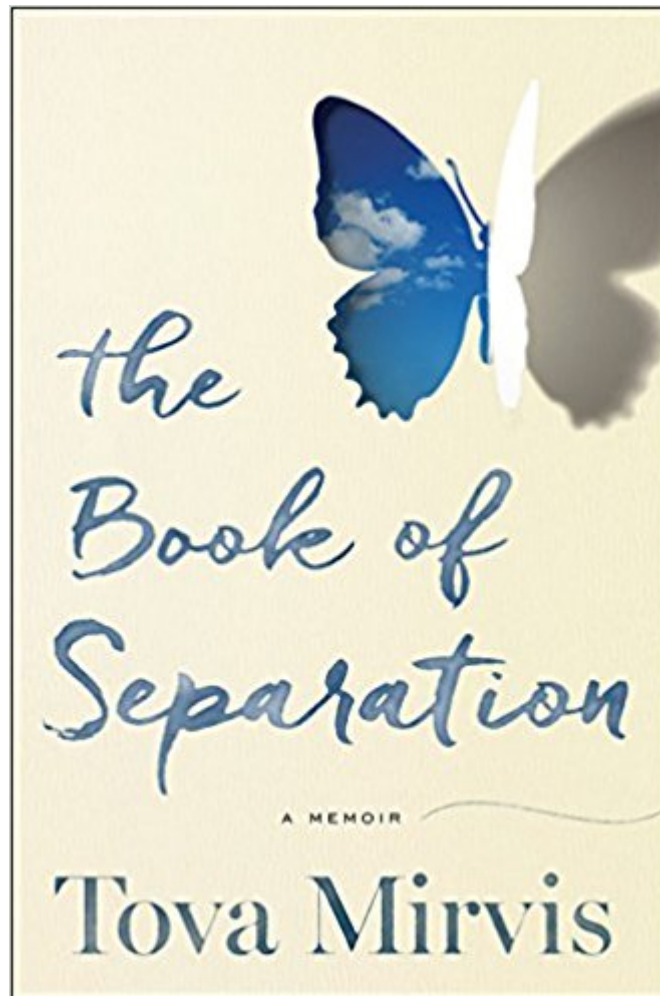




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The Book Of Separation



Synopsis

The memoir of a woman who leaves her faith and her marriage and sets out to navigate the terrifying, liberating terrain of a newly mapless world Born and raised in a tight-knit Orthodox Jewish family, Tova Mirvis committed herself to observing the rules and rituals prescribed by this way of life. After all, to observe was to be accepted and to be accepted was to be loved. She married a man from within the fold and quickly began a family. But over the years, her doubts became noisier than her faith, and at age forty she could no longer breathe in what had become a suffocating existence. Even though it would mean the loss of her friends, her community, and possibly even her family, Tova decides to leave her husband and her faith. After years of trying to silence the voice inside her that said she did not agree, did not fit in, did not believe, she strikes out on her own to discover what she does believe and who she really is. This will mean forging a new way of life not just for herself, but for her children, who are struggling with what the divorce and her new status as “not Orthodox” mean for them. This is a memoir about what it means to decide to heed your inner compass at long last. To free the part of yourself that has been suppressed, even if it means walking away from the only life you’ve ever known. Honest and courageous, Tova takes us through her first year outside her marriage and community as she learns to silence her fears and seek adventure on her own path to happiness.

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Customer Reviews

"Tova Mirvis has already established herself as a first-rate novelist with *The Ladies Auxiliary*, *The Outside World*, and *Visible City*. With *The Book of Separation: A Memoir*, Mirvis shifts genres,

