

Discussion Questions

We are Staying: Eighty Years in the Life of a Family, a Store, and a Neighborhood by Jen Rubin



Discussion Questions created for Madison Public Library by the author.

1. Jen refers to Alan as a “compulsive optimist”. Do you agree with her? Do you think he needed to be one in order to survive as a small business owner in a changing New York City?
2. Jen includes this quote in her book by Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Murray Kempton, “We are used to holding the dignity of the person higher than the dignity of a store. And yet yesterday morning I looked at the shell of the Radio Clinic around the corner from where I live, and all of a sudden it became horridly clear that a store does have its dignity and that it can be violated.” Do you think differently about the stores in your neighborhood after reading this book?
3. The story focuses on Jen and her dad – but her mother and brother are characters in the life of Radio Clinic as well. Why do you think she kept the focus so tightly on her dad? Should she have also told the story through the eyes of her mom and brother?
4. Jen Rubin wrote a memoir where her father is arguably the main character. Do you feel like she is a trusted narrator to tell his story?
5. *We Are Staying* tells the story of what exactly a neighborhood loses when it loses a long-standing small business. Is there a business you remember from your past whose absence made a difference in your community?
6. In telling the story of Radio Clinic and her father, Jen Rubin captures what it means to go after the “American Dream”. How important are individual qualities (such as resiliency) versus public policy in achieving this dream?
7. John Nichols, columnist for *The Nation* magazine writes on the back cover, “The best political stories are the human ones, and Jen Rubin recognizes this.” Do you think differently about community and the role of small businesses from her family’s story?
8. How did learning about the history in the background over the 80 years covered in the book affect how you thought about the characters and their choices? Their failures and successes?
9. How is life different for an immigrant arriving in this country today than it was in 1931?

10. Jen opened the book with her ten-year-old self joyfully playing video games in the storefront window one year before the store was destroyed in the looting. Why do you think she started the book with that moment?

11. Jen put together a chapter-by-chapter Spotify soundtrack for the book (www.rubinjen.com/the-playlists.html). If you listened to the soundtrack while reading the book, did it enhance the experience?

About the Author

Source: www.rubinjen.com/

Jen Rubin is a former New Yorker living in Madison, WI. An obsessive maker of mixed tapes and quite possibly the best challah baker in town, she has worked for social change throughout her career. Jen leads storytelling workshops around Madison, co-produces the Moth StorySlam in Madison, co-hosts Inside, Stories Podcast, and teaches the occasional social policy class at the University of Wisconsin School of Social Work. She also works at the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

Check out the trailer for her book *We Are Staying* here:

<https://vimeo.com/334277167>

Book Review: **The Progressive**

Source: <https://progressive.org/dispatches/book-review-we-are-staying-180920/>

Sticking with the City

A review of, “We Are Staying: Eighty Years in the Life of a Family, a Store, and a Neighborhood.”

September 20, 2018

On the evening of July 13, 1977, moments after a massive power failure left all five boroughs of New York City in the dark, Alan Rubin, the owner of Radio Clinic, stood on the corner of Broadway and 98th Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and watched scores of people, some of whom he recognized from the neighborhood, rushing into and out of his store. The first to arrive had pried open his security gate and smashed through his door. They quickly but methodically went to work, stealing televisions, radios, stereo receivers, amplifiers, FM tuners, turntables, speakers, and boomboxes.

Rubin rushed over. Looters told him to get lost. The owner of a nearby pizza place, who was firing a gun into the air, offered Rubin his spare. “No way,” Rubin said, as he head to the precinct house, where he found the police shorthanded and overwhelmed, their holding cells already filled beyond capacity.

Rubin went home, returning early the next morning to find that all the remained of his showroom merchandise was a few toasters and tape recorders that had been kept on wall shelves too high for anyone to get to or pull down. Fortunately, even though the looters had discovered the business’ basement warehouse, they failed to figure out how to get the large appliances, including most of his air conditioners, out without the freight elevator and power.

