



Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman

Cathy Wilkerson

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Flying Close to the Sun is the stunning memoir of a white middle-class girl from Connecticut who became a member of the Weather Underground, one of the most notorious groups of the 1960s. Cathy Wilkerson, who famously escaped the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion, here wrestles with the legacy of the movement, at times finding contradictions that many others have avoided: the absence of women's voices then, and in the retelling; the incompetence and the egos; the hundreds of bombs detonated in protest which caused little loss of life but which were also ineffective in fomenting revolution. In searching for new paradigms for change, Wilkerson asserts with brave humanity and confessional honesty an assessment of her past--of those heady, iconic times--and somehow finds hope and faith in a world that at times seems to offer neither.

Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman Details

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From Reader Review Flying Close to the Sun: My Life and Times as a Weatherman for online ebook

Ernesto Aguilar says

The Weathermen were an offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society, one of the 1960s' most active anti-war groups. But the Weathermen differed with their radical counterparts in calling for revolution against the United States immediately -- first, because political conditions, they felt, were right, and second, to draw police attention off the Black Panther Party and African-American organizers. The Weathermen waged a largely successful guerrilla campaign in the United States,

Author Wilkerson was intimately involved in the Weathermen. She eventually served prison time for crimes committed during that period, after coming out of hiding in 1980 and turning herself in. Wilkerson's life, activism and the tumultuous period in which the Weathermen operated are the subjects of this book.

Wilkerson writes about her personal growth, political contradictions and struggle to find a place in a revolutionary movement that was largely male dominated and filled with its own contradictions. Inside herself, Wilkerson fights feelings of guilt over her well-off status, and questions the rhetoric of the Weathermen in comparison to the practices she sees in the organization. Many of its members, though intelligent and psychologically strong, were involved in activities most people would never experience, and all often faced varied political, moral and ethical questions, which Wilkerson discusses candidly. This text contains her firsthand account of the 1970 Greenwich Village explosion that catapulted the Weathermen into the national spotlight. In addition, this is one of the few books on the Weathermen in which the author so forwardly addresses the status of men in power and the position of women in the group. At times, Wilkerson's recollections are less than flattering, Yet, it is these stories, and the other tales told as part of a one-of-a-kind life journey, that make this text worth reading.

Christine says

Admittedly, I skimmed over large segments of this book that languished in political analysis of which I'm already familiar. What I was looking for here were the more narrative and psychological bits. What is the process by which an upper middle-class, college educated, ethical person committed to social justice clicks over into the realm of violence? The answer to that - if there is one - is elusive, but seems to be a reaction to years and years of sustained effort and unsatisfied rage, in an atmosphere where political activists were murdered with more and more ferocity by the powers that be.

What were meetings and personal dynamics like in the Weatherman/Weather Underground organization? What does it feel like to be forced to go underground, to be closely tied with the comrades who died in the townhouse - in your parents' townhouse! - and to come to terms over the course of many lost years with the regret? The answers are too long, too painful, and nuanced to repeat here, but Cathy Wilkerson does a good job portraying herself as a young, passionate, sometimes confused and ultimately misguided fighter.

Caty says

At first I felt this was impossibly didactic and impersonal, in contrast to Bill Ayer's memoir. There was no room to identify. But by the time I finished I realized that only such a complex political analysis could do justice to the hope and revolutionary energy squandered in the fuckup the Weathermen became.

Alex says

This is probably the most important book on the Weathermen written by one of its participants, tackling the many difficult inner complexities and questions that haunted the explosive project while remaining deeply committed to progressive social change and anti-racist organizing. In the end, this book taught me quite directly how and why the WUO went astray, and how a lack of open and participatory democracy can distort even the brightest of movements.

Wilkerson starts off slow by talking a lot of her middle-class childhood, and first stumblings into activism at Swarthmore College, supporting poor blacks organizing in Chester through the ERAP project there, and winding up in SDS as the Vietnam War heats up. A few years later, Wilkerson wanders even more clumsily into becoming the editor of SDS' weekly paper New Left Notes, just in time for SDS' grappling with the emergence of women's liberation. She then spins off into the orbit of Weatherman, again accidentally stumbling into joining their cadre in Chicago just before the Days of Rage "Bring the War Home" through street fighting with police.

