

# Counterculture Crossover: Growing Up in the Love Family

By Rachel Israel

Reviewed by Robert W. Balch

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*Life Story Press, Maple Valley, WA. (2018). ISBN-10: 9781732240018; ISBN-13: 9778-1732240018 (paperback). (Amazon.com, \$25.00; Kindle, \$20.00). 643 pages.*

*Counterculture Crossover* is Rachel Israel's fascinating account of growing up in the Love Family, a highly controversial religious commune based in Seattle, Washington. In 1975, at age 6, Ms. Israel became a member of the Love Family when her mother joined, and she stayed until 1983 when the Family broke up after an unsuccessful palace coup. These were the Family's glory years, the classic phase before the fall.

To its defenders, the Love Family was an intentional community, a new religious movement, and a beautiful utopian experiment; but to its detractors, it was a dangerous cult, pure and simple. In 1971, two members had died from breathing toluene, a solvent the Family used to produce visions, which led the famous deprogrammer Ted Patrick to describe the group as a "collection of drugged-up, spaced-out, wired-up mental zombies" (Patrick & Dulack, 1976, p. 152). In 1979, a *National Enquirer* headline called the Family "America's Most Dangerous Cult—A World of Violence, Drugs and Child Abuse" (*National Enquirer*, 1979).

1979 also was the year I met the Love Family, and frankly, I was enchanted. For me, visiting the Family was like being transported to a magical fairy kingdom. The grounds and houses were simple, clean, orderly, and tranquil, brightened by flowers and well-tended gardens. The members were distinguished by their long, well-groomed hair, full beards, handmade robes, gentle demeanor, and especially their names—for example, Strength, Honesty, Courage, Happiness—representing the virtues of Jesus Christ. Unlike Ted Patrick's zombies, I found the members to be bright, alert, and genuinely

committed to their dream of building a new society.

Enchanted though I was, my main interest in the Love Family was sociological. Out of thousands of communal experiments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Love Family was one of the few survivors, and I wanted to understand how it had managed this feat. So imagine my shock when, in 1983, the Love Family suddenly blew up over allegations that its leader, Love Israel, had become a self-indulgent, abusive, cocaine addict. As luck would have it, I was able to negotiate a leave of absence from my university, and with the help of Janann Cohig, a sociology student, I spent the next year in Seattle interviewing members and defectors to find out what had happened. I continued interviewing over the next two summers, gradually piecing together the Family's history and uncovering the roots of the discontent and corruption that led to the big breakup. The research resulted in a few professional articles about the community, which today gather dust in university libraries (Balch, 1988; 1995; 1998).

So I had a special interest in Rachel Israel's book. Not only does it describe the period that I studied, but Ms. Israel also was one of the teenagers I interviewed in the 1980s. She writes from an unusual perspective. Unlike most second-generation members, she was not born into the Family but joined when she was old enough to know about life in "the World." She and her mother had been beach hippies in Hawaii and homesteaders living in the rough-and-tumble backwoods of Alaska. Then suddenly she was thrust into a radical communal experiment where everyone was expected to be perfect and merge with the collective mind. Her experiences gave her a comparative perspective

that enabled her to remain an observer even as she came to embrace the Family's belief system. Secretly, she kept a diary as a way of maintaining her identity apart from the group, and this, too, helped keep her in an observer mode.

Although Ms. Israel writes mainly from memory, her memory is good. Aside from discrepancies in numbers, such as population estimates, which sometimes vary greatly,<sup>1</sup> her recollections are quite consistent with my data. She began recording her memories shortly after she left the community, and she has been careful to verify and supplement them by interviewing many of the adults who played significant roles in her life, and also many of her peers. Dating events proved as difficult for her as it was for me because the Family didn't believe in time, only the present; so members' memories of dates and time sequences were foggy. However, Ms. Israel identifies approximate dates by determining when events happened in relation to the annual Rainbow Gathering, a counterculture festival that Family members had been attending since the first Gathering in 1972. Unlike so many authors of cult memoirs, Ms. Israel does not fictionalize quotations from decades-old conversations, but quotes only from her interviews. Most of the names she uses are members' actual Family names, though she does resort to pseudonyms in a few sensitive cases.