Long before the electricity was restored, Rubin and his employees were back at work, sweeping glass, removing debris, and carting air conditioners out a door which led from the warehouse into to the basement of apartment building the store was a part of. With the mercury headed toward 100 degrees and expected to stay there, the moment the power went back on there would be a crush of customers at his 83rd Street store.

All morning, neighbors dropped in to express their regrets and ask Rubin what he was going to do now. So many, with so much work to do, that Rubin put a sign in the window: “We

Are Staying.” When a reporter from *Time* noticed the sign, Rubin took a moment to elaborate.

“I’m responsible for twenty-five families of the people that work for me. What’s going to happen to them if I pull out?”

“I’m responsible for twenty-five families—the families of the people that work for me,” he said. “What’s going to happen to them if I pull out? As bad as I got hit, there are other guys who got wiped out. What’s going to happen if they can’t re-open? What can the city and government do keep people from us from leaving these neighborhoods?”

Good questions, and we learn the answers in *We Are Staying: Eighty Years in the Life of a Family, a Store, and a Neighborhood*, an engrossing memoir written by Jen Rubin, Alan’s daughter. The book has drawn praise from *The Progressive* contributing writer John Nichols, who called it “a remarkably powerful, poignantly told story of a family, a business, a neighborhood, and a city. But what makes this book so brilliant, and so necessary, is the skill with which Rubin places this very personal story in the broader context of our struggles to understand one another and the common ground where we make our shared lives.”

As it turned out, the “city and government” did precious little to keep Alan Rubin from leaving, but he stayed anyway. This, after all, was the business his father Leon had started in 1934 with \$300, the cost of his first month’s rent.

We Are Staying is a family story, an immigration story, a New York City story, a small business story, and a story about the political economy of urban America. Jen Rubin—a social worker, professor of social policy, and activist—tells it with enormous insight, refreshing honesty, and a sure feel for New York, even though she has been living in Madison, Wisconsin, for many years. She is also a gifted storyteller. We know from the book’s title what happened in the immediate aftermath of the blackout and from the book’s opening pages where the story is going to end.

There is nonetheless drama all along the way, along with seemingly endless optimism against great odds, determination, hard work, frustration, resourcefulness, family tension, resilience, and no small amount of small business wisdom and wit. One customer asked Rubin if he’d match the price advertised by the Wiz—which like Crazy Eddie drove the electronics and appliance stores “crazy” in the 1970s and 1980s. He said, “No,” quickly and emphatically. And then with exquisite timing, added: “I’m not going to raise mine price just to match the Wiz.”

I am not a dispassionate reviewer. I wrote a book on the 1977 blackout and interviewed Alan Rubin for it. The first time we met in person we realized that his late sister had been one of my mother's best friends. I read an early draft of a chapter of this book and encouraged Jen Rubin to keep going. When I got to the end of *We Are Staying*, I learned that her father thought that I missed an important part the story.

My primary interest was the widespread looting and arson and the arguments about it, which began in the streets in the midst of the blackout and raged for weeks after. Less than a decade earlier, the Kerner Commission had explained the riots in Watts, Newark, Detroit, and numerous other cities as the result of racism, segregation, economic, social and political inequality. In the summer and fall of 1977, that explanation was challenged by people who saw simple criminality, even barbarism.

The looters were animals, many said, released from civilizing constraints. The sociological explanation of the 1960s and early 1970s was wrong, even morally bankrupt, which was part of the reason why the city was bankrupt too. The police, mayoral candidate Ed Koch said, should have shot to kill. My aim was to juxtapose complicated behavior—all the things that different people did when the lights went out—and often stunningly simple-minded explanations and debate.

Alan Rubin, so forward looking a man that he was thinking about how to improve his business as he watched it being looted, was not engaged by that debate. He thought the real story, and certainly the untold story, was what came next for the devastated businesses.

