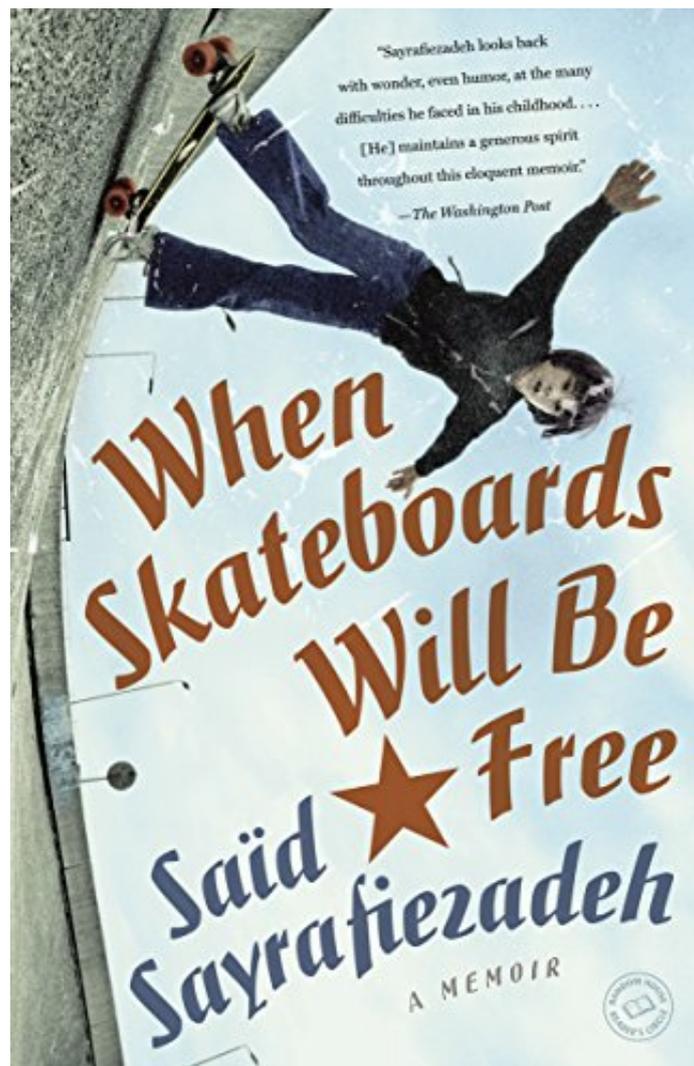


# When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir of a Political Childhood

by

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh



**DOWNLOAD E-BOOK**

## Synopsis

**BONUS:** This edition contains a *When Skateboards Will Be Free* discussion guide. "The revolution is not only inevitable, it is imminent. It is not only imminent, it is quite imminent. And when the time comes, my father will lead it." With a profound gift for capturing the absurd in life, and a deadpan wisdom that comes from surviving a surreal childhood in the Socialist Workers Party, Saïd Sayrafiezadeh has crafted an unsentimental, funny, heartbreaking memoir. Saïd's Iranian-born father and American Jewish mother had one thing in common: their unshakable conviction that the workers' revolution was coming. Separated since their son was nine months old, they each pursued a dream of the perfect socialist society. Pinballing with his mother between makeshift Pittsburgh apartments, falling asleep at party meetings, longing for the luxuries he's taught to despise, Saïd waits for the revolution that never, ever arrives. "Soon," his mother assures him, while his long-absent father quixotically runs as a socialist candidate for president in an Iran about to fall under the ayatollahs. Then comes the hostage crisis. The uproar that follows is the first time Saïd hears the word "Iran" in school. There he is suddenly forced to confront the combustible stew of his identity: as an American, an Iranian, a Jew, a socialist... and a middle-school kid who loves football and video games. Poised perfectly between tragedy and farce, here is a story by a brilliant young writer struggling to break away from the powerful mythologies of his upbringing and create a life—and a voice—of his own. Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's memoir is unforgettable.