reveals some of the autobiographical germs of her fiction, and compellingly chronicles the process of separating from Orthodoxy...The respect for intra-Jewish difference that Mirvis models for her children and for readers is a precious gift to the Jewish literary world...Beautiful and poignant." *Lilith Magazine* "The author's sensitive thematic treatment of belonging and individuality and her candor about the terror she experienced leaving the only community she had ever known makes for moving, inspiring reading. A thoughtful, courageous memoir of family, religion, and self-discovery." *Kirkus Reviews* "Mirvis intimately chronicles her divorce and her separation from modern Orthodox Judaism in this bold memoir...Hers is a story of grief and rebirth. She is compassionate and judicious in her portrayal of Orthodox Judaism, even as she describes its repressive attitudes toward women; she discusses the diverse Jewish lifestyles, from Hasidic to secular. Her personal journey makes for an introspective and fascinating story." *Publishers Weekly* "As [Mirvis] begins her memoir, she documents what it feels like to leave her husband and religion...The author has shared custody of three school-age children and a budding romance, both of which she negotiates with gentle aplomb. Her interior narrative voice draws readers in, asking if she can be loved for who she is, not who she was, especially in her withdrawal from her natal religion. VERDICT: A soothing picture of personal and religious divorce." *Library Journal* "Looking both backward and forward, Mirvis recounts with candor and close observation the social, psychological, and spiritual travail precipitated by leaving her narrow but well known world and entering a more secular, unfamiliar territory. Her tale revisits the seeds of doubt that first troubled her as a young, Orthodox woman as well as the upheaval she feared and resisted while those doubts matured into an irresistible urge to depart from all that was intimately familiar to her. Sharing the personal details and drama of her journey, Mirvis recounts the arduous path so many must take to emerge into their own, true identities." *Booklist* "Tova Mirvis offers a warmly told and searchingly explored story of her divorce from both her first husband and her Orthodox Jewish faith. The intimate view of what it means to live an orthodox life—the day to day reality of following its many guiding rules and principles—is fascinating to an outsider like me, and Tova's insights are both thought-provoking and generous. As she sorts through what pushed her away from the faith and traditions she grew up with, she also conveys what held her; her conflict over her separation becomes our own." *Jessica Shattuck*, New York Times bestselling author of *The Women in the Castle* "The Book of Separation is an elegant, beautiful, carefully drawn story of love, tradition, inner conflict, and loss. This extraordinary memoir resonated with me more than I can say." *Dani Shapiro*, bestselling author of *Devotion* and *Hourglass: Time, Memory,*

Marriage. "To say that reading *The Book of Separation* made me feel less alone in the world would be a vast understatement. Tova Mirvis perfectly, beautifully, unsettlingly captures the particular horror of existential and otherwise of dismantling a long marriage and starting one's life anew. This is a heartbreaking, breathtaking, life-altering book." —Joanna Rakoff, author of *My Salinger Year*

"In *The Book of Separation*, Tova Mirvis brings us into her heart-wrenching decision to leave her marriage and the world of Orthodox Judaism behind. Her exploration of faith and self are truly miraculous. This book is a wonder!" —Ann Hood, author of *The Book that Matters Most*

"With elegance, rare depth and unflinching honesty, Tova Mirvis offers up a chronicle of one woman's revolution against her own life. *The Book of Separation* is fiercely inspiring, and illuminates the too often dormant power within all of us to live in accordance with who we truly are." —Heidi Pitlor, author of *The Daylight Marriage*

"Tova Mirvis's memoir, beautifully written and fiercely honest, is a moving reflection on what it means to take responsibility for one's own life. In the course of the book Mirvis takes leave of her husband, her religious community, and her inherited notions of how her life ought to go. By staring so unflinchingly into her confusions and fears, a portrait of quiet courage slowly assembles itself, radiating insights and inspiration for all." —Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *Plato at the Googleplex*

TOVA MIRVIS is the author of three novels: *Visible City*, *The Outside World*, and *The Ladies Auxiliary*, a national bestseller. Her essays have appeared in various publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe Magazine*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Poets and Writers*, and her fiction has been broadcast on NPR. She lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

At first glance, I thought this memoir would resonate with me, as someone who had undergone a similar experience: Jewish mother of three young children who divorced at age 40 after a long and acrimonious marriage. Unfortunately, in the author's hands this story falls flat, devoid of emotional depth, and repetitive, with multiple renditions of the same anecdotes and reiterated explanations of Jewish holidays and customs (how many mikvah trips do we need to describe in excruciating detail?) In retrospect, Mirvis realizes that her Modern Orthodox upbringing was never quite a fit for who she was, despite her parents' best intentions. She marries too young, not an uncommon mistake, acknowledging the existence of substantial relationship problems even before the marriage...but goes ahead with it anyway. People grow older, self-reflect, and evolve; most of us

