



Living My Life, Vol. 1

Emma Goldman

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“You damn bitch of an anarchist, I wish I could get at you. I would tear your heart out and feed it to my dog.” This was one of the less obscene messages received by Emma Goldman (1869-1940), while in jail on suspicion of complicity in the assassination of McKinley. The most notorious woman of her day, she was bitterly hated by millions and equally revered by millions.

The strong feelings she aroused are understandable. She was an alien, a practicing anarchist, a labor agitator, a pacifist in World War 1, an advocate of political violence, a feminist, a proponent of free love and birth control, a communist, a street-fighter for justice — all of which she did with strong intellect and boundless passion. Today, of course, many of the issues that she fought over are just as vital as they were then.

Emma Goldman came from Russia at the age of 17. After an encounter with the sweatshop and an unfortunate marriage, she plunged into the bewildering intellectual and activist chaos that attended American social evolution around the turn of the twentieth century. She knew practically everyone of importance in radical circles. She dominated many areas of the radical movement, lecturing, writing, haranguing, and publishing to awaken the world to her ideas. After World War I she was deported to Russia, where she soon discovered that anarchists were no better liked than in America, despite Lenin’s first gesture of welcome. She escaped with her life but never was allowed to return to the United States.

Emma Goldman was a devastatingly honest woman, who spared herself as little as she spared anyone else. From her account the reader can gain insight into a curious personality type of recurrent interest: a woman who devoted her life to eliminating suffering, yet could make a bomb or assist in staging an assassination. Equally interesting are her comments on other radicals of the period, such as Kropotkin, Berkman, Mooney, Lenin, Trotsky, Haywood, Most, the Haymarket martyrs, and many others. Her autobiography, written with vigor, ranks among the finest in the English language.

Living My Life, Vol. 1 Details

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From Reader Review Living My Life, Vol. 1 for online ebook

Kathleen says

“For the Cause, I was told, one must be able to do everything, and I so eagerly wanted to serve the Cause.”

Whatever your ideals, the story of Emma Goldman’s life is inspiring. It makes you want to grab hold of your own life and fight for what you believe.

This is an immensely readable book. It’s full of history, adventure, unusual personalities, romances and life and death suspense. The writing is excellent. One of the things I most admired was the matter-of-fact tone she used, whether she was relaying her accomplishments or her mistakes.

The story begins with her arrival in the United States in 1889, shortly after the Haymarket riots in Chicago. That event made a huge impact on her, and she walks us through the development of her philosophy and activism.

She often writes of working “for my ideal.” It struck me that hers was a positive rather than negative stance. We often fight *against* things, but how often do we fight *for* something, let alone for our *ideal*? What might we accomplish if we did?

This volume ends with an attack by vigilantes in San Diego, her lover abducted and tortured, and death threats when she continues on to Seattle. I’m on the edge of my seat as I look forward to Volume 2!

Spicy T AKA Mr. Tea says

What an amazing life! And I'm only have way through! This is an incredible read. What strikes me is that in my encounters with people talking about Emma Goldman--people who haven't read her actual work or those that simply repeat what they have heard from others--is how she is usually cornered into one essential archetype; what I love about reading these volumes is running into the contradictions and the consistencies in her own work and life and how not even Emma Goldman was a perfect human. Otherwise, it's an incredible history and has given me some incredible insight. Anyone who tells you Emma hated Rochester, NY hasn't read this autobiography. I highly recommend this work!

Kimberly says

one of the books that changed my life. although i don't agree with everything emma did or said, she was so inspirational and strong. and definitely lived HER life. which not a lot of us can say about ourselves.

Megan says

Goldman's style is simple but compelling; I went out in search of the second volume immediately after

finishing the first.

It's fascinating to see the labor disputes and political issues of the late 19th century/early 20th from her perspective, and if you want a real taste of the many ways in which the US has used incredible physical force to punish those with 'unconventional' ideas, it would be hard to find as interesting a collection as Goldman amassed throughout her life.

The part I'd recommend for almost anyone is the enormous "chapter" (well over 100 pages in length) in the second volume on her time in Russia, not long after the revolution, under Lenin's rule. It's fascinating on a number of levels: first, just for being a first-hand account of the beginnings of the Soviet Union; second, to see the personal process of someone coming to terms with the failure of their own knowledge, and of possible inconsistencies in their political ideologies (especially in terms of the concepts of 'revolution' and international 'solidarity'), as Goldman turns from a staunch supporter of the Bolsheviks to an ardent critic; third, as an exploration of the idea of 'revolution' and what it is meant to achieve; fourth, as a chronicle of the psychology of resistance and submission under dictatorship; and last, as a critical view of the role of concentrated state power under socialism.

