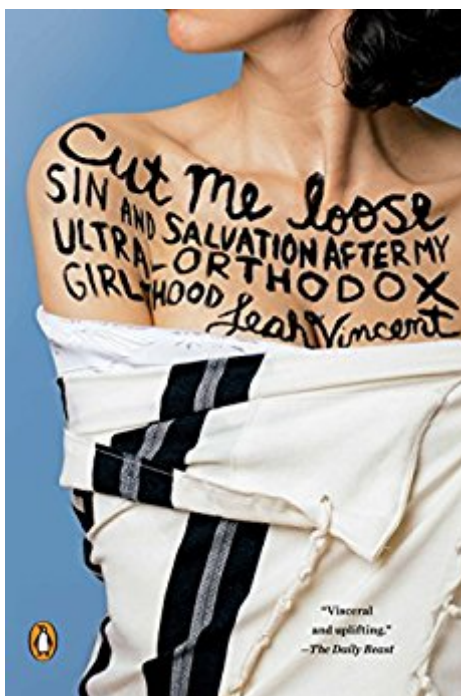


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# Cut Me Loose: Sin And Salvation After My Ultra-Orthodox Girlhood



## Synopsis

In the vein of *Prozac Nation* and *Girl, Interrupted*, an electrifying memoir about a young woman's promiscuous and self-destructive spiral after being cast out of her ultra-Orthodox Jewish family Leah Vincent was born into the Yeshivish community, a fundamentalist sect of ultra-Orthodox Judaism. As the daughter of an influential rabbi, Leah and her ten siblings were raised to worship two things: God and the men who ruled their world. But the tradition-bound future Leah envisioned for herself was cut short when, at sixteen, she was caught exchanging letters with a male friend, a violation of religious law that forbids contact between members of the opposite sex. Leah's parents were unforgiving. Afraid, in part, that her behavior would affect the marriage prospects of their other children, they put her on a plane and cut off ties. Cast out in New York City, without a father or husband tethering her to the Orthodox community, Leah was unprepared to navigate the freedoms of secular life. She spent the next few years using her sexuality as a way of attracting the male approval she had been conditioned to seek out as a child, while becoming increasingly unfaithful to the religious dogma of her past. Fast-paced, mesmerizing, and brutally honest, *Cut Me Loose* tells the story of one woman's harrowing struggle to define herself as an individual. Through Leah's eyes, we confront not only the oppressive world of religious fundamentalism, but also the broader issues that face even the most secular young women as they grapple with sexuality and identity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There's an argument about which "version" of Orthodox Judaism is more strict, surely her version is inaccurate. She was far more "book educated" and allowed more privileges than other Orthodox Jews. She got into higher education quickly, almost easily. (This is the only reason my review is four stars and not five. Her view of her specific "yeshivish" upbringing borders on arrogance. More holy? Not). However, levels of "strictness" don't relate to the author's experience/story. The issue here is strict rules of living, trying to live WITH them and trying to live WITHOUT them. Her life experiences were scary, really scary. I think she's lucky to be alive. Boy, she was naive, doing really dangerous (stupid) things. She is quite fortunate to have lived through her escape. This story applies to all who were raised without 'life skills', something universal to all those raised in strictly religious communities, those in sects and even in cults. I always read books like this with the question "how would I have handled this kind of life?" I never pictured a life like hers. Other books of this genre never describe Leah's experience. Her bravery in exposing her experience is a good lesson for all who venture out of their own life's restrictions. Listen to her. Even read between the lines. I believe we'll all find ourselves somewhere in her story. Congratulations Leah, not just for sharing your story (well written too), but for achieving the success you worked hard to obtain. God is surely watching over you.

After reading the negative reviews, I had to read this book and judge for myself. I am in general reluctant to share details of my own life online, but the misrepresentations of Ms Vincent as a liar and even that she is mentally unstable (from one reviewer who claims to know her family) are without foundation. I feel I must stand up for the truth as I see it. And Ms Vincent speaks the truth. I read the entire book in a single sitting - it is extremely well-written and it is fascinating, helping the reader understand the thinking of someone who has lost their family and identity undertaking self-destructive behaviours. It became very painful to read - especially how she was taken advantage of by men and had no idea how to interact with them - because it is a deeply authentic account. How do I know? Because I had the same Yeshivish upbringing as Leah's. Everything from the small details and philosophy of her upbringing is true. There is no embellishment. With the

