



# Fugitive Days: A Memoir

*Bill Ayers*

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## **Fugitive Days: A Memoir** Bill Ayers

Bill Ayers was born into privilege and is today a highly respected educator and community activist. In the late 1960s he was a founder of the militant activist group the Weather Underground. Living on the run, stealing explosives, and hiding from the law, Ayers was involved in the defining moments of his generation: the Days of Rage, SDS, the Black Panthers-and the explosion that killed his beloved comrade, Diana Oughton. *Fugitive Days* tells of these turbulent events, and of the tenacity with which Ayers slowly rebuilt his life after it all came apart. Ayers writes openly about his regrets and what he continues to believe was right. The result is a profoundly honest account of an incendiary chapter in our history.

## **Fugitive Days: A Memoir Details**

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Author : Bill Ayers

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## From Reader Review Fugitive Days: A Memoir for online ebook

### Jen says

Well told but I needed some sort of companion book that could fill in my gaps of understanding or memory of the surrounding historical details. Enjoyed what was there but I still had so many questions that I wished he'd filled in. Wish Obama didn't have to keep distancing himself from this cool guy.

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### Barbara says

Beautifully written, introspective look at the making of a man of the sixties and seventies. I was especially interested because that was the time of my own activism, and the politicians recently made much of what we were about then without a lot of accuracy. Good job, this.

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### Eric says

The book starts with a disclaimer by the author, "This story is only one version of events – is a memory book rather than a transcript, an accounting of sorts without any pretense toward an authorized history... Is this then, the truth? Not exactly. Although it feels entirely honest to me." In reading the book, I tried as I do with most historical books, to put myself in that period in time. The government was lying about Vietnam, sending many young men (and women) to another country to die for a conflict basically created by Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara (although it historically goes further back). Women and people of color had less rights and privileges, and people in position of authority were at times more violent and corrupt than the Weathermen. Taking that all into mind, I still found 'Fugitive Days' romanticizing and justifying illegal actions taken by Bill Ayers. Published in 2001, it still makes figures like Fidel Castro a hero, although factually he has been involved in the death of not only detractors, but also those that supported him in the July 26th movement, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos.

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### Joshum Harpy says

An amazing autobiography offering a glimpse into the militant anti-war, anti-imperialist resistance group, the weathermen, later known as the weather underground. The book traces Ayers' social consciousness as it develops from a young child to a fugitive "terrorist" through the 70's, through when he and his partner, fellow weather underground leader, Bernardine Dohrn, voluntarily turned themselves in to the FBI in 1980 and even a little into his later life as a norm who tours, lecturing about resisting white supremacy and continuing his anti-capitalist campaigns via non-violent hippy-woo talking circles.

The value of this book is not in the factual recounting of events, but rather the intensely personal and invaluable experience of someone who was there for some of the craziest moments in American history. Some of my personal favorite moments are the gut-wrenching account of the deaths of three members of the weathermen in an accidental explosion while manufacturing a bomb, and the account of Ayers talking to his family about bombing the Pentagon. One of those killed in the accidental explosion was a romantic partner of Ayers and the pain, loss, and the profound effect it had on the politics and tactics of the Weather Underground is so effectively conveyed that the tragedy is felt by the reader as though the loss was from one

of their loved ones, not some obscure radical figure of the 60's.

The time spent underground is somewhat glossed over, which is disappointing, as that insight is what I opened the book for in the first place. I imagine the fact that Ayers and Dohrn were reluctantly cleared of a great many of their charges, due to well documented constitutional abuses perpetrated by the FBI as part of the COINTELPRO program which targeted radical leftist groups in the 70's, is reason enough for Ayers to leave out a great deal of detail about the crimes he and others committed without ever being convicted.

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## **Stewart Home says**

Bill Ayers is a reactionary elitist tosser and his memoirs read like unconvincing fiction. Ayers claims the Weather Underground weren't terrorists but fails to build any kind of convincing argument to back up this assertion. He talks about students and intellectuals joining the working class (as leaders and educators of course!) as if you could join a social class in the same way that you can join a gym or college fraternity. He uses Stalinist terminology like 'good middle cadre' to describe fellow members of the Weather Underground, and has an unhealthy fixation with turning his dead girlfriend - the over-privileged and utterly repulsive Diana Oughton - into a Stalinist icon along the lines of 'Chairman Mao' or 'Uncle Ho' simply because she got herself blown up in a Weather Underground bomb factory.

Ayers constructs a completely ridiculous and unconvincing argument to justify his and his various girlfriends' vanguardist and adventurist activities. In short this amounts to the absurd claim that the only effective way to oppose the war in Vietnam was to carry out the bombings the Weather Underground undertook; which is stuff and nonsense because there were in reality many ways in which that war could be and was opposed. While the US military and government was overwhelmingly more successful in its terrorism than the Weather Underground, it was luck rather than judgement that led to three of its cadre dying in its most spectacular botch job (the Greenwich Village townhouse bomb factory explosion), rather than ordinary members of the working class.

