

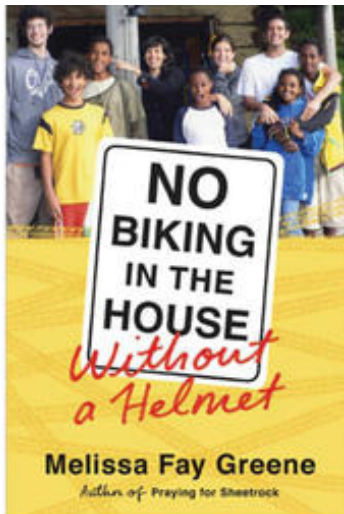
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No Biking in the House Without a Helmet

As her children grow, author Melissa Fay Greene decides to extend parenthood by adopting five more.



No Biking in the House Without a Helmet By Melissa Fay Greene Farrar, Straus and Giroux \$26

By Terry Hong

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You just know that a book's going to be good if you've already guffawed and the type has started to blur (even though you're trying not to get overly emotional) when you've barely even finished the introduction. Welcome to two-time National Book Award finalist Melissa Fay Greene's latest title, **No Biking in the House Without a Helmet**.

The premise, so understated, is mind-boggling: "This book is one woman's musings on the adventures of life with one man and many children." That one man is hubby Don Samuel, who preferred to put the children to bed practicing his closing arguments – as a criminal defense attorney, he spends his days with some of the seedier members of society – over reading the predictable "Berenstain Bears" stories.

As for those "many children," four are of the "homemade" variety (with birth years ranging from 1981 to 1992), while five more are "foreign-born" and arrived school-aged over the course of another decade, up to the arrival of the last two in 2007. You can do the math: It's 2011, which means that Greene and Samuel are entering their fourth decade of parenting.

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As the first four – Molly, Seth, Lee, and Lily – grew, as children inevitably do, Greene and Samuel, who so loved "the cumbersome richness of life, with children underfoot," wanted nothing more than for the good times to continue. So, writes Greene, "When the clock started to run down on the home team, we brought in ringers. We figured out how to stay in the game."

At 42, Greene made her "first-ever appointment with a psychologist" to help her decide whether to have another child. She concluded, without much input from the shrink who "wanted to talk about every sort of unrelated thing," that the final answer was no.

Then, when Greene was 45, a drugstore kit confirmed that she was pregnant. But she lost the pregnancy and was "overcome with grief and remorse."

Eventually, at her hubby's suggestion, she "typed the word 'adoption' [into her computer] ... stopped grieving and leaned forward, beguiled."

Given her journalist's background, Greene first pitched an article to The New Yorker about medical issues related to adoption; she "did not conceal [her] personal interest in the story." That research led Greene to Bulgaria in 1999 where she found the Greene/Samuels' fifth child, originally called Christian: "not the perfect moniker for a nice Jewish boy," the older kids humorously noted, and then renamed him Jesse. Jesse is ethnically Romany; the Romany are also known as Gypsies because (not unlike the way that native Americans came to be erroneously called "Indians") the Romany were thought to have originated in Egypt when in fact they emigrated from northwest India a thousand years ago.

Jesse is 4. Greene solemnly realizes that he was born the year she miscarried.

Back in Atlanta as a family of seven, life would never be the same. Postadoption life proved to be challenging at best. "Post-adoption panic" set in, complete with language barriers, bed-wetting, raging tantrums, separation anxieties, and more. With the family in upheaval, Greene sank into "post-adoption depression syndrome" (something she'd never even heard of), convinced she had "wrecked my dearest treasure, my family."

Miraculously, Greene recovers, her beloved family repairs, bonds, thrives ... and inevitably grows to include another four children, all Ethiopian by birth. Helen arrives in 2002, age 5-1/2. Fisseha, also known as Sol (his middle name, Solomon, shortened), is 10 when he joins the family in 2004. Birth-brothers Daniel and Yosef ("You delivered our first seven children; I'll deliver these two," Samuel tells Greene when the family is finally given clearance to pick up the boys after almost a year delay) complete the family in 2007, ages 13 and 10.

The sprawling family journey is not without its pitfalls. The children fight – even come to blows – give each other the silent treatment, lie on occasion, break rules, and figure out how to download porn on their cellphones. The teenage boys also easily bypass Net Nanny, then get caught charging up the cable bill with XXX-rated movies.

In spite of everyday surprises, Greene somehow keeps her sanity ... long enough to write this unforgettable family adventure. Third child Lee, by the way, is quite possibly the story's star.

Ready with the Band-Aid box in hand, Greene is a culturally sensitive, boldly humane, never-crushing antidote to this year's Tiger Mother. With too many of today's parents caught in the blinding fog of overachievement, "No Biking" is a revelatory must read. Join the Greene/Samuel melee, filled with water balloons, newborn gerbils, dead chickens, spicy foods, baseball stats, frequent-flyer miles, endless extended family ... and, most important, an unlimited supply of laughter and love.

Terry Hong writes a Smithsonian book blog at <http://bookdragon.si.edu/>.

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