Beyond that, it's just engaging autobiographical writing.

Miquixote says

When reading this, it is often suggested to make sure to read it as the life of a speaker and activist, not as a philosophical or theoretical masterpiece.

I however believe Goldman's theoretical contributions are also invaluable. It is important to realize that the exposition of Goldman's theories in this book are developmental, as it is an autobiography. The book clearly and in a detailed way show how Goldman progresses from more infantile ideals to more complex. In fact, by the end of the book I see her theories as infinitely superior to Lenin's (that supposed genius). We won't even go into the chasms between the two in practice or compassion.

The most popular theoretical credits that Goldman gets are for significantly influencing activism on issues of sexual liberty, reproductive rights, and freedom of expression. For this she is often loved by the women's movement, and was reincarnated in the 1970s.

But this book will show that she was influential with much more than that (although the aforementioned influence would be more than enough to justify the reading of this historically invaluable autobiography). Her influences are manifold: not only on sexual liberty, reproductive rights, marriage, free love, homosexuality rights, and freedom of expression. But also on prisons, atheism, militarism, and of course capitalism in general. Of interest is that she was finally kicked out of the US during a hysterical jingoist period of militarism (just after World War 1). (Wait a second...has that hysterical jingoism stopped yet?) She was sent to Russia for being a mass agitator concerning any of the above mentioned issues, but it could very well have been her anti-militarist stance that gave the most impetus to getting her booted.

Neither to be underestimated is her influence on the value of aesthetics. Anarchism and the arts are inextricably linked with no minor input from Goldman. It is no coincidence that her most famous quotes are the following:

"If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution."

Her inalienable belief in "the right to self-expression, the right to beautiful, radiant things" is above and beyond the typical revolutionist. I for one think this smashes austere denials of life and joy that are so common in revolutionary movements (not to mention religions).

All in all, this work is most obviously inspirational, fascinating and honest. Although other adjectives that are often used by a quick look through other reviewers are: incisive, reflective, passionate, engaging, amazing, uncompromising, important, informative, funny, incredible, riveting, and beautiful.

The one important thing missing here is an emphasis on race, which as some have already pointed out is something odd. But even more odd is how people like to assume that if her emphasis was not on race that we should consider her irrelevant. As integral as race is to leftist theory and practice, there are plenty of other issues that can also be focussed on to positively contribute to liberatory ideals.

Some minor quibbles:

There is a fair amount of name-dropping, and it is easy to get a bit lost about the sheer quantity of people in her life.

The book has no ending, and I would really like to know about her contributions to the Spanish Civil War...For that I am told that one must read Richard Drinnon's and Alice Wexler's biographies of Emma.

I suppose it could be also possible for the lyrical or literary types to be critical of lyrical qualities and literary conventions, or propensity for emotional outbursts. But I guarantee Emma didn't live an emotionally vacuous life like most of us, so I will excuse her.

Another criticism is that the book (2 volumes) is too long (at 1,000 pages). It has been said that the abridged version is too jarring though, and I do think Emma's life is quite worth the extra effort. It is the kind of book that everybody could read to learn from. A book devoted to solving some of the hardest complications of a life being lived to the utmost. The kind of complications that one can have between theory and practice, ideal and reality.

Was Emma too utopian, messianic, too idealistic? Oh, that is one of the main reasons for reading this, to find that out. So I won't spoil it...

Michael says

This book is Part One of a memoir of the "notorious" (or famous) Emma Goldman, a Russian-Jewish anarchist active in New York City and other parts of the US in the late 19th and early 20th century. Goldman masterfully brings the period and her political activities to life, drawing even a critical reader in to the fascinating world of immigrant activism and agitation. Goldman made extensive use of letters and newspaper

clippings, as well as other primary sources, to refresh her memory of dates and specifics, which raises this above the level of most memoirs in terms of its value to the historian. Of course, it is told from the perspective of a participant with the benefit of hindsight, and thus is not strictly "objective," but this is arguably true of any source written after the fact.

This volume follows Goldman from her political awakening at the age of seventeen in 1886 through about 1911, when she was engaged in a speaking tour across the United States and hounded by violent patriotic "Vigilantes." 1886, of course, was the year of the Haymarket Affair in Chicago, when several anarchist and labor speakers were accused of throwing a bomb at police who were breaking up a meeting in favor of the 40-hour work week. With virtually no evidence against them, eight anarchists were tried for murder, and four executed. This galvanized the radical community and became a symbol of the uneven struggle between Labor and its oppressors. Goldman describes her own anguish at hearing the news, and her drive to become involved in fighting the crimes of the State. In the process she met Johann Most, a disfigured German anarchist who advocated fighting back in the most uncompromising manner, Alexander Berkman, who would shoot the millionaire Frick in 1892 and spend much of his life in prison, and Ben Reitman, the "hobo doctor" who was the love of Goldman's life.

