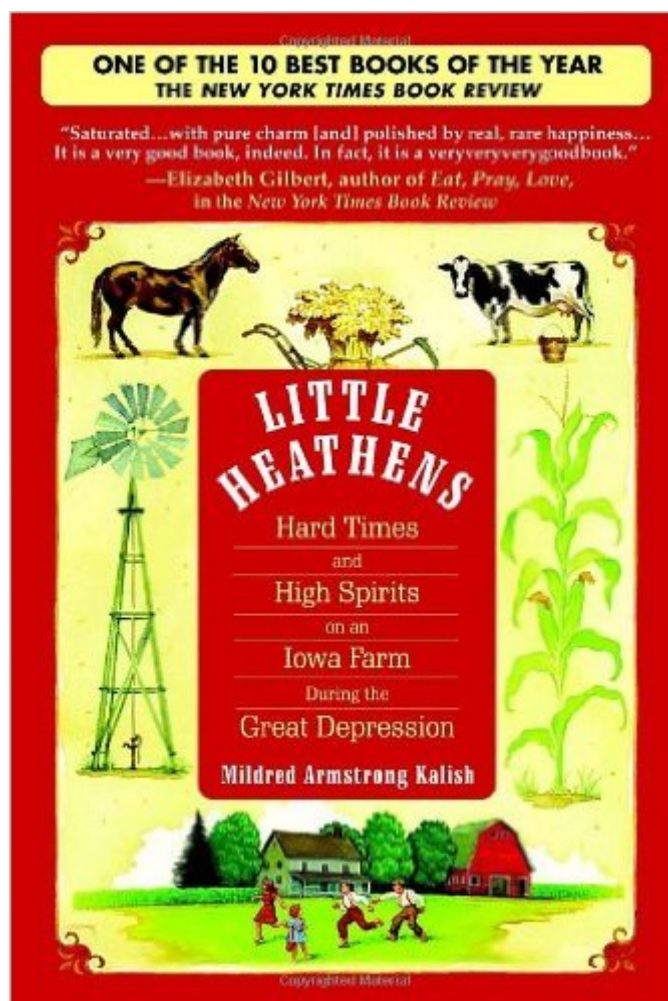


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Little Heathens: Hard Times And High Spirits On An Iowa Farm During The Great Depression



Synopsis

I tell of a time, a place, and a way of life long gone. For many years I have had the urge to describe that treasure trove, lest it vanish forever. So, partly in response to the basic human instinct to share feelings and experiences, and partly for the sheer joy and excitement of it all, I report on my early life. It was quite a romp. So begins Mildred Kalish's story of growing up on her grandparents' Iowa farm during the depths of the Great Depression. With her father banished from the household for mysterious transgressions, five-year-old Mildred and her family could easily have been overwhelmed by the challenge of simply trying to survive. This, however, is not a tale of suffering. Kalish counts herself among the lucky of that era. She had caring grandparents who possessed "and valiantly tried to impose" all the pioneer virtues of their forebears, teachers who inspired and befriended her, and a barnyard full of animals ready to be tamed and loved. She and her siblings and their cousins from the farm across the way played as hard as they worked, running barefoot through the fields, as free and wild as they dared. Filled with recipes and how-tos for everything from catching and skinning a rabbit to preparing homemade skin and hair beautifiers, apple cream pie, and the world's best head cheese (start by scrubbing the head of the pig until it is pink and clean), *Little Heathens* portrays a world of hardship and hard work tempered by simple rewards. There was the unsurpassed flavor of tender new dandelion greens harvested as soon as the snow melted; the taste of crystal clear marble-sized balls of honey robbed from a bumblebee nest; the sweet smell from the body of a lamb sleeping on sun-warmed grass; and the magical quality of oat shocking under the light of a full harvest moon. *Little Heathens* offers a loving but realistic portrait of a "heartly-handshake Methodist" family that gave its members a remarkable legacy of kinship, kindness, and remembered pleasures. Recounted in a luminous narrative filled with tenderness and humor, Kalish's memoir of her childhood shows how the right stuff can make even the bleakest of times seem like "quite a romp." •From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is an entrancing memoir of days now long gone, but vivid in the minds of those who lived them. While I lived on an Iowa farm in western Iowa rather than eastern Iowa, and was a boy, and was about six years younger than the author, this book recalled so much of what it was like that reading it was an unmitigated delight. The author recognizes "the all-too-human tendency to gloss over the bad and glorify, or at least magnify, the good" when recalling one's childhood, but it sure makes greater reading to read of one's appreciated childhood than it does to read of one who looks back thereon in bitterness. Thus this book beats, e.g., *Angela's Ashes* by a mile in enjoyable reading.