Jen Rubin couldn't resist the story of her family's emigration to America—after her great grandfather was murdered in a pogrom—or the story of her grandparents' early years in the city, the opening of the store and its rise in the golden age of both radio and small business (there were five-hundred small stores an easy walk from their apartment) or the story of the blackout and its immediate aftermath. But in the second half of her book she tells the story her father most wanted told, the experience of small businessmen and women in the months and years after the blackout looting.

Here again I am hardly impartial, for I am an often unrequited lover of the city that Leon Rubin and his friends and neighbors built, the city that Alan Rubin and his allies tried to save, and that Jen Rubin's book is a lovely tribute to. When my family moved back to Manhattan in 2000, we bought our conditioner from RCI. Two decades later, I still go out of my way to shop at the smallest stores that sell what I need.

Some of those stores are a long walk or a bicycle or subway ride away. Some are pretty big. Some that were small and family owned just a few years ago sold stakes—or the entire

business—to much larger businesses or the first good offer that came their way. Still, once a week someone asks me why I go to so much trouble when I could get what they see me carrying much cheaper at Costco or Stew Leonard’s or much more conveniently from Fresh Direct or Amazon.

I tell them: “After the people, what I love most about the city are the stores. Who in the world is going to want to live here when they are all gone?”

James Goodman, professor of history and creative writing at Rutgers University, Newark, is the author of “Stories of Scottsboro”, “Blackout,” and “But Where Is the Lamb?”

Book Review:



ISTHMUS

Source: <https://isthmus.com/arts/books/jen-rubin-we-are-staying/>

Survival tale

Jen Rubin's debut nonfiction book revisits her family's business.

by Lindsey B. Anderson

September 20, 2018

In her debut book, Jen Rubin writes about the sign that her father hung in their family's New York City electronics store after vandals ransacked it during the infamous blackout of 1977: "The glass was broken on the street side window, but the Broadway window was intact. He took a blank white poster used for promotions and with a thick black felt marker wrote 'WE ARE STAYING' and taped it to the window."

Her father's message was poignant, and pointed. So it's fitting that Rubin chose to call the book *We Are Staying: Eighty Years in the Life of a Family, a Store, and a Neighborhood*.

We Are Staying, as its subtitle implies, tells three stories.

First, it tells her family's story. Rubin writes about her grandfather, Leon, who fled religious persecution in Russia in the 1930s and opened a radio repair shop on Manhattan's Upper West Side, at 98th and Broadway. "He called the store Radio Clinic," Rubin says, "and he would put on this white doctor's coat and sit in the window and fix up the broken radios that people brought in." She also writes about her father, Alan, who became a pillar of his community through his work at the store — mentoring his employees, helping out his neighbors, sponsoring local sports teams and charities — until rising rents forced him to close the business in 2006, at age 74.

And of course she writes about herself too: how she looked forward to spending summer afternoons at Radio Clinic, and how her upbringing shaped her understanding of the American Dream and made her a lifelong community activist.

Second, it tells the story of Radio Clinic itself. The storefront it once occupied is vacant now, but for 80 years it was a hive of activity. When Leon opened the store in 1934, there weren't any Walmart Supercenters or shopping malls in the city — everyone shopped local,

and small businesses flourished. “There were 40 small businesses, on average, on every block in the city,” Rubin says. “It was a different time.”

And third, it tells the story of urban decay and renewal, the ebb and flow of wealth into and out of cities all over the country.

Rubin, who moved to Madison more than 20 years ago, is an award-winning storyteller who has competed in national Moth slams and who helped found the local chapter of the popular storytelling group. She says that the book’s themes are as relevant here as they are in New York. “We all want a say in our communities. No one wants to live somewhere where the businesses have been hollowed out and they have to drive five miles to get to the nearest big-box store,” she says. Madison, like Manhattan, she adds, has undergone a transformation of its own. “Look at State Street. It’s definitely changed in the last 20 years.”