Her book is not simply a memoir, but also a study of the group's history, culture, social organization, and inner dynamics. Her intent is not to justify or condemn, but to make sense of her own experiences by understanding the group that consumed the formative years of her life. Her analysis draws from sociology and psychology, and from historical studies of nineteenth-century communal societies, particularly Oneida. She views the Love Family not as a cult, but as an heir to America's long history of radical social experiments. Given that former members remain bitterly divided over

what really caused the big breakup, her objectivity is impressive.

The first three chapters describe Ms. Israel's early life as a hippie girl, the events leading to her mother's decision to join the Family, and her culture shock upon entering this strange new world. She was immediately separated from her mother and would see her again only rarely. When she did, she was bewildered and dismayed to find that her mother had transformed from an assertive, self-reliant woman into a meek, submissive follower.

Ms. Israel had entered a new society where the old rules no longer applied. The price of membership was steep—renouncing one's past, giving all assets to the Family, and working to cleanse one's mind of all negative thoughts and emotions. It was a society without clocks, watches, radios, televisions, phones, books, magazines, or newspapers, where “the World” was an illusion and the present was all that mattered.<sup>2</sup> The Family was an insular, self-contained society in which, thanks to donations from new members, nobody needed a worldly job. It was a society without moms and dads or birthdays or personal possessions; a society without privacy where all activities were group activities, and eight to 20 people shared a house or a yurt—hence, Ms. Israel's difficulty keeping a diary. Her diary was not just a possession, but a symbol of herself as an independent being. Soon the outside world would seem strange, banal, and threatening.

I was happy to see that Ms. Israel mentions one of my favorite images of Love Family communal life. One day while visiting the Family ranch, I needed to relieve myself and was directed to an attractive cedar-shake outhouse just off the trail. Much to my chagrin, the outhouse turned out to be a three-sided affair with three holes and no partitions, all facing out to the trail. To be bothered by this was to be *self-conscious*, and in the Love Family the ideal was to have no sense of self at all. If a beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Ms. Israel claims the Love Family had 600 members, whereas I estimated 300 at its largest point. I suspect her estimate includes low-ranking members who dropped out before the breakup in 1983.

<sup>2</sup> The Family eventually bought two televisions, one for Love's house and one for the ranch; but their use was tightly controlled.

“sister” were to sit down next to me, I should be happy to see her because she is me and I am her and we are One.

The idea of being One was fundamental to the Family’s belief system. Love taught that we are all One with God and One with each other, but that people in the World have been blinded to this truth by Satan. Satan was seen as the spirit of separation that keeps us from loving each other, building positive relationships, and living together harmoniously. By rejecting Satan and the World, and living in perfect agreement, the Love Family could create Heaven on Earth where members would live forever in their physical bodies.

These ideas grew out of an LSD vision experienced by Paul Erdmann, then 27, in 1967 during the Summer of Love in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district. The following year, Erdmann returned to his hometown of Seattle and began attracting young hippie seekers who were inspired by his vision, absolute conviction, and willingness to take bold action. Other visions followed, including one that revealed Erdmann’s true name, Love. Before long, Love transformed his amorphous ideas into a simple but coherent belief system based on the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Together, Love and his followers were the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. They were the true Israelites, called by God to build New Jerusalem. In recognition of their Israelite identities, they all took the surname Israel. The key to their success was to *be* Jesus Christ by living as One.

However, Oneness did not mean social equality. The Love Family was a patriarchal kingdom believed to reflect a divine hierarchy symbolized by a golden pyramid. At its apex was Love, who had absolute authority as the King of Israel. He had complete control over who joined, who was baptized, who got a virtue name, how money was allocated, where members lived, whom they had sex with, and who got kicked out. The Family’s small size and communal structure gave Love enormous freedom to micromanage daily life, which he did virtually every day. Ms. Israel portrays Love as the object of slavish devotion, an attitude that he promoted by

constantly being attuned to and managing the collective mood.

Assisting Love were the elders. These were men with virtue names handpicked for their commitment to community ideals, leadership ability, and, most of all, their devotion to Love. Each elder and his “elder lady” supervised a household that consisted of up to 20 people sharing a house or yurt. The next tier included all other baptized members with virtue names. Together the “virtues” made up the core of the Family. At the bottom of the pyramid was a servant class that consisted of newer members such as Ms. Israel and her mother. They were identified by Hebrew names chosen from the Bible.