don't have the exact same friends and beliefs that we espoused when we were in college. Mirvis does not try to separate that typical maturation trajectory, which may have contributed to the end of her marriage, from the process that led her to abandon her childhood religious practices, most of which she makes sound somewhat foolish. (Why would turning on a light switch be forbidden?) It's easy for the reader to understand why she shed those onerous rituals, just as she discarded the uncomfortable hats and wig that accompanied them. Mirvis also doesn't seem to understand that the social treatment she received post-divorce was only thinly related to her rejection of religion. Young moms who get divorced, no matter what the circumstances, are going to be judged and criticized by many, whereas a young divorced dad is often deemed a fine addition to the social scene. During the last third of the book, scenes showing Mirvis with her new boyfriend are interspersed with scenes from her marriage, and the timeline becomes chaotic. Just as I started to wonder if this was a deliberate effort to camouflage the fact that she had gotten involved with the boyfriend while she was still married (not judging here) she insisted that it was not so: she knew the man but the relationship didn't begin until the marriage ended. Whatever. There's no point in writing a book like this unless you're going to be honest and upfront with your readers, and it was never clear to me why she and husband #1 were such a mismatch or how she immediately knew that husband #2 was a catch. In one illuminating section, she discusses being invited to participate in the Orthodoxy Forum, "a group of ...rabbis and Jewish communal leaders selected to discuss an issue of relevance to Modern Orthodoxy." She was asked to contribute her thoughts by responding to questions like "do I consider myself an Orthodox writer?" and "how did my Orthodoxy affect my work?" Months later, when she read her printed answers, she realized that she had downplayed the conflict between her personal and her religious beliefs. While I was reading this chapter, it occurred to me that the same desire to make nice was responsible for the muted tone of this memoir. She bypassed the opportunity to create a powerful account in favor of staying on her tiptoes to traverse the remaining relationship land mines. I get it, and I'm sure her concerns for her children were a major factor in her reticence, but it makes for a lethargic and tedious narrative.

There is no doubt that this is a memoir--the detail is extreme. It is also intense. One does not make a radical change in life style without it rocking the core of every aspect of personal being. To move from living as an Orthodox Jew to a more liberal stance is especially earthshaking. I could not read this book very quickly because it resonated with a personal life change of my own that had lots of ramifications. I so appreciate the author opening herself to showing the impact on herself and her family. I am sure it would have been easier for her to bury the trauma as quickly as possible, but we

would have missed the identification and learning. I pray that she has come to accept that her goodness was in no way usurped by the many ways that critics and expectations tried to thrust a bad vibe to a challenging journey.

Tova Mirvis bares her soul in "A Book of Separation," in which she recalls her Modern Orthodox upbringing in Memphis; her sixteen-year marriage to Aaron, with whom she had three children; and her decision at the age of forty to leave not only her husband, but also traditional Judaism. Tova, (a name that in Hebrew means "good"), is a novelist who married too young and too hastily, before she and Aaron really knew who they were and what they wanted. Although they stayed together for a long time and were grateful to have two beautiful sons and a daughter, Aaron and Tova gradually drifted apart and began quarreling. Tova had hinted now and then that she was no longer comfortable with the rituals that defined their existence, but Aaron was still shocked when she asked for a divorce. Mirvis's writing is exceptional. She creates poetic images and vivid metaphors, and in heartfelt passages, shares her feelings of pain, guilt, and loss. The author does not single out religion as the sole source of her discontent. In fact, she acknowledges that Orthodox Judaism is, for many individuals (including Tova's Chasidic brother), a beautiful and fulfilling way of life that helps bring harmony, peace, and joy to its adherents. Nor does she blame her husband for her woes. Instead, after much soul-searching, she realized that her insular community was slowly suffocating her. She was no longer content to go through the motions of pretending to be happy. "The Book of Separation" is a poignant and, in many ways, sad description of the dissolution of a long marriage, made all the more difficult because three children were involved. Tova and Aaron consulted lawyers and therapists before splitting up their property, settling on a joint custody agreement, and making the transition from a couple to single parents. This memoir is a rich tapestry that flashes back to Tova's childhood, education, early years with Aaron, and her excitement and pleasure at becoming a mother and a novelist. Finally, she finds the courage to express her misgivings to her husband, parents, and friends. Eventually, she forges a new path, and takes her first tentative steps into uncharted territory.

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