important qualifier that in every community there is variation and that not all families are like Leah's, the fact is that many are. So while Leah's upbringing does not tar the entire ultra Orthodox community, it is also a valid account of her own experience for her own family and life, and her experience is representative of many ultra Orthodox people's experiences. Many ultra-Orthodox Jewish parents would have reacted with shunning at a female teenager's natural baby steps toward developing their own identity, like asserting things like wanting to go to college, and wearing a tight sweater. The slightest deviation from draconian modesty rules can make a girl the equivalent of a prostitute in this black and white world where there is only one path to God. Every move of a young woman is watched to class her as pious, or as a 'rebel', which is called 'prost' (which means what it sounds like). The goal is to make her a dutiful wife, willing to bear as many children as her body will handle in exchange for poverty, little real relationship with her husband, and to accept a position of inferiority to men (who are not in a much better position with their own lack of education and options). Punishments come down hard to nip deviations from the path in the bud; if they are not successful and the girl commits more 'infractions' that would be considered downright cute in normal society, banishment occurs because a teenager's reputation, once damaged, is lost forever, no matter her youth. She can rarely make a good marriage if she was a 'rebel' as Leah was by putting on an attractive sweater. Worse, her behaviour is deemed to cause 'shame' to the family and ruin the marriage chances of her siblings and cousins, so she must be cut off before she can 'worsen' and damn the entire family with her grave sins of writing letters to another teenager or expressing a desire for an education. Boys, however, are given much more freedom and are allowed to rehabilitate themselves. This certainly brings to mind attitudes of very traditional Muslim families, who severely punish their daughters for any perceived breach of chastity as bringing 'shame' on the entire family. It is not a Western mentality, and it takes some getting used to. The racism and the attitude toward non-Jewish people, especially Blacks, although I believe it has improved among the Yeshivish community, is accurately described especially for the time (15-20 years ago). So is the poverty, of material things, educational opportunities, and of time for children from parents, with the father constantly away on religious duties (including study and prayer even if the father is not a rabbi) and the mother keeping house with many children with no support from the husband. Boys get much more of their father's time than girls do, because they go to synagogue with him and learn Jewish law and Talmud with him in the men-only community study hall; girls are forbidden from being educated in Talmud. A desire to study it marks a woman as rebellious. Therefore, given fathers' lack of investment in time and education in daughters, in many ultra-Orthodox families the emotional relationship between a father and a daughter, especially when she grows up, is an

extremely watered down version of a normal father-daughter relationship. There is also no open affection between parents, including physical affection that others can see, including even little things like holding hands and the slightest of loving touches. Open displays of affection, including in front of one's own children, are regarded as highly immodest in this ascetic lifestyle. The life is very functional: taking care of children, work, running a household, and adhering to myriad religious rules that pervade everyday life and take up substantial amounts of time. In this world, children do not belong to themselves but to God, their parents and their community, and there is no such thing as simply giving a child the best education letting them make up their own minds as to what they want to be so long as they are ethical people. The child is educated to be an ultra Orthodox adult - a copy of their parents - and is given no education to allow them to be anything else. All other forms of oppression flow from this: you are not your own person. You have no right to have your own choices respected. Leaving - although it is the only option for many people who need to be honest with themselves - is increasingly traumatic the more religious one's family is. One can lose one's entire family, and one is dumped out into the world with no skills, no money, and no identity. In other words: there is no such thing as unconditional love. Can you imagine how it would be if your entire family - everyone you loved, invested in and thought you could count on forever - would cast you out because of a private choice you made for your own life that had nothing to do with your love for them? The effect on most people is devastating. Especially with the financial hardships that come along with this (which mean a whole slew of hardships), people understandably lose their sense of self and self-esteem. Some take their lives. Don't judge until you've walked that mile in another person's moccasins. One commenter has said that Leah should have been happy to go to an ultra-Orthodox women's 'secular' college. Sure, if she wanted a substandard education with very limited choices as to career (limited to 'female' professions like speech therapy), and no rigour. That commenter seems to have little appreciation of the value of the Harvard education Leah strove to get instead. Fortunately, with the increasing use of the Internet, the ultra-Orthodox (frum) community has become more open, although this is still a work in progress. Leah's struggles happened a decade and a half ago, and the Internet (with communication among religious people through the blogosphere and other democratic forms of commentary) has only really started making inroads in the last 5 years or so. At the same time, there are well-attended rallies against the use of the Internet in these communities, because of its power to educate people to make up their own minds. Those who criticise this book seem to fall into roughly two categories. There are the apologists, who want to discredit Ms Vincent, degrade her and attack her pain, because they feel her book is embarrassing to the ultra Orthodox community or Judaism as a whole. Some of these