Within each stratum of the hierarchy, women occupied a secondary position and were expected to bow to men and do their bidding. On one of my early visits, I was chatting with an elder in his house when another elder man walked in and joined the conversation. Although the elder lady was busy cooking, folding laundry, and feeding a baby, the man said to her, without so much as a glance, “Charity, will you give me a braid?” The elder lady immediately dropped what she was doing and, without a word, proceeded to braid his hair while we, the men, continued to talk as if she weren’t there.

As a young newcomer, Ms. Israel quickly realized that to fit in she had no choice but to go with the flow; so she watched what the members did and modeled her actions after theirs.

Initially, she had been shocked at her mother’s transformation, but soon she realized that she, too, had become meek and submissive.

So why did people such as Rachel’s mother join the Family? Ms. Israel addresses this question in an excellent chapter, “Why

Love? . . .” (Chapter 5). She finds that members came from very diverse backgrounds—rich and poor, good families and bad; but for the most part they were young hippies looking for communal alternatives to mainstream society but disillusioned by everything they had tried. That is, until they met the Love Family, which they often likened to “coming home” (p. 159).

By the time Ms. Israel's mother joined, the Family no longer needed to proselytize because "droves of people" (p. 156) from the counterculture were eager to join, even knowing that total submission was part of the deal.

Ms. Israel has no use for those who claim they were brainwashed, and she gives little attention to the issue. "They had all made the choice to be there in the first place and had willingly relinquished their autonomy," she writes (p. 611). This is an important observation. The Love Family's membership was self-selected, in that people chose to join because the Family offered something they wanted. They knew they would have to change and were willing to do so, or at least give it a try. Self-selection continued after members joined because turnover was high among the Hebrew names. At the same time, selection by the Family also occurred because not everyone who wanted to join was allowed to. The community effectively screened out free riders and people unlikely to adapt to the Family's culture.

The result of these selection processes was a membership ready and willing to go with the program, and Ms. Israel's book is peppered with examples of how Family beliefs and practices then facilitated the process. The core belief was "We are One," and there was enormous pressure to *be* One, to not have personal opinions or independent ideas. Individual thoughts were from Satan. Any negative comment would result in gentle admonishments to stay "positive" (p. 88), "take it up" (p. 89), or "brighten up" (p. 91); and members would be reminded that "thoughts create" (p. 88). If you continued to hold to an independent viewpoint, you would be labeled "dark" (p. 91) and subjected to gossip and ostracism. Given the rewards of membership—meaning, purpose, security, and a community of friends—the cost of leaving was simply too high. The result was constant self-monitoring and the suppression of contrary thoughts and feelings, which, in turn created an illusion of Oneness in the community. For those like Ms. Israel, who still harbored "separate thoughts" (p. 91), the appearance of unanimity fostered guilt: Why am I the only one who doesn't get it?

Marijuana and, in particular, psychedelic drugs were used to reinforce the Family's belief system. They were regarded as "sacraments"—marijuana because it brought people together, and psychedelics because they produced visions. Visions were common and always discussed in meetings, where they were recounted in ways that confirmed Family beliefs, Love Israel's authority, or both. Of course, some people made up visions because there was such great pressure to have them, and those who didn't wondered why they didn't get it.

Ms. Israel and several of her peers were introduced to LSD when they were just 12 or 13 years of age. The occasion was an informal rite of passage, approved by Love and conducted by an elder acting as guide. The purpose of the LSD was to help the kids experience Love Israel's vision of the Oneness of all things. And Ms. Israel did have such a vision. Afterward, the idea of being One "no longer was just something I was being told; it was something I had experienced, something I had felt, that was very real, a way of thinking that was now part of my awareness" (p. 213).

Nonetheless, Ms. Israel struggled with questions. She wondered how everything could exist in the present and was confused about being eternal, especially after she learned about babies who had died in the community. (These deaths were never reported to authorities outside the Family.) But she quickly accepted Family beliefs, and she describes the blissful feeling of merging with the collective mind during Family gatherings. She felt safe and protected by a loving community. Yet at other times she found Family life to be "oppressive" (p. 146). For an escape, she liked to befriend new members who didn't know the rules yet because they would talk about the past and life in the outside world. "I craved my own mind," she says, adding that she would sneak off by herself "just to be alone" (p. 147). Her diary was perhaps her most significant way of maintaining her individuality. So secret was it that she wrote in a code that she had invented in case someone found it.