Goldman traces her coming into being as a political leader alongside her awakening sexuality and realization of sexism in the radical milieu of her day. This book is likely the source of Goldman's apocryphal quote: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution!" as she describes her clashes with overly-serious-minded radicals over her choices of recreation. Considering the time at which she wrote, Goldman was quite frank about her lovers and her commitment to free love (although by later standards she might appear rather discreet). Her insights into progressive, socialist, and labor politics are sharp and incisive, often foreshadowing failings that would haunt the Left to this day, and her descriptions of important historical figures she knew are colorful and fascinating. This book is recommended for anyone with an interest in the developing politics of America or a love of history.

Liz says

this is so good. I was always a bit "eh" on Emma Goldman because I read her essays and didn't find them earth-shattering. Plus I don't always agree with her political analysis -- her race-blind attitude was particularly unfortunate. You could say it was par for the times, but she was so far ahead on so much else that I expected more -- and anyway that's rubbish, lots of people critiqued her race politics at the time. That said, it turns out that Goldman's strength was not as a theorist but as an activist and generally fascinating human being. Her autobiography is an incredibly interesting depiction of radical politics in the USA and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Goldman knew a lot of interesting people, and it's very strange and humanising to read about her trying and failing to make friends with one famous anarchist, or having a bitter breakup with another. Plus she avoids the common tendency of autobiography to obscure the actual process of development. Everything is told in the present tense, with virtually no indication of what's later to come. She'll talk about this great guy she met, or what she thinks about an issue, and you'll be like "Emma! He's kind of a fuckwit!" or "no! that's silly!" and you have to read the next fifty pages to know if she ends up thinking that too. Totally engaging and heartwrenching.

Torkel says

Great autobiography by an extraordinary woman. Not only a gripping read but also works as a great history book of early workers rights activism in the united states. Interesting how freedom of speech was so suppressed during this period (end of 1800 and the beginning of 1900). Is also gives a picture of early 20th century international political history. Will definitely read Vol 2.

Julian says

I can't believe it took me so long to read this given that I love autobiographies and this one is regarded as such a classic. Maybe the length of Emma's work made me apprehensive. Anyways, reading about her life was pretty incredible and insightful, and fulfilled my desire to read about anarchist history in a way that wasn't boring. I was particularly engrossed by how much detail she provides on her relationships, but this seamlessly weaves in and out of her anarchism. And she lived with two lovers at once! Even our contemporary ga-ga for open-relationships scene would raise an eyebrow at something like this. I could talk about the rest of this book for a long time, so I'll just leave it there.

Carmilla Voiez says

An awe inspiring read. The witty and conversational style of Emma Goldman's autobiography cannot mask what an intelligent and amazing woman she was. Ahead of her time, in fact probably ahead of our time, she was a pioneer in politics and the women's movement. With commentary on the historically important events of her time this book is both enchanting and educational with more than a slight bias away from the more traditional and institutionally approved texts. I look forward to getting my hands on volume 2.

Sarah says

EG is a total badass. Love her. Few people are as true to their convictions as she. A free spirit, an idealist, an intellectual, and a fighter, EG is a pretty good writer to boot. In her autobiography she not only chronicles the details of her polemic public life, but also intimately bares her internal struggles with the tensions and contradictions between her intellectual principles and her heartfelt emotions. It is sometimes hard to believe that this is not the stuff of fiction.

Sophia Hernandez says

My father gave me this autobiography when I was 13. For better or worse it has shaped my entire life This is one of the most beautiful revolutionary perspectives from the Industrial Age. What Emma Gloldman and Alexander Berkman were propelled to do in the name of social change is the stuff of fairy tales.

Florence says

Volume 1: Emma's turbulent life (1869-1940) is spell binding. Her admirable determination and strong fighting spirit enabled her to travel about and lecture during the 20th century as an anarchist and feminist. She spent time in prison for her efforts and her strong beliefs.

She tells her life story here, how she lectured wherever she could, when she could, in many parts of the world. She dealt with a maize of stumbling blocks. Her fight for free speech was continual. Often her efforts were based on goals such as raising funds to help victims of oppression. Her humanity is shown through the introduction of stories about her family, friends and associates who were a big part of her life.