## Sort review

: While images of athletic and Hollywood celebrity decorated the rooms of his classmates, the walls of Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's youth were adorned with fierce glares from heavily-bearded revolutionaries. As the son of an Iranian father and Jewish-American mother--two souls united by a commitment to an impending socialist revolution--young Saïd spent his childhood working to make the comrades proud. He hawked the movement's rag, embraced a moniker of "the little revolutionary," and even embarked on a confusing trip to Cuba to spark his political awareness. Despite the seriousness of his cause, *When Skateboards Will Be Free* describes a politically-charged childhood with an innocence that forces smiles in unexpected places and reveals the heartache of a home soaked in idealism. The arrival of a socialist state not only promised to bring skateboards in bubblegum-bright colors to the masses; it also pledged to repair the rifts within Sayrafiezadeh's own home. - Dave Callanan

Exclusive Q&A with Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

We caught up with the author of *When Skateboards Will Be Free* to discuss his present-day perspective, writing influences, and politically charged father. Has your childhood caused you to embrace or run from politics today? I have a difficult time thinking for myself when it comes to politics. Considering what my childhood was like I suppose this is a natural consequence. I try to stay up on the news as much as I can but I'm wearied by a lot of it. I'm also uneasy. Especially

around election time when my anxiety is inflamed by the extreme urgency of both Democrats and Republicans. As a little boy, politics moved at a feverish pace. According to the Socialist Workers Party the world was always on the verge of total collapse, and it was up to us to do everything in our power to forestall that collapse. So as an adult I try to live above the fray as much as I can. My wife and I recently went to Washington D.C. for a week's vacation. We took every tour we could: The Supreme Court, the House, the Senate, even the Pentagon. It was fascinating to actually visit these places that I had only ever seen at demonstrations. I found that I had a lot of respect and admiration for our political process. But this was countered by a certain amount of guilt, and, rightly so, reproof at some of the more egregious misrepresentations of American history. I have a curious relationship to my country that I haven't entirely sorted out yet. How do you feel about the revolutionary heroes of your youth - Castro and Che, for example - as an adult? I have a soft spot in my heart for them. I think I always will. Castro, Che, Malcolm X. These were the main revolutionary figures for me when I was a child. I considered them less like heroes and more like family. And I don't think I'm overstating that. In fact, at times they were more personal to me than my family. Certainly more personal than my father whom I didn't really get to know until I was eighteen. They acted as stand-ins for him. Even though Che and Malcolm X were already dead by the time I was born, I saw them as living, breathing companions, and I imagined that they were working to rescue me and my mother somehow. I felt comforted by this. Even to this day I cringe when I hear disparaging comments about them. But I'm able to handle criticism about my father. You recall some very personal memories in this book. Would it have been easier to fictionalize the names and dates and write a debut novel? Probably. But that's not what motivated me to write this story. I was driven by a desire to have the truth be known precisely as it had occurred. To fictionalize it would have been an act of cowardice. The Socialist Workers Party has always prided itself on speaking out regardless of the consequences. In many ways I've become the ideal party member. That's the irony. Who has influenced your writing the most? There is no shortage of eloquent thinkers in your family. I don't really know. Perhaps it's a combination of things. The theatre had a big impact on me, for one. I acted in plays as a child and I was profoundly affected by the experience of dramatizing events. And my uncle, Mark Harris, was a successful author, so I saw that it was something that was possible to do. On the other hand, my mother was consistently frustrated in her desire to be a writer. I would often see her working on short stories or taking classes. She had little or no success, but at least writing was a part of our household. I knew she had other aspirations besides socialist revolution. How has your father reacted to *When Skateboards Will Be Free*? In the fall of 2005, I published an essay in *Granta* about my childhood, and which ended up becoming the foundation for this book. My father hasn't spoken to me since then. I'm sure he was offended by what I said about him and the Socialist Workers Party. Maybe he was also mortified about the consequences of his abandonment. I'd like to think so. My father's still a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, and his reaction has not been much of a surprise since politics have always trumped family. Which is essentially what my memoir is about. So in some ways my point has been