If I have given the impression that Ms. Israel's book dwells on the matter of commitment, it is only because the subject is of great interest to me. In fact, she addresses a wide range of issues pertaining to communal survival. These include health and medicine, sexual relationships, parenting, education, the acquisition and allocation of resources, relationships with government agencies and other communities, and the roots of the discontent that ignited the breakup in 1983. Here I will touch on a few of these.

The chapter on medicine (Chapter 8) reveals the perils of trying to live without it. Since members were considered eternal, illness was an illusion, a state of mind resulting from negative thoughts. Ms. Israel describes a hepatitis outbreak, dubbed "yellow fever" (p. 427), that ravaged the community for months but went untreated except for prayer and herbal remedies (it also remained unknown to authorities). Later, Love did make a few compromises, such as allowing a member (conveniently, a dentist) to open a dental clinic at the Family ranch, but other forms of modern medicine remained off-limits, even as members got older and more women were getting pregnant.

The most interesting medical development was the emergence of otherwise devoted women who secretly violated both the prohibition against medical care and the agreement not to use artificial birth control. This was deviance at the highest level, primarily among the elder ladies, and it was abetted by some of the highest ranking women, who had access to vehicles required to get to a hospital. Their actions signaled a growing gap between ideal and reality that spread throughout the Family in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Family's belief in living in the present left it unprepared for the baby boom that began in the mid-1970s. Shared parenting was the ideal, but in reality, it didn't work well. Though every adult was expected to be a parent to every child, parenting styles varied greatly. And in any case, the burden fell on the women, particularly low-ranking women and girls such as Ms. Israel and

her mother. But, as the author explains, the diffusion of responsibility often meant no responsibility, so children commonly went unsupervised. Paradoxically, in this world where having no self was paramount and individual freedom was taboo, Ms. Israel was forced to become self-reliant and highly adaptable. She, like other kids, learned to work the system to her advantage (and, as I found, many adults did so, too). If she wanted to do something but was afraid her elder lady might say *no*, she could bypass her by going directly to Love. As I found in my own research, the words "Love said" (p. 209) were perhaps the two most powerful words in the Love Family. She also learned which households to avoid, as the elders varied greatly in the latitude they granted to kids and the harshness of their punishments.

For a community based on total agreement, there was a surprising lack of consensus on the importance of education. The Family had its own school staffed by dedicated teachers, but Love put little value on formal education. Whereas the teachers wanted to expose kids to the world, Love and the Family conservatives wanted to protect them from it. Love had to approve all reading material and, at least once, books deemed too worldly were burned. On my first visit to the Family in 1980, I noticed second-hand children's readers in which all references to conventional family roles and worldly practices had been blacked out—not just words, but sentences and whole paragraphs—making the stories unreadable. Classes followed no calendar or daily schedule and were frequently moved from one location to another. Science was "hit or miss" (p. 333). By conventional standards, Ms. Israel's education was clearly inadequate; after she left the Family, she would struggle in the mainstream educational system, as would her peers who also left.

Another source of conflict was polygamy. Love already had two wives, and he encouraged his elders to take additional wives, as well.

Although the practice never caught on, it became a source of tension when Rachel's mother, beautiful but with a low-ranking Hebrew name, became a second wife. The first

wife, an elder lady, felt threatened; but having no choice except to submit, she took her anger out on Ms. Israel's mother's by ruining her reputation in the community. The result was such extreme ostracism that her mother, then pregnant with the elder's child, had to give birth alone. This was the ultimate insult in a community in which every birth was a joyous occasion attended by the whole Family.

The incident seems particularly vicious, especially for a group called the Love Family, but Ms. Israel sees it as just one of many signs that the Family's culture was breaking down. By the end of the 1970s, constraints were loosening and more and more people were breaking the rules. Women and girls started wearing makeup and Fresh Squeeze jeans, and the elder of Ms. Israel's household brought home a ham for dinner; newcomers weren't being screened; kids weren't being supervised; and Ms. Israel reports children as young as three or four being given omelets containing psychedelic mushrooms. She attributes these developments to strains caused by members suddenly having to get paying jobs to pay off Family debts. Most of the money went to Love, but workers were allowed keep a small amount for their households. Because some households were more successful than others, a divide developed between the haves and the have-nots, along with resentment on both sides.

