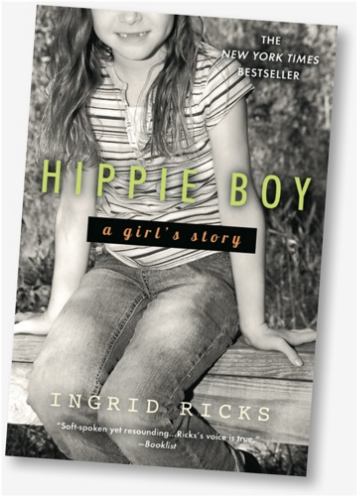
# Ingrid Ricks's Great Escape

By Ryan Joe




In her youth, Ingrid Ricks was in constant search for escape. She grew up stifled by an overbearing stepfather who wielded his Mormonism with all the tenderness of a war club. She rebelled against the confines of both religion and poverty—fantasizing that she was a forgotten sibling of the Osmonds and that in time the famous family—her real family—would return for her. At 13, true escape came when she teamed up with her father, a traveling, tool-selling vagabond. Ricks and her father traveled the country until he was arrested, forcing her to begin finding her own path.

It's a saga that Ricks recounts in her self-published book *Hippie Boy: A Girl's Story*, which recently found itself a place on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for e-book nonfiction. More recently, it was picked up by Penguin Random House division Berkley Books, for a January 2014 re-release.

But the journey that eventually led to the publication and eventual success of *Hippie Boy* is, like Ricks's childhood, one full of uncertainty, serious self-reflection, and determination. Ricks self-published *Hippie Boy* in September 2011, but the process of actually finishing the book was a decade-long grind. It began initially as another project, when Ricks's was writing her father's rags-to-riches-to-rags story during which she kept inserting the narrative elements that would eventually become Hippie Boy.

Ten years later, she was still talking about her idea for the book—just not really writing it. Along the way, she had to power through a couple of humiliations. The first happened at the Pacific Northwest Writers Association (PNWA) conference, where Ricks hobnobbed and networked, and where she had already found a prospective agent to whom she'd sent 50 pages of *Hippie Boy*. On a whim, Ricks also signed up for a workshop.

"I went sauntering into that room feeling very cocky and good about myself," Ricks recalls. She'd worked as a journalist before and knew she could string together prose. But as she listened to the writing of her peers, she began to understand the importance of dialogue and character and scene development—and she realized that her writing had none of it. When it came time to discuss Ricks's writing, the room went silent.

She immediately told the agent to trash her submission and enrolled in more workshops to hone her fundamentals and learn the difference between the journalism she'd done before and the writing she wanted to do. "I really learned to tell a story instead of paint a picture," she says.

"I was mortified," Ricks remembers. She realized then that she'd been talking about *Hippie Boy* for so long, yet never writing it, that the idea of her book had become a family joke. More importantly, she felt it was a bad example to set for her children. "I had something I wanted to do so much it was eating a hole in me," Ricks says, "but I wasn't doing it. It felt like it was an irresponsible thing to do."

The next day, she and her husband worked out a plan. Ricks would scale back her work as a marketing consultant, take only the minimum of clients, and bang out her book.

In January 2010, Ricks put her writing plan into effect. At the time, she had a few chapters in decent shape, and a base outline. "I had maybe 100 pages and of those, there were a couple of chapters I was really proud of," she says, "and the rest of it was a mess. The most difficult part was figuring out how to start the story and where."

Ricks partitioned her day such that she woke up at 5:30 every morning so she'd have an hour and a half of writing time. She'd do client work until the afternoon, then leave for a nearby coffee shop where she'd write until the evening. By June, *Hippie Boy* was complete.

## The Publishing Game

The time Ricks spent working her way through the PNWA conference had given her certain presumptions about the publishing industry: You find an agent, the agent does some behind-the-curtain magic, and you have a publishing contract.

The first step went as planned. Ricks used her background in marketing and PR to cobble together a book proposal and found an agent by August. Her celebration lasted minutes, until the agent told her that she needed to build a platform for herself. This was where the rules, as Ricks understood them, had had their most drastic shift. The publishing world was no longer interested in how large of an audience it could potentially attract—it was interested in how large an audience the author, whether published or not, already had.

Over the next few months, Ricks became a marketer again. She built a site and began engaging with an audience to build and expand her base. She developed a blog in which she profiled individuals who'd turned their dreams in realities. And she began writing essays—discovering that she loved the format. Ricks posted her work on sites like Scribd and Open Salon—a publishing platform affiliated with the online news site Salon.com.

Ricks began attracting readers. Her essays on Scribd showed up on the home page, which drove social media followers and Web traffic. And her Open Salon essays were hand-picked by editors and featured on the main Salon.com site. In December 2010, as Ricks accumulated her audience, her agent shopped her manuscript to three or four publishing houses.

One month later, she had her first pile of rejections. The publishers loved the voice, Ricks was told, but the memoir market was saturated. Thanks and good luck.

As Ricks built her name through online essays and podcasts (mostly about Mormonism), she began to see the mild absurdity of her situation. "When I wrote an essay for Salon, hundreds of people would come to my Web site," she says, "but I didn't have a product to sell." Ricks told her agent to stop trying to sell the book and they parted ways; she would go about publication alone.

Ricks hired a former editor from HarperCollins, Erin Brown, for some editorial advice. Brown reviewed *Hippie Boy* and came away feeling much had happened with Ricks internally that hadn't been written into the book and also pointed out that some of the dialogue felt stiff. The edits added another 50 pages to the book. Ricks hired another professional to design the book cover and in September 2011, introduced *Hippie Boy* to the world.

## First Impressions

For self-published authors, first impressions are everything and Ricks has encountered authors who've had their work demolished on Amazon. "They've taken it back out and want to relaunch it and ask how they can do it," Ricks says. "And I feel awful for them, but the thing is, it's really hard once you've gone out there with a book and gotten negative reviews. It's really hard to overcome that. No amount of knowing how to market will matter if your book is crap."

That Ricks only introduced *Hippie Boy* when she knew it was ready allowed her to concentrate on bolstering its audience through marketing. The "game-changer," as she put it, occurred after the book had been out six weeks. Amazon had a special promotion in which authors exclusively on Amazon's Kindle Store could offer the book for free for a certain period of time.

"It took me exactly five minutes to pull my book out of Barnes & Noble for that time and set up my promotion the next day," Ricks says. "I don't do the program anymore, but I understand the power of sharing and promotions."

The continued success of *Hippie Boy* is due to constant building. Construction on the author platform can't ever stop. "Every day, I try to push *Hippie Boy* or *Focus* (a memoir about Ricks's combat with a degenerative eye disease)," she says. One year after she released *Hippie Boy*, she read a section of the book on the NPR show *Snap Judgment*. An article in the *Atlantic* in mid-June 2013 focused on the radio program and specifically mentioned Ricks's reading as a standout episode. All of these elements work together to grow a readership.

## Stepping Off and Falling Up

When Ricks thinks back about her initial trepidation around the story that would eventually become *Hippie Boy*, she's aware of the various issues that paralyzed her. She had a family she needed to care for. She didn't want to hurt her mother. She didn't want people to think her book was an attack on Mormonism, rather than an examination of the abuse of power that happened to take place within a Mormon household. Ricks would only write the book after she allowed herself to sit down, put pen to paper, and gut it out.

"When you give yourself permission to step off that cliff and head off the known path, you'd think you'd have this one goal in sight, but that path is always changing," Ricks says. ■

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