I am moving on to Vol.2.

Jaindoh says

Enjoyed this more than I thought I would ! Originally started reading it as an academic exercise and to find out some background behind historical events at the time, but Goldman is an engaging writer . Never realised she was so vociferous about birth control and non-monogamy . Will continue to Volume 2 when I get my hands on it !

HeavyReader says

This is a dense autobiography which somehow manages to be both interesting and nap inducing. Maybe it's the 19th century writing style that put me to sleep. Maybe i was overwhelmed by the large number of pages in this book (and this is only volume 1!). In any case, through sheer force of will, I read the whole thing.

Daniel says

This is a long and involved read; it is also an excellent one. Emma Goldman had a singular personality, and the list of her accomplishments is incredible. There is a lot to digest in this book, including the lot of immigrants in late-19th century America; the history of the anarchist movement; and the difficulties that a strong-minded woman met growing up at this time.

I really enjoyed this, and I look forward to reading the second volume next year.

Artnoose McMoose says

When my friends and I go around in a circle and say how they got into anarchism, I say through this book. I read it when I first moved away to the big city, and it was the perfect book to read at that time. Changed my life, although would you believe I never did get around to reading volume 2?

*** More recent review: I reread this for the monthly anarchist reading group here in Pittsburgh, and it was my first time reading it in 15 years. I had marveled at Emma's remarkable life when I was in my very early 20s, how varied a life could be. Reading it now was a totally different experience now that I have had a lot more experience. I'm still amazed at the variety of things she did, and the amount of lovers she had. I'm comforted in the fact that she also had longstanding enemies and lived to tell the tale. I mean heck--- she

effin' *horsewhipped* Johann Most because of a disagreement, and he never spoke to her again!

I'm not saying I'm as awesome as Emma Goldman, but reading this book a second time gave me the perspective of looking at a life as a narrative. Even really bad breakups don't even take up a whole chapter. Maybe later it'll all make a great story, and that's what I try to keep in mind when everything seems terrible.

Álvaro says

La edición de Capitán Swing es bastante descuidada, si le sirve a alguien de advertencia.

Natalie says

I very, very rarely get seriously into a biography/autobiography. I've almost always just found them boring. This one is a glaring exception to that rule.

Goldman's writing is engaging and interesting. Plus, her story is just so dang FASCINATING. This woman was involved in some serious stuff; it is amazing to read about all the radicals she worked with, how they lived their lives, how they related to one another. I am enthralled by her descriptions of what it was like to speak to a roaring crowd of thousands - it makes me really, really miss the speech competitions I used to be involved in. But her life was also so much more than that of a radical activist - this woman loved, suffered heartbreak, faced physical torment, experienced familial strife, had to move around like crazy - there is so, so much to relate to.

I love reading her introspection regarding The Cause - can a true believer have outside interests? Should personal relationships and desires take a backseat to The Work? How do you work with people who are fighting for the same short-term goal, but with whom you have grave disagreements over the final project? What kinds of actions are appropriate for bringing about sweeping change? I have talked about some of these very issues for hours upon hours with my friends - it is reassuring and **cozy** to know that they were working through the same issues over 100 years ago.

I do wish she gave a bit more theory about her beliefs, instead of just running through the historical occurrences, throwing out names and places and events and ideas like the reader is totally familiar with them. (What on earth is a single-taxer? Off to Wikipedia!) I am not well-versed in anarchism as a philosophy, and this book doesn't do much of the leg-work for educating one about it.

All in all, very pleased. I expected this to be a good "bed-time" book - something to read when I'm going to sleep cuz it'll make me feel all drowsy. Who knew autobiography could be a page-turner?

On to volume 2!

Maud says

THIS BOOK WAS SO INTENSE!!

EG is truly an inspiration, as well as a good writer. It's a long book and full of every detail but she keeps yr

interest with her bold, clear narrative voice - i assume the same compelling voice that swayed many of her contemporaries at her lectures. i found myself reading my life and my friends' lives into her own tale and having to step back from that self-importance and odd delusion - it was really just that vivid.

EG is still a somewhat divisive character (and, surprisingly to me, not so well known to everyone) but you can't doubt the strength or beauty of her ideals. Autobiographies can sometimes feel a bit fake and untrustworthy but there even seemed to be a fairness in her ability to criticize herself.

I'm going to take a break before moving on to Volume 2 of her autobiography, just because it's so dense, but i relish in having read this first volume. I hope i can take some of her bravery, determination and compassion with me moving forward.

Highly, highly recommended - it is especially important to read the words of people we so often only learn of secondhand.
