

My Name Is Jody Williams: A Vermont Girl's Winding Path to the Nobel Peace Prize

Jody Williams

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An introspective, goody-two-shoes growing up in Vermont, and then a self-proclaimed hippy during her college years, Jody Williams was first sparked into political action by a pamphlet stuffed into her hand by a scruffy volunteer on a street corner. It read: “El Salvador: Another Vietnam?” and drew in the college-age war protester immediately, changing the course of her future. While the sentiment may be a cliché, Jody Williams, winner of a Nobel Prize in 1997, proves in her memoir that any “average girl” can change the world—all it takes is passion and perseverance.

Her confusion over the admonishment of her childhood fantasy of growing up to become the pope, her fear (and protection) of her deaf and violent brother, and her failed marriage to her high-school-sweetheart at the age of twenty-three all steered Williams toward feminism and social justice. Shaped by the world around her—her Catholic upbringing and the antiwar efforts of the Vietnam era, in particular—she was driven to work as an activist in Central America to protest US intervention. Her work in El Salvador brought her to the attention of the executive director of the Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation, who “just knew” she would be able to unite NGOs and urge them to pressure governments to place a ban on landmines; because they are left buried underground, they cause as many injuries and fatalities long after war is over as they do during war. Hoping to learn more about international law, she took on the task, and it eventually led to the Nobel Peace Prize.

While the autobiography’s focus is on Williams’s journey to the Prize (and, therefore, ends in 1997), the important life events and memories she describes that are not directly related to her work support the story of her character development. Anecdotes concerning her relationship with her disabled brother, her close friends, and her long-term boyfriends and husband—as well as the details of her rape by a member of the Salvadoran death squad, a story which she read in 2006 as a part of the *Vagina Monologues*—reassure readers that activism and social change are not reserved for those with money or political sway. Williams’s persona on the page is conversational, friendly, and straightforward.

Williams relates her life story with candid language, homing in on what sparked her interest in activism and what drove her to make significant decisions as well as the excitement and emotional turmoil that resulted from those choices. Through her concise portrayal of her childhood and the development of her political and social work, she illustrates the turning points along her path and digs deeply into what they meant for her, her family and friends, and the world. The clarity of Williams’s voice is appealing, and her journey is inspiring. With her final sentence, she sums up her life and work: “The only real limitations we face are those we put on ourselves.”

AIMEE JODOIN (Spring 2013)

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