Little Heathens, the memoir of an Iowa farm childhood, is a marvelously vivid encounter with an iconic way of life that has largely gone the way of the elm tree. The author Mildred Kalish, valedictorian of her high school class back in 1940, turns a sharp, remarkably objective eye on those descendants of the pioneers, "more 19th century than 20th," who raised her to live off the land through Iowa's "fierce blizzards" and some of America's worst times. But this is not *Little House on the Prairie*. Yes, Kalish can rustle up the poignant details of honey gathering and head-cheese making. She can tell you how to domesticate raccoons and explain the proper use of beets to draw boils. What's unique here, though, is Kalish's portrait of an austere people whose Puritan tradition frowned on joy, prohibited affection in word or touch, "built character" with an open bible and homilies that dotted their days. Fortunately, while Kalish grew up hearing that "whistling girls and crowing hens will always come to some bad end," such warnings never dampened the spirits of the "little heathens" -- as her grandmother called the farm's children. Eight decades later she has brought those stern sepia-toned faces back to full color through their words (from "Oh my soul" to "shit from shinola"), their ideals ("better to wear out than rust out"), and their deepest pleasures ("the kinship of souls that is created when everyone gathers in the kitchen to prepare a meal"). Reading *Little Heathens*, you become part of that lovely kinship for a while.

I loved every word of this book! The author grew up fresh and innocent and kind and loving in a very difficult, but pure, time in our history. In this too-short book she goes into all aspects of that life -- the

fun, the hardships, the extended family, the recipes, schooling, holidays, etc. I would really love another book or two by her, fleshing out some of these chapters. I would especially love a cookbook. I loved the short chapters on their animals and pets! I would like more on her school studies and friends. And more old photos. After reading this book, I fervently wished I could know Mildred Armstrong Kalish. She is obviously a smart and sweet lady, appearing to be very much like my beloved grandmother who was raised in Kansas a few years prior to the time of which this author writes. It is amazing to think what changes she has been through, what changes our country has been through! I hope I don't sound too old when I say that I miss the good ole days, even though I wasn't fortunate enough to have lived through them. I miss the excitement over even the smallest things (birth of an animal, fresh-baked foods) and the simple but important teachings of her ever-present family. I would like more details about the members of her family and herself after she left town and began other adventures -- in the military, teaching, marriage and family, cars, television, etc. HOW this country has changed! Please read this book to re-connect with our roots. It is enlightening and funny and interesting and always educational and entertaining. And everyone today knows how we love our entertainment!

Even though I am a 42-year-old city girl, this book resonated with me. Ms. Kalish writes with gratifying specificity of "the little things that make up a life." You'll wonder how her generation had enough energy to do the endless work it took to survive on a family farm. I'd recommend her story to anyone who is interested in what daily life was like in another era. But here's what moved me to write this review: Ms. Kalish's recipe for Apple Cream Pie! It is an odd, open-faced creation with big chunks of apples and heavy cream poured on top. I've been baking apple pies from scratch all my life, but people keep telling me this is the best one I have ever made. Don't miss her recipe for pie crust, either. Her vegetable-oil crust is not only healthier and much easier than traditional pie crusts, but addictively delicate and crisp. When she tells you, in her intro to the recipe, that you'll never bother making any other type of crust again, she's not lying. I intend to try all the other recipes in this book. How generous of Ms. Kalish to share her time-tested gems with the world.

Mildred Armstrong Kalish provides a deep look back to growing up on a farm in Iowa during the Depression. Ms. Kalish's family of seven lived a frugal lifestyle in which three generations resided in the home with the only missing person being her exiled father although why she was not sure. Her cousins lived on nearby farms so the extended family was nearby to help if needed. The key to this superb discerning memoir is Ms. Kalish avoids acrimony and sugared (except when grandpa bought

some) nostalgia to provide a vivid picture of a bygone era in which an extended family was there to raise the children with positive values. Life on the farm during harsh economic conditions was fun to a preadolescent Mildred although some chores were simply work. With black and white pictures to enhance the era and "farm food" recipes that were not microwave, LITTLE HEATHENS is a well written winner providing a powerful look at the 1930s in the Midwest. Ms. Kalish showcases how different life was back then from today when for instance the three Klausner brothers live in Georgia, New Jersey and Texas respectively and outhouses is a Three Stooges' joke. Harriet Klausner

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