To sum up, Ayers is a right-wing scumbag and a really bad prose writer to boot! "The emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves" - so twits with the bourgeois mindset so sordidly displayed in Ayer's memoirs can fuck right off, especially since they always present themselves as better than the rest of us and want to be our leaders! Anyone who understands that revolutionary activity aims to abolish alienation (and thus any division of labour) will simultaneously grasp the need to oppose all forms of leadership and specialisation. What we seek is the movement of vast majorities, and this necessarily entails opposing vanguardists like Ayers who are deluded enough to believe they can act as a divine spark bringing life to what they obnoxiously view as the dead matter of the inert masses.

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## **Jim says**

Funny, sad, inspirational, depressing and honest account of Bill Ayers' journey from a suburban childhood through the SDS anti-war years and into the world of the Weather Underground.

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## **David says**

Un libro turbulento, incendiario y atropellado. Imprescindible para entender unos años turbulentos,

incendiarios y atropellados. Bill Ayers nos arrastra por pisos francos, huidas permanentes, proyectos revolucionarios y acción directa, sin darnos tiempo a respirar. En algunos momentos la lectura se hace farragosa, por la mezcla de reflexión política y una narración discontinua. Sin embargo resulta fácil dejarse arrastrar por la corriente eléctrica de la historia de unos años irrepetibles.

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## Brian says

I was reading this primarily as research for a novel I'm working on, but found it to be an extraordinary piece of writing. Ayers does a wonderful job of capturing the radical spirit of the times, and authentically addresses the issues of activism in a time of political turmoil. I'd say it's more than relevant for the present time.

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## Daniel says

John McCain doesn't care about no washed-up terrorist. I guess I don't either.

So, here we have the tell-all memoir from the infamous Bill Ayers, who plotted with Barack HUSSEIN Obama to blow up the Capitol building and replace it with a giant statue of Chairman Mao raping Lady Liberty. Or something like that.

Actually, in *Fugitive Days*, Ayers never comes across as that smart or creative. He talks about getting caught up in the 60s anti-war movement and campaigning to bring an abrupt end to the atrocities in Vietnam. Cool. However, what I honestly can't figure out is if he's *intentionally* trying to sound like a spoiled, naive college kid who just likes weed and hot hippie chicks (i.e. "Oh, look how silly I was, I thought I was doing something cool but then I grew up...") or he really *does* think he's the Che Guevara of Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Ayers and his group started off with some unique and admirable attempts at social change. For example, they dropped out of college and rented apartments in the poorest, most crime-ridden neighborhood of Ann Arbor, where their goal was to organize the citizens into workers' unions and renters' rights groups. Ayers also helped found an alternative elementary school for children whose parents couldn't afford to send their kids to school (public or otherwise). As the anti-war movement became more heated, he and the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society--an odd name, as Ayers's dad points out: "You guys are already living in a democratic society!") spread rumors around the university that the group was going to torch a stray dog with napalm in protest. When outraged citizens showed up to prevent this act of brutality, the SDS of course had no napalm nor dog, but pictures of Vietnamese children who had been burned by napalm.

Unfortunately (for us, not Ayers), he emphasizes that with each demonstration and act of civil disobedience he participated in, there was a new girl, or three, for him to bed. Even after his radical Weathermen group broke from the SDS and went militant during Chicago's Days of Rage, he basically tells us that he did it all for da nookie (wut?) da nookie (wut?) so we can take that cookie and stick it up our (yeah!) stick it up our (yeah!) and so on.

Plus his justifications for planting bombs are pretty weak. Hey, I'm all for ripping the system and defying authority. Naturally, I don't condone violence and Ayers tries to share this philosophy, saying that the bombs his group set off were meant to cause architectural mayhem and chaos, and were strategically planted to disrupt the Washington war machine without spilling any blood. Okay, good to know. However he leaves several things unexplained. For example, why was the bomb which was set in a police station that (thankfully) failed in its planned detonation--the middle of a workday--placed in a ventilation duct adjacent

to a receptionist's desk? More shocking, why was the bomb that malfunctioned, killing three Weathermen and leveling their New York townhouse, loaded with nails and broken glass and shrapnel?

Overall though, they guy can't write for hell. One can see the real reason Obama desperately wanted to distance himself from Ayers. What was advertised as "a fascinating memoir...distinct, original...a powerful, morally charged account of a life and a society in the political balance...provocative reading" really just comes across as either sheer stupidity or a whole lotta false memories.