proven.--This text refers to the hardcover edition.Review"[Saïd Sayrafiezadeh is a name] that you may want to remember...if this exacting and finely made first book is any indication...[He] writes with extraordinary power and restraint...[His] prose has some of [Isaac Bashevis] Singer's wistful comedy, and good deal of that writer's curiosity about the places where desire, self-sacrifice and societal obligation intersect and collide."—New York Times"[Sayrafiezadeh] writes with grace and clarity about growing up juggling deprivation and desire."—Time"Sayrafiezadeh looks back with wonder, even humor, at the many difficulties he faced in his childhood...[He] maintains a generous spirit throughout this eloquent memoir."—Washington Post"A memoir is a bold thing to write so young, but the author pulls it off with pathos and humor, proving some histories are best written early."—GQ"[A] wry, lovely memoir."—O: The Oprah Magazine"Once I began *When Skateboards Will Be Free*, I couldn't put it down but to sleep. So reading a memoir, it reaches the reader's innermost consciousness. Its language has the fierceness and humor of a Charles Dickens story about childhood." —Paula Fox, author of *Desperate Characters* and *Borrowed Finery*"Saïd Sayrafiezadeh has a wry, deadpan sense of humor, an exceptionally open heart, and the wisdom of a true outsider. *When Skateboards Will Be Free* shows us exactly how he came into possession of these rare qualities. This is a fantastic, beautifully written memoir." —Scott Smith, author of *A Simple Plan* and *The Ruins*"*When Skateboards Will Be Free* is a brave, honest and elegant book. It felt like the story was being whispered in my ear. I haven't read a memoir in quite a while that has so skillfully ma...About the AuthorSaïd Sayrafiezadeh's writing has appeared in *Granta*, the *Paris Review*, and *Open City*. He lives in New York. --This text refers to the hardcover edition.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter OneMy father believes that the United States is destined one day to be engulfed in a socialist revolution. All revolutions are bloody, he says, but this one will be the bloodiest of them all. The working class—which includes me—will at some point in the not-so-distant future decide to put down the tools of our trade, pour into the streets, beat the police into submission, take over the means of production, and usher in a new epoch—the final epoch—of peace and equality. This revolution is not only inevitable, it is imminent. It is not only imminent, it is quite imminent. And when the time comes, my father will lead it. Because of such urgency I do not see my father very often. This despite the fact we both live in New York City. Weeks pass. Months pass. Then a year. At times I will begin to wonder if I will ever hear from him again, but just as I do, a postcard will arrive from Istanbul, or Tehran, or Athens, or Minneapolis, where he has gone to attend this or that conference or to deliver this or that speech. "The weather is beautiful here," he will write in enormous swirling optimistic cursive that fills the white space, leaving room to say nothing more. We've had our moments, though, over the years. My eighteenth birthday—the first time we had been together for any of my birthdays—my father astounded me by giving me a Walkman, by far the most expensive present I'd ever received. Then for my nineteenth birthday I stayed an entire week with him and his wife—his second wife—taking photographs, watching movies on the VCR, and playing Scrabble late into the night, where, even though my father is Iranian and English is his third language, he beat me nearly every time. We also took a long walk one

Sunday afternoon, just him and me, to the aquarium at Coney Island, sitting side by side in the winter air while we watched as a walrus swam back and forth in its cement pond. Later at the café I was so nervous about being on my best behavior that I knocked over an entire cup of coffee onto his lap. "Sorry, Pop. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry." And every Sunday morning during my freshman year in college he would call to ask if he could help answer any questions I might be having with Algebra 101. He is a professor of mathematics, after all. But first and foremost my father is a member—a comrade—of the Socialist Workers Party. He is a leading comrade, in fact, and has been for almost all my life. The responsibilities he chooses to undertake include, but are not limited to, editing books, writing articles, giving speeches, teaching political classes, attending book sales, demonstrations, rallies, meetings, conferences, picket lines . . . By the time I was in my early twenties my father had again begun to disappear behind this massive workload of revolution, and his phone calls grew increasingly infrequent until they ceased altogether, and our joyful reunions became more like occasional punctuation marks in long paragraphs of silence. One summer night, when I was twenty- seven years old, I took my girlfriend to Film Forum in the West Village to watch a documentary on Che Guevara. When the movie was over, I came out of the theater to see my father standing on the sidewalk behind a table with an array of books published by Pathfinder Press, the publishing house of the Socialist Workers Party. *Che Guevara Speaks*. *Che Guevara Talks to Young People*. *The History of the Russian Revolution*. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. A handwritten banner was draped over the front of the table with a quote by Castro that read "There will be a victorious revolution in the United States before there will be a victorious counterrevolution in Cuba." In my father's hand, displayed for all to see, was that week's issue of *The Militant*. "Sidsky!" my father called out, using his invented Russified diminutive of my name, which has never failed to endear him to me. "Pop!" I said. "How was the movie, Sidsky?" "I liked it," I said. And my girlfriend, who cared little for politics and had never even heard of Che Guevara before I had told her about him, said, "I liked it too." "I see," my father said, looking first at my girlfriend and then at me. It was obvious by the expression on his face that we had given the wrong answer. I thought of backtracking and adding qualifications to my opinion, but before I could think what those qualifications could be, he said, "Let's have dinner tonight. What do you say? There's a nice restaurant right around the corner." I agreed, of course, wholeheartedly. The only hitch was that my father had to wait for the next showing of the documentary to let out, ninety minutes from now, and then he had to put all the unsold books away and fold up the table, so my girlfriend and I walked fourteen blocks through the West Village to my studio apartment to sit patiently by the phone, growing hungrier by the minute. And when my father finally called it was to say, sorry, a last- minute meeting had suddenly been scheduled, he could not see us tonight, but we would definitely do it again sometime soon, he promised, the three of us, soon. "Oh, I can tell you're disappointed!" my girlfriend said, throwing her arms around me, kissing me. "No, I'm not," I said, but I was. And then the phone rang again, and it was my father again, but this time he was saying that the last- minute meeting had just been rescheduled, and, yes, he could have dinner now, right now, he