Rubin misses the days when Madison was full of mom-and-pop speciality stores, in much the same way she misses watching her dad crack jokes with customers at Radio Clinic. She says that, in the act of writing *We Are Staying*, she was able to get past the painful demise of the store to remember what made the family business special: “I sort of forgot the wonderful part, when my dad was well-loved throughout the neighborhood, and how much I was impacted by my dad’s community-minded approach to running a business.”

Book Review: The Berkshire Eagle

Source: www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/book-review-we-are-staying-is-a-tribute-to-a-community-based-small-business,562722

Book Review: 'We Are Staying' is a tribute to a community-based small business

Posted Friday, January 25, 2019 2:45 pm

By Colin Harrington

"We Are Staying: Eighty Years in the Life of a Family, a Store, and a Neighborhood," by Jen Rubin, daughter of Pittsfield resident Alan Rubin, who is active locally in consulting with a small business incubator, coaching high school soccer, and as perhaps the central character in this story, was the proprietor of the Radio Clinic appliances store on the upper West Side of New York City on 98th and Broadway for 40 years. The store was opened by his father Leon Rubin, and Radio Clinic stayed open for 80 years. This book is a tribute to an iconic community-based small business, a way of life and a commentary on the importance of family and ancestry, urban community, social change and the ethical role of government in American life.

The author makes an important point that this story "originated as an immigrant story." Her grandfather and his family fled religious persecution and, like many from all over the world, migrated to New York City. The story begins dramatically for the author's father, Alan, when on the sweltering evening of July 13, 1977, New York City suffered a 25-hour blackout that pitched the city into darkness and Radio Clinic was almost completely looted. Key to Radio Clinic's survival and revival was his attitude of optimism, not anger, and in the second in a series of brilliant business moves at Radio Clinic, resolved to stay in business, even after having been almost wiped out. The very next day he put a sign on the storefront window: WE ARE STAYING.

"We Are Staying" chronicles and comments from a small business point-of-view on the effects of government policy and urban development in response to demographic shifts in the turbulent '60s, '70s, and '80s in New York. The book also laments the once-thriving 500 stores between 80th and 100th street, where everything you needed was provided for by the same merchants intent on sustaining their communities and the American dream. The book also portrays the importance of the personal involvement with people in running a small business that has been lamentably lost now with the preponderance of giant chain stores and

the need to travel out of the neighborhood to shop for essentials. An important question remains — what happens to the people who remain when small businesses are gone? Appendix II to the book is "Tributes Radio Clinic received from people who lived in the neighborhood." This is a marvelous preservation. "We Are Staying" is not just a celebration of an heroic victory for keeping a store and a way of life vibrant at all odds, but it is an important living history, a detailed memory of a world that now seems largely lost, but not forgotten.

The author is a self-described "obsessive maker of mixed tapes and quite possibly the best challah baker" in Madison, Wisc. Appendix I of the book includes the store listings of what was open on the same block during the time period of Radio Clinic, the books and articles read for each chapter, and delightfully, the mix of music she made that fit the theme of each chapter. Rubin leads storytelling workshops, works for social change, and teaches social policy at the University of Wisconsin. She co-produces the Moth StorySlam in Madison.

Colin Harrington is the events manager at The Bookstore & Get Lit Wine Bar in Lenox. He welcomes reader comments at charrington686@gmail.com.

Op-Ed: **The New York Times**

Source: www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/opinion/small-businesses-new-york-city.html

Can Small Businesses Survive New York City?

By Jen Rubin

July 14, 2017

On the morning of July 14, 1977, my dad stood on the sidewalk at Broadway and 98th Street staring through the shattered windows of his store, Radio Clinic. A lightning bolt had led to a cascading power failure that had plunged New York City into darkness. By the time the power came back on, 25 hours later, more than 1,600 stores had been looted. With its shelves of stereo equipment, televisions, boomboxes (remember those?) and other electronics, Radio Clinic had been an irresistible target.

