

Reading Group Gold

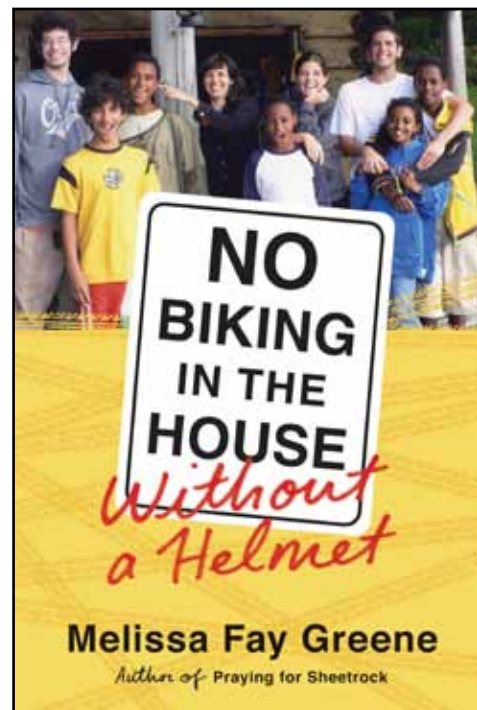
No Biking in the House Without a Helmet

by Melissa Fay Greene

When the award-winning nonfiction author Melissa Fay Greene confided to a friend that she planned to adopt a four-year-old boy from Bulgaria to add to her four children at home, the friend snapped: “Who made you the Old Woman Who Lives in a Shoe?” Three years later, as Melissa and her husband, Don Samuel, prepared to adopt a five-year-old girl from Ethiopia, she sensed that her friends now regarded her as “one of the greats: the Kennedys, the McCaughey septuplets, the von Trapp family singers, and perhaps even Mrs. Feodor Vassilyev, who, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, gave birth to sixty-nine children in eighteenth-century Russia.” When the number of children hit nine, Melissa took a break from reporting and trained her journalist’s eye upon events at home. Fisseha was riding a bike down the stairs; a squirrel was sitting on Jesse’s head; vulgar posters were going up on bedroom walls; the insult “niftam” (Amharic for “snot”) had led to fistfights; and four non-native-English-speaking teenage boys were researching, on Mom’s computer, the subject of “saxing.”

“At first I thought one of our trombone players was considering a change of instrument,” writes Melissa. “Then I remembered: they can’t spell.” Using the tools of her trade, she uncovered the true subject of the “saxing” investigation, inspiring the chapter “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, but Couldn’t Spell.”

A celebration of parenthood, a relishing of moments hilarious and poignant, and a treasury of hard-won wisdom, *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet* is a loving portrait of a unique twenty-first-century family as it wobbles between disaster and joy.



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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Cast of characters: parents Melissa Greene and Don Samuel; and Samuel children (in order of age): Molly, Seth, Lee, Lily, Fisseha (“Sol”), Daniel, Jesse, Helen, and Yosef

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1. How does the Greene/Samuel household compare to your family? Did you—or did your parents—grow up with a houseful of brothers and sisters? What was that like? Did you ever entertain thoughts of raising many children? What does a child gain by having half a dozen or more siblings? What does a child lose?
2. What surprised you the most as Melissa described her initiation into the international adoption process? Were you surprised to learn about sometimes misleading adoption agency promotions and about the dire conditions of some institutionalized children? What happens when a child's physical, cognitive, or emotional needs overwhelm his or her new parents?
3. How did Melissa balance her research into the medical aspects of international adoption with her heartfelt desire to adopt a child? Have you had parenting or other life experiences in which your heart pulled you in one direction while your head led you in another? Have you ever felt frozen between turning a blind eye to the truth and losing your courage as a result of fact-finding? How did you strike a balance and move forward?
4. The title represents a type of ridiculous warning parents sometimes find themselves obliged to say to children. Melissa mentions others, including “I want you to hit each other outside!” and “Please don’t wrestle with the scissors near the baby.” Can you share any absurdities you were forced to say to your children? What does the book’s title say about Melissa’s approach to parenting?
5. How did the chapter “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, but Couldn’t Spell” compare to your adolescent sex education and/or the education of your adolescents?
6. The ability of children to play is pivotal at several key moments, including Jesse’s assimilation into family life, Melissa’s introduction of whoopee cushions and Twister to Helen’s orphanage, and Sol and Daniel’s peace pact. In 2010, the United Nations codified a new Millennium Development Goal for the world, entitled “Sport for Development and Peace.” Talk about ways in which play and sports can overcome social, economic, cultural, racial, national, and cognitive barriers between people.
7. Sol’s story contains many unique elements, including a warm connection between his biological grandmother and his adoptive parents, and the revelation that his mother is still living. What values has this somewhat unusual “international open adoption” imparted to his life and the family’s?
8. Yosef and Daniel became part of the family at the urging of Lee. What inspired Melissa and Don to trust an eighteen-year-old’s intuition that the Gizaw brothers, then ages nine and twelve, should be part of the Greene/Samuel family? What would have been the scariest consideration for you in facing such a decision? What factors might have given you the courage to proceed or convinced you to say no?

