absence of family. If you enjoy reading memoirs this is the one to read

The world of an American child growing up amidst urban poverty in the 1970s with educated parents who are zealous members of a fringe communist party. The father is largely absent while fighting for revolution (here and in Iran) and the mother is a true believer who lives for the perfect future state while assigning her own children to a highly imperfect present. The author, Mr. Sayrafiezadeh, a product of mixed religious and cultural backgrounds, is a highly talented writer. His story reaffirms the resiliency that is at the healthy core of the human condition. (The book benefits from an excellent jacket design by The Heads of State. Whoever or whatever that is.)

As more than one reviewer has astutely pointed out, despite Sayrafiezadeh's positively Dickensian childhood, he has emerged as bright new "voice" in the book world--scarred but without rancor. I'd like to commend Said for his positively other-worldly ability to maintain a remarkably balanced view of life, which seemingly would be impossible--given the circumstances of his upbringing. He is also a fine writer. And a word to the reader, once in a great while, the saddest

of stories can have a happy ending.

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