Here the book becomes deeply enthralling, full of enigma as Wilkerson delves deeper into the unique and strange cult-like Leninism of Weather, all the while questioning why the rhetoric and macho posturing of imminent revolution and armed struggle doesn't match her inner voice. In this inner conflict, the desire to belong and to sacrifice everything as a privileged white person for the national liberation movements of Third World peoples and blacks within the US, leads Wilkerson to silence that inner questioning voice and to commit passively to do whatever the Weather leadership (who appear to know what they're doing) tell her. Despite the apparent flaws of Weather politics, Wilkerson lets her attraction to certain male leaders and the appeal of being part of a revolutionary vanguard convince her to fatefully arrange for her estranged father's townhouse to become the setting for a Weather collective to haphazardly build bombs which were to be used to blow up a military Officer's ball, and the rest is history.

Wilkerson, an accidental survivor of the ensuing blast, writes with a determination and a wise clarity about those events that defined an era of resistance to US imperialism, and the errors taken by impatient movement leaders which contributed to the general defeat of the left over the next several decades. Now, at a time when the US is again openly asserting its imperial aims, a nuanced and complex understanding of where the old SDS went wrong is desperately needed, and Wilkerson here makes a major contribution to our understanding by asking tough questions, like

How do we build a revolutionary movement in the heart of Empire that is democratic and liberatory, while moving with sufficient urgency to stop the assault on the globe?

What is the role of privileged whites (and students) in supporting the liberation of blacks, Latinos and other oppressed nationalities when those groups demand self-sufficiency and separation from white involvement?

How can movement organizations sustain necessary militancy and collective structure (especially in the face of state repression), while also remaining supportive and nurturing of individual voices, particularly those of women, queer folks, trans folks, youth, people of color, working class folks, and others who have been

silenced by dominant society?

What does revolution even mean in the post-industrial US?

Sarah says

One of the better memoirs I've read. Wilkerson avoids the typical self-pitying found in most memoirs and tells her story directly and honestly. She readily admits that the Weathermen (and SDS) were deeply flawed organizations, though they had decent intentions and were pretty astute in their analyses of race and world affairs. She also willingly admits her own mistakes and is able to provide convincing explanations for her past actions, even though she wouldn't necessarily have repeated them, particularly the events revolving around the explosion at her dad's townhouse.

It was also great how Wilkerson interprets much of what happened through a gender lens, allowing that SDS and the Weatherman were often sexist.

Finally, Wilkerson scatters her analysis of current affairs throughout the book and more extensively in the last chapter, tying the politics of Vietnam to those of the Iraq War quite nicely. This book was great. Only four stars, though, for the first few chapters on her childhood, which kind of dragged...

Bart says

Flying Close to the Sun is an honest reflective and analytical account of Cathy Wilkerson's transformation from a shy younger person to a radical activist in SDS, Weatherman, and Weather Underground. Most interesting were Wilkerson's analysis on gender and activism and how radical organizations took on authoritarian characteristics of the systems - silencing and coercion of opponents, hierarchy, etc. - the organizations were trying to destroy. Wilkerson's prose is smart and engaging.

eliza says

Make no mistake, this book is worth reading, but it is not as compelling as I hoped. Wilkerson gives a very slow but thorough retelling of both her journey from a shy, middle-class New Englander to underground radical, and the transformation of SDS to WUO.

In fact she doesn't start getting into the notorious Weatherman stories until 300 pages deep; in the meantime a dizzying number of other organizations and leaders are name-dropped, but it's very interesting to see how they overlapped in productive and obstructive ways.

For all the time she spent distancing herself from and apologizing for the terrorist actions of the WUO, I thought she really wasn't the member most qualified to write a memoir (eg: she hid under a van during the Days of Rage demonstration), but in the end she does deliver. The details of the famed townhouse explosion are especially intriguing.

But most interesting about this book -- and the WUO ideology in general -- is how it addressed many faces

of the 60's revolution at once: anti-war, civil rights, and feminism. She and her contemporaries (for the most part) realized it was the same system and the same perception of reality that oppressed the Vietnamese as African-Americans and women all over the world. Her accounts of their struggles reminded me how much things have changed in the last 50 years and how much more change is possible.

