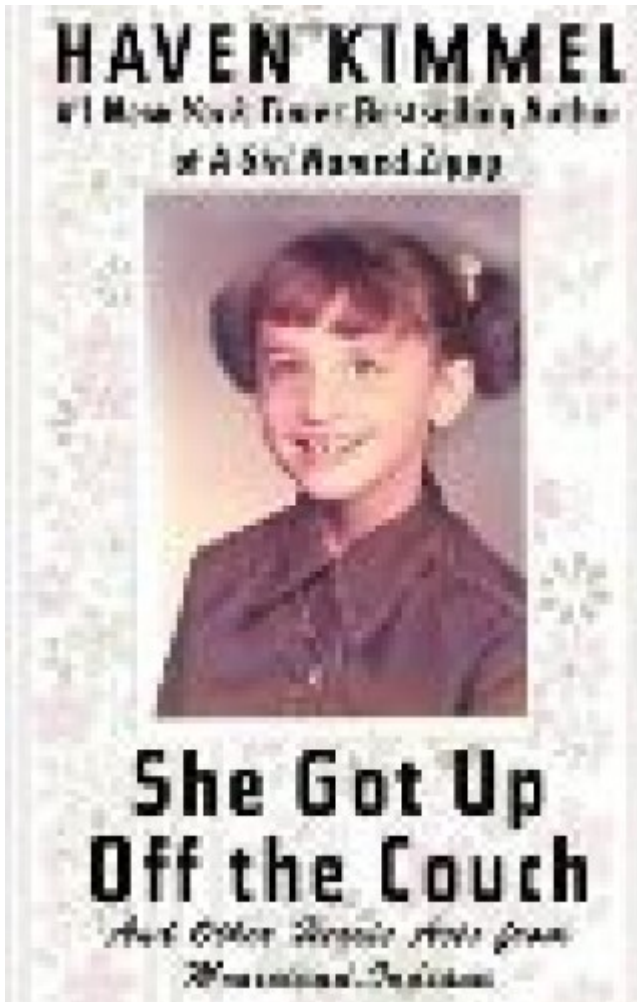


She Got Up Off the Couch

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

In Review



She Got Up Off the Couch: And Other Heroic Acts from Mooreland, Indiana

Haven Kimmel
Free Press

Five years after *A Girl Named Zippy*, Haven Kimmel returns to her life story with *She Got Up off the Couch*. Both memoirs are loving portraits of her hometown, Mooreland, Indiana, a Quaker community of 300 residents and three parallel streets—"the dearest postage stamp of native soil a person could wish for." Kimmel knows that her Midwestern hamlet, like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, to which she nods, contains all the larger human struggles. In particular, she sees in her "mother's evolution . . . the story of a generation of women who stood up and rocked the foundation of life in America."

Her obviously talented mother is overweight and indolent; she is wasting her life on a couch, reading books by the binful. One day "she sets out a fleece," making a bargain with God that she will go to college if he arranges for a certain commercial to appear before six o'clock. When the commercial miraculously runs with 30 seconds to spare, she "brushes away the pork rind crumbs" and starts her new life. Kimmel is moved and impressed by the many obstacles her mother overcomes—and rightfully so. Her mother loses 100 pounds, learns to drive a car and finishes a degree in two years. Women like this, Kimmel writes, "took it on the chin for everyone who followed." With no discernible support from her husband, Kimmel's mother earns a master's degree and becomes a teacher.

But young Haven is also rattled by the changes in her family. At age 17 her sister marries and moves out. An older brother she flatters with exaggerated adoration (he is "a wonder like Niagara Falls") cuts himself off from the family. Her mother, once dormant, is now absent and preoccupied. Her father is ill-prepared, it appears, for women's suffrage, much less full-blown feminism. He watches westerns and chain-smokes cigarettes. As the book ends he is escaping into an affair. Young Haven is convinced he no longer loves her.

The tension—and the most important theme—in *She Got Up off the Couch* is how the dark underside of life weaves through the small-town idyll. Stories like this are much-needed reminders of complexity. We need to see the selfish person do something kind; we need to see repressed love leaking free; we need to see love that can't leak free. We need to see how our liberating moments can hurt others, and how we strive for them anyway.

Young Haven grows up in this volume (by story's end she is 13), and yet the adult author is too timid about these early disturbances. After the near-idolatrous

description of her brother, Kimmel adds: "One time my father hit him so hard Danny was knocked halfway across our street, and when he got up he didn't say anything or do anything." That's it; then he's gone. She skirts the memoir's essential question—why her mother was stuck on the couch—then finally addresses it in a torrent of back story. In a single rush late in the book we learn about "the scholarship to Miami University she'd sacrificed at 16 to marry my father, who she thought was 26 years old and a pilot. (He was 18 and a gambler.) The 24 years of poverty and terror and ennui, the sexy, unpredictable man who managed it all, dominated everyone around him, animals even."

The account spills out, but we have not been prepared for it. Terror? Tell us more. Unpredictable? Show us that. He convinced her he was a pilot? How was she so easily fooled? Instead, Kimmel rushes in and rushes out as if, like the sons of Noah, she is embarrassed at seeing her mother's vulnerability and needs to cover her up.

She loves her mother after all. This is the woman who showed her how not to be afraid in the world. "See?" her mother says in one of the book's most beautiful moments. "It's just the world, you know the world." But the writer should not protect her characters, even in a memoir. She must trust us to judge them on our own. Kimmel acknowledges the dilemma in an interview: "As for why I generally choose the happy ending, it's because I love my characters and could never punish them. I could never leave them hanging or hurt them."

It takes courage not to use comedy and distraction to finesse the disturbing side of being human. Kimmel knows real conflict, but in her two volumes of memoir she moves us on too quickly. We need to enter those tents where Noah lies naked and ponder the drunken sleep. The unprotected story will provoke more empathy.