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### **Adriane says**

The Weathermen are a staple in the diet of any person who wants to learn about radical social movement in the US. Bill Ayers tells the story of his life both before and after he went Underground. Ayer's tone is at times overly sentimental. I suppose if I went from feeling like I could change the world to being just another average human with leftist views and a lengthy criminal record I would be overly nostalgic too. What I found most interesting about this book were the details of how He and his partner (and other weathermen) managed to live Underground for 10 years before finally turning themselves in. If you like memoirs, the idea that maybe the little people can save the world, and nostalgia for the glory days of youth then you can probably appreciate this book.

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### **Sandra says**

This is a significant document about the development of protests to United States military involvement held during the Vietnam War, and it gives us tidbits about the fugitive life of its more radical, violent dissidents. Bill Ayers writes good prose, although a bit wordy when he gets into the ideology behind the actions of the Weather Underground. He comes across as a likable, chatty kind of guy.

I believe he gives an honest and loving homage to Diana Oughton, their relationship a key plank in framing this memoir that gives it its ability to stand up. However, I also believe Ayers understates the activity of the Weather Underground during its fugitive time, and his role in it. Even the emotion takes on an absent, numbed sense in Part 2 of two parts. He states in several ways in several places what is concluded in chapter 29:

There is a necessary incompleteness in this account, an incoherence which is in part an artifact of those times and that situation. Some details cannot be told.

Okay, but what is told leaves me with a sense of misrepresented intentions. He criticizes the United States government for bombing that, I agree, tragically killed too many innocents to root out nests of "the enemy," yet justifies the Underground, employing the same basic strategy of bombing to root out centers of power without really saying how this would change any misguided policies. Ayers uses proportion of damage as a defense that I find weak. Lives were at stake no matter the numbers or the timeliness of warnings when given. He hints at different, more-humane-than-bombs strategies but then backs away from them, defending what came down, without recounting the scope of what came down, saying he could not know, there were too many "tribes" with their own agency, but...? He even suggests the Underground was somewhere in the middle between nonviolent peace advocates and anarchist terrorists. Well...would he know this if his information is incomplete?

So I am left feeling Ayers is not quite honest about the degree of his involvement, or, more charitably, not aware of his blind spots during this time. He falls back on musings on the changeable nature of memory, "a

house of mirrors,” interspersed throughout the account—these lyrical interludes reveal the survival strategy of non-retention or willed amnesia—but I speculate the townhouse blast, the accident that killed Oughton and others, left a hole in his life that resists his full consideration.

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### **Catherine says**

Good read, but I found 'Flying too close to the sun' by Cathy Wilkerson to be far more informative and critical.

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### **Kim says**

Perhaps mindful of E.L. Doctorow's sentiment, "History is the present. That's why every generation writes it anew. But what most people think of as history is its end product, myth", Ayers offers a rearview mirror exposition of his attempts as a twenty-something-year-old to live his answer to "How will you live your life so that it doesn't make a mockery of your values?" with integrity. This question "set me afire -- it rattled in my heart and my head for years to come."

"This story is a version of events, not definitive by any means, neither authorized nor authoritative; I warn you of my mistakes. Still, this account feels honest enough to me."

"We know something of catastrophe and precariousness, it's true, and something of indifference and narcissism as well. And memory."

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### **Nancy says**

I recently revisited my own experience of the late 60's when I read Rogue River Journal by John Daniel. That book is not directly about the 60's but because that time was an important turning point for Mr. Daniel, he spent some time describing his thoughts and actions. I found he really “got it right” in a way that captured my own experience and mood about that time. “Fugitive Days” does not describe my thoughts at the time or the world I knew. Like Bill Ayers, I opposed the war. It affected the decisions I made in life and who I am at 60. It also defined Bill Ayers but took him on a very different path. For people around my age, it is a book that gets you thinking about your idealistic youthful self, how you once approached trying to change the world, and what you are doing now to make the world a better place.

The book is not inspirational and only occasionally gives you a believable window into the “why” of what they did. But I think it is still worth reading, if only as a starting point for self reflection. If you just want to poke through, the middle part is most worth reading.

If you are specifically looking for a book about this era from the point of someone inside SDS and the Weatherman try Underground: My Life with SDS and the Weathermen by Mark Rudd

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## Paula says

I was soooooooooooooo looking forward to reading his account of his years with the Weather Underground group, with whom I've always been fascinated - but I hated his writing style and never did adjust to it. There was something frenetic and unfocused about it that agitated me, and I felt emotionally gypped throughout, like he was holding out somehow. There was some real emotion missing from it – and it makes me wonder how different (and better?) the same account would be if told through the eyes of his wife, Bernardine Dohrn. I've never read a book that made me feel the way this one did, and I'm not sure what to say about it. I kept thinking it would get better and it didn't.

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