

Author Spotlight

SUSAN FALUDI



Susan Faludi (fah-LEW-dee) is a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist best known for her reporting on and critique of gender portrayal in American media. She was born in 1959 to Steven Faludi, a photographer, and Marilyn Lanning Faludi, a writer and an editor. Faludi's father, a Hungarian Jew who hid in a cellar with his family during the Holocaust, shared with her his love of woodworking, chemistry, and other uncommon activities for a young girl. She is the author of the bestselling *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, *Stuffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, and *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*. Faludi's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Nation*, among other publications.

Her most recent book, *In the Darkroom*, a memoir on her transgender father and a meditation on identity in its many forms, won the 2016 Kirkus Prize for Nonfiction. When she learned that her seventy-six-year-old father—long estranged and living in Hungary—had undergone sex reassignment surgery, the revelation would launch her on an extraordinary inquiry into the meaning of identity in the modern world and in her own haunted family saga. How was this new parent who identified as “a complete woman now” connected to the silent, explosive, and ultimately violent father she had known, the photographer who’d built his career on the alteration of images?

Faludi chases that mystery into the recesses of her suburban childhood and her father’s many previous incarnations: American dad, Alpine mountaineer, swashbuckling adventurer in the Amazon outback, Jewish fugitive in Holocaust Budapest. Faludi’s struggle to come to grips with her father’s metamorphosis takes her across borders—historical, political, religious, sexual—to bring her face to face with the question of the age: Is identity something you “choose,” or is it the very thing you can’t escape?

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Sources: *Great Lives from History: Jewish Americans* and us.macmillan.com

Discussion Questions for *In the Darkroom*

- 1) In chapter five, the author raises the question that lies at the core of *In the Darkroom*: “Is identity what you choose or what you can’t escape?” Is Stefánie’s transition a rejection of her origins, or is her new identity a kind of homecoming? What are the forces that have shaped your own sense of self?
- 2) What role does gender play in parenting styles? Before transitioning, was Steven a “typical” father? Afterward, did he become maternal? Did your parents perform stereotypical gender roles?
- 3) What did you learn about Jewish-Magyar collaboration and assimilation, and the decimation that followed the Treaty of Trianon? In what ways does this history continue to repeat itself with other populations, in other locales?
- 4) *In the Darkroom* was published without any family photographs. What memorable images did you create in your mind based on Faludi’s descriptions?
- 5) By impersonating the enemy, István Friedman (Stefánie) was able to survive and save his family. Would you have been willing to wear a Nazi armband if your life depended on it?
- 6) What motivated Stefánie to return to Hungary despite the continued anti-Semitism there, and a history in which his government essentially handed his community over to the enemy? Would you like to live in the homeland of your ancestors?
- 7) Besides technical skill, Stefánie had to possess a particular type of creativity to become such an accomplished re-toucher of photographs and editor of film, producing alterations that went undetected. How did she apply this artistry to her life?
- 8) Which aspects of Stefánie’s personality remained unchanged throughout her life, fueling her sojourn in Brazil, her tumultuous marriage, and her eventual return to Hungary?
- 9) What does *In the Darkroom* say about the nature of cultural scapegoats? What are the ingredients of paranoia? What makes a population vulnerable to discrimination?

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Discussion Questions for *In the Darkroom* continued

- 10) Stefánie repeatedly refers to herself as a “lady.” What does she think it means to be a lady? How do those expectations compare to your beliefs about what it means to be a woman?
- 11) Growing up, what did Susan learn from her father about a woman’s place in the world? How would the memoir have unfolded if it had been written by a son?
- 12) What do you predict for the future of Stefánie’s underground trans community? Do you have hope that they will achieve equality?
- 13) When Stefánie began preparing for sex-reassignment surgery in Thailand, she had to lie about her age. How was she affected by transitioning so late in life?
- 14) What were Susan and her father expecting from each other when they reunited in 2004? What did they end up receiving? What is Stefanie’s legacy?
- 15) As the author gradually coaxed her father to let her tour the county of Pest and visit the places where he spent his youth, how did the architecture, streetscapes, and landscapes begin to transform both Susan and Stefánie? If Budapest were a human being, how would you describe its life story?
- 16) Are any aspects of your family history off-limits or steeped in unverified lore? Is it always good to know the true history of your ancestors? What is the ultimate power of archives such as the one preserved at the Hungarian Jewish Museum?
- 17) Susan Faludi’s previous books have examined the fallout of gender myths (*Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*) and the cultural roots of 9/11 (*The Terror Dreams: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*). If you have read her previous works, what was it like to see her now examine the deeply personal imprints of gender and culture in her own life?

Source: macmillan.com