was excited to see us, how soon could we be there? So my girlfriend and I hurried the fourteen blocks back through the Village to meet him at the nice restaurant around the corner from Film Forum, where we ate and drank our fill while he explained to us everything we had misunderstood about the movie. Not long after that, I began to have feelings of claustrophobia around my girlfriend. We had been together for just one year, but all the excitement had worn away. I cringed at her affection. When she would ask if I had missed her after a few days apart, I would cruelly delight in telling her I had not. I broke up with her finally in front of Monet's Water Lilies at the Museum of Modern Art for what was supposed to be the beginning of a fun-filled weekend at her parents' house in upstate New York. And my father, almost about the same time, divorced his second wife of ten years. But while I remained single, unable to summon the courage to ask anyone out, sitting alone in the front row of Film Forum every weekend with regret, he had begun to date with gusto, beginning with a twenty-eight-year-old comrade from the party. When I saw him next, it was in his new apartment in Brooklyn, shabby and unpainted, but I knew he didn't care. The apartment had a hollow, empty, un-lived-in feel, like he was just moving in or just moving out. The reality was that he had already been there six months. There was hardly anything in the place except for a large desk in the living room littered with memorandums from the Socialist Workers Party. And next to the desk was a plant about to die. Next to the plant were two bookcases. One filled with forty-five volumes of the collected works of Lenin, including letters to relatives. And the second with forty-nine volumes of the collected works of Marx and Engels, also with letters to relatives. These had been given to him by his second wife one Christmas when times were still good. I remembered that Christmas. I had been there for it. Standing in the dim light next to the dying plant, I wondered if he had had the chance yet to read every volume. I wondered if I should read every volume. My father abandoned me when I was nine months old, and with only a few exceptions I did not see or hear from him for eighteen years. "Mahmoud went off to fight for a world socialist revolution," my mother would tell me with proud determination when I was a little boy. Mahmoud. The name always sounded so ornate, so exotic, coming from my mother's mouth, and it emphasized the fact that my name was also exotic, while my mother was Martha Harris (née Finkelstein), a Jewish American, born and raised in the small town of Mount Vernon, New York. The divisions and allegiances, therefore, were various. In any event, the logic behind my mother's explanation was that the separation with my father was only temporary and, once this socialist revolution had been achieved, he would return to us. It was only a matter of time. Neither of us ever dared state this belief aloud—it was unmarked and liquid—but we subscribed to it silently, like a well-kept secret among friends. And thus, since the night of my father's departure, she began to save herself for him, denying herself a sexual or even a personal life, never bothering to find either another husband for herself or a surrogate father for me. Indeed, she even consented to stay married to my father so that he could continue to live and work legally in the United States. Moreover... --This text refers to the hardcover edition.

Read more

[Download to continue reading...](#)

























## What people say about this book

JAK, "A Trotskyite Childhood. There have been a number of articles in recent years criticizing the apparent trend of publishing books which are memoirs of rather young people. I'm sympathetic to this line of criticism but see it as refuted in part by books like this. Sayrafiezdeh comes from a very unusual background. His father is an Iranian immigrant to the U.S. presumably from a Muslim background. His mother an American Jew whose brother was the fairly well known writer Mark Harris. Unfortunately for everyone concerned the two of them joined, one could say converted, to the Socialist Workers Party. The SWP is a rather fascinating organization. At one time it actually had some credibility on the Left as an organizing force. No one disputes that it did impressive work in organizing Anti Vietnam War protests. However by the time the author was born I think it may already have been in the process of shedding any intellectual and political credibility that it had. Strangely enough the worm of decay may have been Cuba. The party was an active booster of the Cuban Revolution and at first this made this rather fusty old Trotskyite party seem "relevant". However if there is a law of left wing politics it is this, one Trotskyite party breeds many. The party's Cuba fixation led to all kinds of arcane disputes and splits. Shortly before Said S. was born a major split took place in which, it's my impression, the party faction that thought Cuba was really a deformed workers state rather than a true workers state split off. This seems to have fueled the party's evolution into the American Castro Cheerleading Society. This in turn alienated a lot of Trots who were willing to support Castro but only critically. The fatal blow seems to have been the turn to labor when the party began to insist that educated white collar workers abandon their jobs to go work in factories often in distant locales. Hundreds (and that's a lot for a little party) of the best educated party members left. Said S doesn't go into all of the political history and you can't blame him. He wasn't writing a history of the party. However the book might have gained from this. I think it explains something. When I was reading SKATEBOARDS I couldn't help but notice how Moonie like the SWP people sound. I don't think they were as zombies even as late as the mid 70's. My theory is that the more independent minded and intellectually serious members of the party were gone by the time Said was say 8 or 9. What was left was a cult remnant that included his mother and father. Although even his mother couldn't take it past a certain point. In all events this is a compelling story of an American counter culture most Americans have never even heard of."