The Upper West Side was one of the hardest hit sections of Manhattan, with 61 stores looted between 63rd and 110th Street. Looters tore off iron security gates by hand, or with chains attached to cars. New Yorkers feared that the blackout was proof that the social order and perhaps the city itself was in an irreversible decline. Many small-business owners, and even more residents, decided it was time to get out.

While my dad and his employees cleaned up the store, neighbors streamed in to ask if Radio Clinic was shutting down, too. The store had been on the block since 1934, when my grandfather set up shop and sat in the storefront window in a white lab coat fixing broken radios. My dad had worked there since he was a teenager. I was only 11, but I already spent my weekends there sticking prices on film and demonstrating the new Atari arcade game to people as they passed by the store. My dad had no intention of abandoning Radio Clinic.

So finally he put up a sign in one of the few remaining windows. Thick black marker on white poster board read: “WE ARE STAYING.” Neighbors saw the sign and came in offering thanks, flowers and hugs. They were relieved that this business was not giving up.

The sign also drew reporters’ attention. “I’m responsible for 25 families — the families of people that work for me,” my dad told a Time magazine reporter. “What’s going to happen to them if I pull out? As bad as I got hit, there are other guys that got wiped out. What’s

going to happen if they can't reopen? What can the city and the government do to keep people like us from leaving these neighborhoods?"

My dad knew he needed help from the city to rebuild his business. Just two years earlier, New York had been on the verge of bankruptcy, and it wasn't too big a leap to think it would now put some muscle into keeping the looted businesses from boarding up their windows, if only to stabilize neighborhoods (and tax revenues).

My dad began making the wearying rounds of city agencies. He was full of ideas on how the city could help looted businesses, from offering interest-free loans to waiving July taxes. At each meeting, he was offered plenty of sympathy. But in the end he received very minimal financial aid — \$1,800 — an amount so negligible he considered it only “slightly better than a kick in the head.” He was so frustrated he wrote his own Op-Ed for this newspaper about the experience. As far as my dad was concerned, the city had failed to protect its small businesses during the blackout, and now it was abandoning them in its aftermath.

He managed to keep the store afloat, however, eventually renaming it R.C.I. A few years later, it turned out that his vote of confidence in the city had been prescient. By the 1980s, the Upper West Side was experiencing a real estate boom and was gentrifying quickly. But the small businesses like my dad's that anchored the neighborhood were now victims of their own success. As property values went up, storefront rents became untenable. “Lost our lease” signs popped up all over.

My dad got involved in lobbying for rent stabilization for small businesses. Mayor Ed Koch acknowledged that rents were a problem but opposed any rent controls. He felt confident that the free market was the most effective mechanism for determining what type of store a neighborhood needed. Mayor after mayor, City Hall never decided that small businesses were in the city's public interest. As the rents continued to rise through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, small family-owned stores continued to close. It was increasingly clear that one thing the market couldn't bear was small businesses.

My dad retired in 2006. R.C.I. hung on until 2014, when it, too, finally closed.

In 1977 my dad asked a reporter what the city could do to keep stores like his in business. In the 40 years since, the city has been indifferent to this question. As a result, many neighborhood stores, in business at the same locations for decades, are gone forever, replaced by a revolving cast of chain stores that do not sink deep roots into the neighborhoods they serve. The next time the city is down, facing hard times, will there be anyone left who will put up a sign that says “WE ARE STAYING”?

“What can the city and the government do to keep people like us from leaving these neighborhoods?” It is still a good question.

Jen Rubin is working on a book about Radio Clinic.

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A version of this article appears in print on July 14, 2017, Section A, Page 23 of the New York edition with the headline: The Struggling Stores of New York

Interviews with the Author

Tone Madison Podcast Interview: www.tonemadison.com/articles/podcast-jen-rubin-remembers-a-resilient-family-business

Forward Forum Interview (Video): https://youtu.be/_XAsP1ucFLI