The most serious problem was that Love Israel had become a cocaine addict with an extremely expensive habit. I would like to have seen more on this subject in the book because Love's addiction was the central concern driving the palace coup that led to the breakup in 1983. Love had created a belief system and social structure that made him the center of everything and gave him ultimate authority, and members were accustomed to his micromanaging their lives. For a while, the arrangement worked, but once cocaine appeared on the scene, Love became increasingly erratic, withdrawn, and eventually inaccessible. Without him, the Family lost its focus and cohesion. As more and more members began disregarding the rules, it became safe to talk about once-forbidden topics, such as why a respected elder lady, Dedication, had

defected. Frustrated by Love's bad business decisions but lacking control over Family finances, the elders secretly drafted a letter to Love accusing him of negligence and self-indulgence, and asking him to turn the leadership of the community over to them. When Love refused to budge, two principle elders decided to leave, and their departure precipitated the mass exit of 1983.

The Love Family didn't disintegrate as many expected, but instead split into factions that continue to this day. The first but smaller faction consists of those who remained loyal to Love and now call themselves the Love Israel Family.<sup>3</sup> Love quit using cocaine and moved the remnants of his following to the Family ranch, the only property that hadn't been lost in lawsuits brought by ex-members. Under a new name, the Love Israel Family, the community maintained its hierarchical structure and much of its old culture; but now its teenagers attended public school and the adults paid rent to live there. Outwardly the group looked much the same, but it could never muster the enthusiasm or collective energy of the glory days, and in 2004 mounting debts forced Love to sell the ranch. By the time Love died in 2016, the Family had been reduced to a handful of elderly members living in a single house, in addition to a few second-generation members who had given up communal life to live in the World.

Rather than dispersing, most defectors remained in the Pacific Northwest, primarily western Washington, where they constitute a relatively tight but nonexclusive network of friends and acquaintances, within which old Family cliques persist. A few still lead counterculture lives, but most have been reabsorbed by the World. For Ms. Israel, meeting members she hadn't seen since the breakup was surreal. Now they had ordinary names and looked like anyone else in the World. Even their personalities were different.

After she left the Family, it took Ms. Israel about ten years before she decided to reconnect with either faction. For the second time in her young life, she spent much of this time in

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<sup>3</sup> For information on this phase of Family history, see LeWarne, 2009.

culture shock. Suddenly she had been thrust back into a world that now seemed strange, repulsive, and dangerous. So out of touch was she that she once mistook a urinal for a drinking fountain. She suffered from depression and anxiety, felt like a misfit, and got caught up in drinking and drugs; but in the book she eschews the “victim mentality” that she sees in many ex-members (p. 613). She found it therapeutic to write about her experiences and eventually was able to attend college, where she studied other communes and also psychology and sociology. She says her experiences with the Love Family left her with a distrust of authority, a fear of conformity, and a desire to avoid groups, all of which she attributes to the Family’s stifling “mind control” (p. 626). On the positive side, she claims to have benefitted by learning self-restraint, the creative power of thought, and the ability to focus by staying present, all of which she says have made her stronger and helped her deal with problems in her everyday life. And, she adds, her life in the Family was an amazing adventure.

Ms. Israel’s decision to reconnect with Family members was prompted by a desire to learn about her past. However, she ran into unexpected resistance. Though 10 years had elapsed since the breakup, she encountered a pervasive reluctance to talk about the past, especially anything negative. Old habits die hard. It took years before anyone would let her read the elders’ letter to Love, and longer to gain access to any of the thousands of photographs taken during the 1970s and ‘80s. She felt that her childhood was being “squashed into non-existence” by collective denial, as secrets from long ago were still being kept (p. 618). However, her persistence paid off because her memoir is packed with information. Although the book is hardly a sensational exposé, it apparently has been a bombshell among both defectors and loyalists.

In this review, I have hit on only some of the book’s many topics. The book is long (643 pages cover to cover), often redundant, and frequently goes off on tangents that stray from the topic at hand. It also could have been improved by better editing. Most grievously of

all, she misspells *Haight-Ashbury* three times, a cardinal sin considering that Haight-Ashbury is both the birthplace of the hippie counterculture and the scene of Love Israel’s original revelation. All this can be forgiven, though, because the book is loaded with intriguing details and excellent insights into one of the most notable social experiments to come out of the 1960s. Especially for those interested in the children of radical religions, Ms. Israel’s memoir will raise questions about the extent to which parenting in unconventional religions should be subject to state control, if at all.

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## About the Reviewer

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