Andy Miller says

This is a memoir of a woman deeply involved with the Students for a Democratic Society(SDS) and then the Weathermen in the sixties and early seventies. She traces her family life, how she became involved in progressive politics, the civil rights and anti-war movements turning finally to the SDS(which was originally a progressive,democratic(small d) organization) and then to the weathermen where she became involved in violent acts and finally the accidental explosion of her father's townhouse while friends were making explosives. The book then outlines her years on the run and her eventual turning herself in.

This memoir is best when she discusses her evolving views and involvement in violent politics. She explains how her idealistic vision turned to anger and how the anger combined with an abandonment of democratic ideals--when she and her allies felt that they knew better than anyone and did not need to listen to anyone else-- fed itself into doing things that she now considers destructive to herself and harmful to others.

The book is not an apology, Wilkerson still maintains many of her beliefs, some current beliefs such as her happiness that the United States were, in her words, defeated in Vietnam will make many of us cringe. But on the other hand, Wilkerson does not let herself off easily, she makes fun of herself and is critical of the path that led her and others to violence.

One interesting narrative was the relationship between early feminism and the radicalism of the SDS movement and the tension/alliance between the student radicals and Black Militant groups.

There were parts of her story that I would have liked to see her explore more, especially her relationship with her family during and after the bombing. I was particularly intrigued with her Quaker sister whose commitment to pacifism was just as radical as Wilkerson's views in the 60s but took a dramatically different turn(the sister's protests were just as pacifist as her beliefs) It would have been interesting to learn more of her sister's opinions at the times as well as their eventual reconciliation. I understand that Wikerson may not have wanted to open old wounds and invade the privacy of her family(her parents are never really named in the book) but I felt like I missed an important part of her life.

This was also an excellent book on the times of the sixties, I'd recommend it to anyone interested in a thoughtful view of the ideals and excesses of those times

Corinne says

Wilkerson does an excellent job of giving context for a story of which most Americans remember only the climax. She begins at the beginning, with the civil rights movement and her involvement with Alinsky-style community organizing. The book follows her participation in SDS and eventually the WUO. What is most striking is Wilkerson's present political analysis and dedication to the beliefs she first held as a young activist.

Orion says

Flying too close to the sun

Cathy Wilkerson gives a thoughtful memoir of her life in SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and the Weather Underground. She also provides enough personal background to explain how she became involved in US radical politics in the 1960s. Her final chapter Reentry gives a brief summary of her life afterwards.

Wilkerson is famous for being one of the two people to survive the 1970 explosion of the Greenwich Village townhouse where a bomb was being assembled. This incident is described in chapter 10 of the book.

She is careful not to discuss the motivations or actions of others in the movement which, while understandable, gives a certain limitation to her story. Yet as the reflections of an American radical this is an excellent book, providing insight into her personality, the movement, and the events of the time. What stands out clearest in this writing is the support that Wilkerson and the Weather Underground wanted to show for the Black Panthers in the fight against Racism in the United States. The hardest part for readers to understand today may be the Maoist/Leninist revolutionary tactics that were the signature belief of this faction of the radical left.

In the opening pages of the book Wilkerson quotes Carl Sandburg:

"You can't hinder the wind from blowing.
Time is a great teacher.
Who can live without hope?"

Rich says

I was among those who came of age in the 60s, though I was not quite old enough to full comprehend everything that was happening among groups such as the SDS as its offshoot, Weatherman. I was actually alerted to this book through a mention in John Strausbaugh's history of Greenwich Village, called (aptly) *The Village*.

Cathy Wilkerson doesn't quite capture the electricity of the times she portrays, but she has given us a serviceable memoir and an important one too, coming as it does from someone who was part of the movement for many years. Those who know their 60s history will recall Wilkerson as the person who, in the company of several others, used her father's four-story Greenwich Village townhouse as a staging ground for making explosives; the subsequent accidental explosion demolished the entire townhouse and is now part and parcel of the Weather Underground's lore.