L. bartsch, "An unusual and moving memoir. Unlike my brother and sister and even my mother I kept my unpronounceable last name because it was my only connection with my father. Thus writes Said who is born in New York and brought up in Pittsburgh from an American Jewish mother and a socialist Iranian father who never integrates with America and leaves his family when Said was nine months old. As a child he is poor and lonely and these conditions make an unusually deep impression on his sensitive mind. With great clarity and insight he describes the small circle of strangers who make up for the absence of family. If you enjoy reading memoirs this

is the one to read”

average Reader, “The world as seen through a cracked and hazy (crazy) lens. It was a cringe worthy revelation to the mind set of the hard core socialist believer. The circular socialist value system the author describes self justifies it's faults and failures by blaming the society it parasitizes. I didn't know that socialists encourage shoplifting from small businesses to "hasten the fall of capitalism". It's the fault of the business owner of course.Mr. Sayrafiezadeh, you are an amazing example of the resilience of children. Your book is very well written and your stories are poignant.”

Beth K., “A Personal View of a Political Childhood. This is a moving memoir of a childhood deeply-scarred by parental neglect due to a misguided focus on political suffering to the exclusion of all else. The writing is captivating, engaging and amusing, even in the midst of the personal pain caused by the author's mother because of her total devotion to the Socialist Worker's Party to the neglect of the care of her own son, as well as the subjugation of her personal goals and desires to her extreme view of the necessary commitment to the cause of social justice.Saïd Sayrafiezadeh remembers his childhood with surprising compassion for both his mostly-absent Iranian father and his depressed Jewish-American mother, especially given the trauma that was inflicted upon him as a child and as a young man by their chance encounter with, and subsequent devotion to, the Socialist Worker's Party. He poignantly paints a vivid picture of what it is like to grow up as an outsider, of not belonging because of the apparently voluntary extreme deprivation that his mother inflicted upon both herself and him in an effort to identify with the suffering of the masses, of not belonging because of his parents' political idealism and his childhood misperceptions of them, and of not belonging because of his Iranian heritage during the difficult 2 years of the Iranian hostage crisis of the early 1980's.Saïd Sayrafiezadeh tells his story with wit, honesty and insight. This book is highly recommended, and a good read.”

Busy mom, “This is my FAVORITE memoir ever. This is my FAVORITE memoir ever! I adore the author's style of writing and admire the way in which he weaves his adult and childhood experiences so that the reader truly feels how his childhood has shaped him.A wonderful read, and one I've dipped into many times and never cease to be delighted at the story, the style and the author!”

Hanako, “sad, funny....good!. I just wanted to say, I really enjoyed this memoir. I found this book just by chance and I am glad I did. His childhood is a very peculiar one but it's so well told and at the end of the book I found myself crying. I had bought already Authors next book and am looking foward to reading it. I hope he will write many more books!!”

Laurie Hawkes, “Un autre univers. Moins rigolo que "Tout le monde n'a pas la chance d'avoir

des parents communistes", mais c'est un peu le thème. L'auteur relate son enfance auprès d'une mère convertie à l'internationale des ouvriers, avec un fonctionnement sectaire assez impressionnant. Le plaisir est exclu de cette vie-là, le garçonnet ne peut vraiment s'amuser qu'en dehors de son tête à tête avec la mère, femme courageuse au dévouement assez masochiste. Le père, lui, semble avoir plus ou moins abandonné ce 3e enfant à son épouse. Son manque d'implication est assez exaspérant, on a envie de l'arracher au narcissisme qui lui donne l'impression d'avoir tant de choses importantes à accomplir, plutôt que de consacrer du temps à son fils. J'aime la façon dont le narrateur nous emmène dans cette vie, sans se lamenter mais sans laisser de doutes sur la dureté de cette existence, parsemée tout de même de moments joyeux. Dépaysant, différent -- une bonne lecture."

Satisfied, "OK. It's what I wanted. I read a review in the Guardian and was intrigued by this autobiography. I have not read it yet."

[DMCA](#)