

The Girl's Guide to Homelessness: A Memoir

by Brianna Karp



About the Book

Brianna Karp entered the workforce at age 10, supporting her mother and sister throughout her teen years in Southern California. Although her young life was scarred by violence and abuse, Karp stayed focused on her dream of a steady job and a home of her own. By age 22 her dream became reality. Karp loved her job as an executive assistant and signed the lease on a tiny cottage near the beach.

And then the Great Recession hit. Karp, like millions of others, lost her job. In the six months between the day she was laid off and the day she was forced out onto the street, Karp scrambled for temp work and filed hundreds of job applications, only to find all doors closed. When she inherited a 30-foot travel trailer after her father's suicide, Karp parked it in a WalMart parking lot and began to blog about her search for work and a way back.

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Discussion Guide

1. What ideas did you have about homelessness/homeless people before you read **The Girl's Guide to Homelessness**? Have your ideas changed after reading about Brianna's experiences? How so?
2. Brianna had an enormous number of odds stacked against her throughout her life. To say that her childhood was difficult would be an understatement. How do you think she was able to overcome her past and survive? What qualities in Brianna have allowed her to be particularly resilient?
3. How did religion play a role in shaping Brianna's relationship with her family? She says that Jehovah's Witnesses is a cult. Do you think her life would be different if she had stayed on and tried to be a member of the community as her sister did? Would it be better or worse?
4. Regarding her religious education, Brianna writes: "Even as a child, I recognized hypocrisy and prejudice at play, but I was at my most impressionable and, inevitably, whether I liked it or not, I retained bits of it." How has Brianna attempted to deprogram herself from religious indoctrination? If she was raised to embrace certain prejudices, do you think she can ever be truly free of them?
5. Brianna says that she has tried to forgive her family, including her mother, for the wrongs they have done her. If you were in her position, would you be able to forgive? Why or why not?
6. Brianna has a vehicle, a trailer, a mobile phone, a laptop and a dog. Does she still "count" as being

homeless? Are there different levels of homelessness? Do you think she's made good use of the "comforts" available to her?

7. Throughout her experience being homeless, Brianna is adamant that she will not accept charity --- that there are people worse off who need help more than she does. If you were in her shoes, would you feel the same? Is Brianna wrong to forego such assistance?

8. Having fun is still a priority for Brianna, even though she's homeless. Should homeless people be singly focused on altering their circumstances? Is there anything else she could or should do? Is having fun a luxury, or a basic need?

9. When daily survival was Brianna's number one goal, she met and got involved with Matt. What do you think initially attracted her to Matt? Do you think her relationship with him shifted her priorities in a negative way?

10. At first, Brianna presents Matt as a kind of savior, a true kindred spirit who gives her support and guidance. Did you detect any warning signs that Matt might not be the upstanding, selfless person that Brianna wanted him to be?

11. **The Girl's Guide to Homelessness** was written while Brianna was going through the events she describes in the book. How might her memoir have been different if it had been written at a later date, looking back on past experiences?

12. The title **The Girl's Guide to Homelessness** brings a sense of humor and a bit of irony to a serious subject. How does its tongue-in-cheek title affect your impression of Brianna and of the book?

13. On one of the final pages of the book, Brianna says, "People in general are not so bad after all." Were you surprised that she would say this, after all the hardships and betrayals she faced? Do you agree with her?

14. Now that you've read about Brianna's struggles, what do you think we can do about the homelessness epidemic? How can the average reader help?

Author Bio

Brianna Karp

BIO

Brianna Karp was raised in Orange County, California, the daughter of an abusive, mentally-ill mother and a father who left the family before she had any memories of him. She got her first job at age 10, a legal work permit at age 12, and supported her mother and younger sister by working multiple jobs from age 12 to 18, when she left home for good. She enrolled in community college and worked her way from entry-level, minimum-wage jobs into administrative and legal-secretary positions upward to an executive-assistant position at a major corporation, where, within a few years she was earning \$50,000 and living a comfortable life until being laid off from her job in 2008. Still looking for permanent work and shelter as the recession drags on, she has become a passionate advocate and spokesperson for the homeless. She lives in Riverside, California.

Critical Praise

In this candid and wickedly humorous memoir, Karp recounts her struggles of going from having a steady job to living in a trailer in a Southern California Wal-Mart parking lot in a matter of days. Raised in a Jehovah's Witness household, Karp endured sexual abuse from her father (who later abandoned the family) as well as mental and physical abuse by her mother. Despite this, as well as being forced by her mother to get a job at age 10, she excelled in school and had a well-paying job as an executive assistant when she was 22. But in the wake of the recession, Karp was laid off and, unable to pay rent or stay with her mother and stepfather, had to live in a 30-foot trailer she'd recently inherited. Taking advantage of Wal-Mart's policy of allowing RVs and trailers to stay in their parking lots overnight, Karp 'moved' to a parking lot, spending her days at Starbucks using the Wi-Fi connection to search for jobs. When a friend suggested blogging about her experience, she started www.girlsguidetohomelessness.com and connected with other homeless activists;

soon, her story went viral. Karp's voice is instantly appealing, and her message that basic respect shouldn't disappear when you lose your home is a vital one.

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