Flying Close to the Sun reads more as chronicle than history. It could have been shorter by a lot; up until the chapter on the Weathermen late in the book, it slogs along with action after action, city after city, campus after campus, all eventually melding into a tedious blur. There is much repetition of Wilkerson's reflections: over and over again we hear how she and her colleagues were too naïve to understand the bigger picture, or how she didn't see how violence would rally people to the cause yet accepted the leadership to know what

they were doing. I wish there had been less telling and more showing. What did the Weatherman's offices and houses look like, smell like, feel like? Granted that this memoir focuses more on ideology, philosophy, and the organization-as-organization. Still, the book is long on chronicle but short on descriptive prose. The author's affect, in sharp contrast to the adrenaline electricity of the time, is often remarkably flat. Perhaps, given her own numbness depicted towards the end of her time in Weatherman, that is not surprising.

On the plus side, I came away with insights into the SDS, Weatherman, and Wilkerson herself. Raised to believe that a woman should fit certain societal roles, she rebelled against that upbringing and ended up advocating for women's causes. Delving into philosophers of violence shaped the grid through which she saw violent revolution as the only force capable of creating systemic change of an oppressive, colonial system. (I found myself wanting to read the authors that were formative for her, such as Franz Fanon.) The ultimate lack of coherent thinking that characterized the organization is made clear, along with such troubling aspects as double standards of living between leaders and others, and the "need-to-know" principle which kept many in the dark in terms of strategy and larger vision — and blind to whether there was in fact any coherent larger vision at all.

There are other memoirs from some of the key players, such as Mark Rudd's *Underground*. I have not read it and so cannot compare it with *Flying Close to the Sun*. As for Wilkerson's book, I would have liked to have given it three-and-a-half stars, but when whole numbers are the only option, it's not a four-star book for reasons I have given above. But it is an important one that deserves to be read by anyone who wants to understand more about the SDS and Weatherman. Certainly those who lived through that era will benefit (I think I now understand a high school classmate who told me I should visit Cuba before criticizing it); perhaps others will too.

Susan Richards says

This is a memoir of both one person's life, - her thoughts, actions, doubts, and evolution. It is also a history of an era, a movement, and a zeitgeist. I didn't give it more stars only because the detailed history of SDS could have been better edited. I bogged down in the minutiae. Once I got to the Weatherman part it flowed more easily and became compelling. I did want to know about her relationship with her father and step-mother, after their townhouse and everything in it had been destroyed by the weatherman accidental explosion. She makes clear her continuing emotions and thoughts about her three friends who were killed in the disaster, but doesn't mention whether or not she reconciled with her father after she came out from underground and turned herself in. The story feels very pertinent to current history, in terms of better understanding extremist movements.

Ciara says

i was so psyched for this book, & it lived up to my expectations in terms of the story, but it failed dismally when it came to the editing. cathy wilkerson was a member of SDS who was kind of begrudgingly recruited into the weather underground in early 1970. it was her father's new york townhouse that was blown sky-high in a tragic accident as her cell built bombs in the basement. she survived (obvs) & disappeared into the underground, where she lived for years, even after she left weather behind. she decided to have a child & became a fugitive single mother, moving around the country & struggling to support her young daughter

with assorted service jobs. eventually she surfaced & now works as a math teacher, trying to empower young people (especially young women) to learn math. she got interested in math after the failed bombing. she writes that the explosion made her realize how important it is for people to understand math & science. as interesting as the book was though, i wanted to take a red pen to the whole thing. it switches tense a lot. i got the sense that wilkerson is still really traumatized by some of the hell she went through underground in the 70s. she uses a completely different voice when writing about those times. the weird tone issues, & the psychobabble feel to the story, made it kind of hard to pay attention sometimes. it took me a lot longer to finish this book than it should have, because i kept getting distracted by weird editing issues. but...it was a gazillion times better than bill ayers's book. of all the weather biographies i have read (& i've read them all), i think this was my favorite.

Andrea says

I just started this memoir by a member of the Weather Underground. What's particularly inspiring about it, so far, is the measured way Wilkerson reflects on her past self, her coming-of-age as a politicized person, and her actions. This isn't some big expose of the radical movement but a critical look at what worked and what didn't from someone who still works for social justice.

Just A. Bean says

Reading this back to back with Assata, one couldn't help but notice that this was longer than it needed to be, but on the other hand, I'm young enough to have appreciated the context Wilkerson provided. I also appreciated the constant call backs in how she talked about her thinking at the time, and what allowed her and blocked her from seeing the flaws in it. It gave a really good read on what it felt like to be in a cult, and how Wilkerson emotionally progressed to the point where she needed to be in one. Also why she left and how that felt.