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9. It takes financial resources to house and feed children, but Melissa and Don seem to have chosen the route of “rich in love” rather than “rich” in more practical ways. What family values can be relayed to children regardless of a family’s socioeconomic standing? How can well-off families impart to their children the importance of battling poverty and injustice?
10. The book’s descriptions of Ethiopian cuisine reveal the power of food as a link to our roots. What recipes capture your childhood? What special meals will your own children remember (either fondly or with horror) as touchstones of their childhood?
11. Like most adoptive parents, Melissa and Don immerse their new children in their own heritage, including religious traditions. Yet they also attempt to help their children preserve ties to their birth countries and to their first families. What is your experience of trying to respect and sustain more than one language or more than one cultural, national, or religious tradition in your home?
12. How did sibling relationships evolve during the arrival of more and more children? How do brotherly bonds seem to differ from sisterly bonds? What steps did Melissa and Don take to try to build unity among all nine children?
13. Upon Helen’s return visit to Ethiopia in 2007, she is overwhelmed by the widespread suffering. She tearfully asks, “What *makes* a country rich or poor?” What would you have told her that day?
14. Do you have personal experience of adoption or foster care? How would you compare your experiences with those described in *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet*? Is adopting or fostering a baby or older child something you would consider in life? Is it helpful to read that there could be difficult hurdles along the way, or would you prefer not to know in advance? Would you find the angels and storks and kitties of adoption agency websites alluring, or would you prefer to hear harder truths up front?
15. Are you acquainted with Melissa’s earlier books, *Praying for Sheetrock*, *The Temple Bombing*, *Last Man Out*, or *There Is No Me Without You*? Though she has written about the civil rights movement, a historic coal mine disaster, and the current HIV/AIDS pandemic and orphan crisis in Africa, her books all focus on unsung heroes and on struggles for racial or economic justice. *No Biking in the House Without a Helmet* is her first memoir and her first truly light hearted book. Are themes of justice and heroism also discernible here?

PRAISE FOR *NO BIKING IN THE HOUSE WITHOUT A HELMET*:

“With four children of their own, Atlanta journalist Greene and her husband gradually adopted five more . . . to create a roiling, large hearted family unit. In her whimsical, hilarious account, she pokes fun at her own initial cluelessness regarding the adoption process . . . Despite periods of tension and strife, Greene captures the family’s triumphant shared delight in one another’s differences.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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“Brimming with humor and love, the story of Greene’s ever-expanding family is both unique and universal. Not everyone watches a son spear a Frisbee in mid-flight or weave a bullwhip out of the suburban shrubbery. But everyone at some point asks what it means to be a parent, a sibling, a family. Greene answers these questions with wit and wisdom. I finished her book with a renewed conviction that it is possible to shrink this wide world and begin to bridge the chasms that have opened between us.”
—Geraldine Brooks, author of *People of the Book*

“About every five years, we get a book from Melissa Fay Greene. I’ve learned to wait for them eagerly, always excited to know what this thoughtful, sensitive writer is going to do next. Now—*No Biking in the House Without a Helmet*. That title tells you in no uncertain terms that you will laugh, but there’s a lot more in these pages than humor, including Melissa’s trademark generosity, optimism, winning self-deprecation, and high spirits.”
—David Guterson, author of *The Other*

“The funniest part of this book is not the fact that several of Melissa Fay Greene’s nine children were once Ethiopian goat herders. The funniest part is that *she has nine children*. She not only loves and appreciates every one, she brings them all to vivid life with affection, exasperation, candor, and (indispensable, under the circumstances) humor. I went from *Are you kidding?* to *I love these people!* in four pages flat.”
—Marilyn Johnson, author of *This Book Is Overdue!*

“Joy to the world. Line by glorious line, with raw honesty and unforced hilarity, Melissa Fay Greene tells the story of the true mega-family of the millennium, which is not some reality-show curiosity shop, but her very own nine children: those who came home from the hospital and those who came home from the airport. I stayed up all night with this, the *Cheaper by the Dozen* for a new planet. With this book, Greene raises the bar, wherever the word ‘family’ is spoken, for every single one of us.”
—Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *No Time to Wave Goodbye*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MELISSA FAY GREENE is the author of *Praying for Sheetrock*, *The Temple Bombing*, *Last Man Out*, and *There Is No Me Without You*. Two of her books have been finalists for the National Book Award, and New York University’s journalism department named *Praying for Sheetrock* one of the top one hundred works of journalism in the twentieth century. She has written for *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Reader’s Digest*, *Redbook*, and *Salon*, among others. She and her husband, Don Samuel, have nine children and live in Atlanta.

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Reading group guide written by Amy Root Clements / Amy Root’s Wordshop, Inc., and Melissa Fay Greene

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