are Orthodox or ultra Orthodox people themselves, made plain by their demanding to know why she couldn't stay Orthodox instead of ultra-Orthodox: a common attitude that shows the writer's religious certainty that they know what God wants. It's an attitude that shuts down all rational debate: people can speak only for themselves. A theological discussion, if one is desired, should be respectful. At any rate, people should accept that ultra Orthodox culture has its flaws like any other culture - instead of pretending it is perfect because it is God's right way, and the way forward to change is by books like these that ventilate issues for discussion. I trust people reading this book who are not Jewish are rational and realise it does not represent all of Judaism, just as a book on an oppressive aspect of fundamentalist Christianity does not represent Christianity as a whole, or denies positive things fundamentalist Christians do, like great acts of charity. The other camp are those who have no idea what this world is like, and what some of its teachings can do to a vulnerable young person's psyche. The frum girl thrown out in the world has less than a sixth grade education in real terms, and little confidence. She would be extremely naive in relationships. To those of you in this camp: Most of you have been reared with the privileges and freedoms others only dream of. You have received an education that helps you navigate the real world and has given you incredible options. Denial of education and real experience in the world stunts a person's development. Leah's experience is not that much different from an immigrant child's from a very different culture. It's hard to put ourselves in another person's headspace, but image yourself as a small child going out into a completely alien world and not understanding what people in it mean, what the rules are and what the governing philosophies are. For anyone who actually reads the book with an unvarnished, plain attitude: the book stands on its own merits. For now, bravo to Leah: you are a great success. A master's from Harvard KSG no less. I'm sure we'll hear wonderful things from you. As a final note: a number of fundamentalist religions have the same features as I've written above, and more. It is amazing to those who leave to realise how common these control methods are when they finally obtain information about the world outside their group. At the very pointy end of things, a community is simply a cult. These groups are called "high demand organisations". Katie Couric interviewed Leah along with women who had left the FLDS polygamist Mormon community and the daughter of a Westboro Baptist Church leader, and the similarities of the groups' beliefs are no coincidence. These are just a sampling of fundamentalist interpretations of religion: Muslims in fundamentalist communities face similar lives: Poverty. Denial of education from toddlerhood so people don't know what other options exist in life. Tightly controlled information within the group, including controlling what books, newspapers, magazines, phones, films and computers people can buy. No TV. Shaming and strong moral condemnation of even slight deviations from the very strict codes of

practice in the group. Girls taught from a very young age (2-3) that their primary role in life is to be wives and mothers. Young marriage and no contraception so a young woman is trapped even if she wants to leave: The husband gets the kids in the event of divorce, 1800s style. Women providing enormous economic (but unpaid) benefits bearing children, running households. Women dressed in dowdy clothes and denying them a sense of individual identity. Individualism denounced as apostasy. Women covering hair or wearing them in girlish styles. Women treated like children compared to men. Strict gender roles: with powerful and lucrative jobs and positions overwhelmingly in the hands of men. Male-only clergy. And, importantly, so that people buy into this impoverished lifestyle that robs them of their potential in life: 1) the teaching that the followers are living the 'hard' life God wants to test them with so that they'll go to heaven, so their suffering is worthwhile; 2) the specific religious philosophy and rules of that group is ancient and unchanging from time immemorial; 3) the specific religious philosophy and rules of the group is the **\*\*only way\*\*** to salvation; and 4) all those outside the group are degenerate, disapproved of by God, unholy and crude, including in intelligence. Racism and bigotry is rife, but it serves the purpose of making the 'in-crowd' feel superior and special. After all, if other people were just as loved and valued by God even if they have a very different life, why not live their much less demanding and happy life? Ms Vincent has seen past this crap. She has gone on a journey that proves that she obtains her feeling of being special as all of us should: through education, and finding our unique calling in life that serves others. We all have awesome creative gifts to make this world a better place. We are all special. If that's not what's meant by the verse in Genesis that says that all people are created in the image of God, I don't know what is. Fundamentalist religion takes away the wonder of life and replaces it with a poor substitute, like an abusive relationship. It's important to see it for what it is. It's not valid. It's not loving. And it's not life-affirming. Fundamentalists have more in common with each other than other adherents of religion: so that moderate Jews, Christians and Muslims have more in common with each other than they do with fundamentalists of their own religion. Why the world has moved toward fundamentalism in the last 30-40 years is an important discussion to have. Please comment :)

This book for me was hard to start, I did not know the difference between the various Jewish communities, however after some research I was able to decipher the authors references and gain some insight into her life as a young ultra Orthodox Jew. The part of the book that stands out to me the most is her parents decision to send her to New York, I would've never imagined a religious parent could be so cruel, her account of living in her basement apartment was heart breaking. I

would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys learning about how to overcome obstacles placed on you by your family, I can't say I'd reread this book, because my emotions would get the best of me, but it has definitely made me great full for my upbringing and the love I was able to receive from my family.

You know that girl in high school that seemed to find every loser guy? And fall in love with him? And decide he was her prince Charming? And then always acted surprised when he treated her like garbage? And then he dumped her and she always found another one just like him? Okay, so mix that girl up with "Fiddler on the Roof", and you have Ms. Vincent's story. I felt bad for her, I really did, but felt very upset at her family that abandoned her, both physically and spiritually. Vincent isn't really a likeable person, so empathy is difficult, but she finds her own way out, in the end. Let's hope she finally has her happy ending with the man she loves now.

Fantastic memoir about Leah's transforming paradigm from her way from the Ultra Orthodox world to the secular one. Very detailed on the details that matter that explain the larger events that shifted her paradigm. As a secular, it's interesting to see how she perceived the same events and reacted to them that many secular Americans experience in early adolescence. Fantastic, well-written work from an author who was able to re-make herself through questioning and seeking answers for so many ideas, beliefs, norms, etc. that secular folk grow up with as normal.

I stayed with it...I cared about her. not the best book I have ever read.

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