

# I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales From a Happy Life Without Kids

Jen Kirkman

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

## i can barely take care of myself

TALES FROM A HAPPY LIFE  
WITHOUT KIDS

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#337586 in Books Simon Schuster 2014-04-22 2014-04-22 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.37 x .60 x 5.50l, .44 #File Name: 1476739943224 pages Simon Schuster | File size: 29.Mb

**Jen Kirkman : I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales From a Happy Life Without Kids** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales From a Happy Life Without Kids:

132 of 135 people found the following review helpful. Focus on the happy life By 2A Lawyer This is not a book for solely for women without children. This is a very funny, clever series of stories about people who simply live their

lives without regard to what others expect of them. I've seen some people take shots at Jen Kirkman for being a child hater. If you read this book, you'll see that Jen doesn't hate kids at all. There was recently a story from the UK about a woman in her 50s who took to the press to tell the world that her greatest regret in life was having kids. (...).[dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2303588/The-mother-says-having-children-biggest-regret-life.html](http://dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2303588/The-mother-says-having-children-biggest-regret-life.html)). That is someone who hates kids. Jen's story is quite the opposite. She knows she doesn't want kids and not having any is the most responsible thing she could have done. But as much as the book is a thoughtful analysis of a person's life and how she is, indeed, very happy in a life without children (or a spouse), it's also an endearing and hilarious story about a person navigating her way through her own mind. I'm a married guy without kids and this book really spoke to me. It's not just for women (with or without kids) and it really isn't like the books from others who work with Chelsea Handler (I think it's a lot more thoughtful and a lot less of the "I got drunk and slept around" theme). It's very funny, but not in a bawdy or crass way. Like her comedy, Jen Kirkman's book finds its humor in observational story telling with a positive, yet sardonic, bent. This is a book for anyone who hasn't conformed, in one way or another, to what society expects of us. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Clap along if you feel like a room without a crib

By Andrew McCaffrey  
You don't really need a base description of "I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales From A Happy Life Without Kids" because the title of Jen Kirkman's memoir serves as its own summary. And it is a happy life; this is not a bitter book or a mean-spirited tirade against motherhood and children. It's a straightforward presentation of the rarely heard side of a discussion. The fact that Kirkman is a hilarious writer just makes the book that much more delicious and enjoyable. "But what if you change your mind?!" is something often said to childless people who state their intent to remain childless. Of course, this ignores that fact that this question can also be used as an equal and opposite argument in the other direction. (It would also be a reason against buying a particular car or a house, or against taking a vacation, or indeed against ever doing absolutely anything at all). Kirkman relates the most common (often unintentionally insulting) things said to her when the topic of her decision to remain child-free comes up in conversation. She then takes those half-considered sentences and responds. Often with wit and sarcasm, but always with thought. The book is structured mostly as a series of anecdotes from the author's life. My own personal favorite (and the one perhaps most representative of the book as a whole) is her inadvertently getting into an uncomfortable conversation about death and murder with a four-year-old boy she's babysitting and becoming increasingly unable to extract herself from it. It's personal but relatable. I've never been in that exact situation, but I could easily imagine the horror that she felt as she tried to smooth over an awkward discussion, and hoping beyond hope that she hadn't scared some poor innocent child for life. One thing I appreciate when reading a book or an essay by a stand-up comedian is the careful attention they generally take towards their use of language -- more so I think than many other kinds of writers. They'll agonize for weeks or months over the exact phrasing of a joke, trying to determine which individual words in which precise order manage to convey the same information in the funniest or most clever possible way. This obviously translates very well to the written word. Whether or not Kirkman actually follows this preparation style isn't known to me, but the end result certainly feels very smooth, polished and considered. The language flows in a gentle comedic manner that pulled me gradually along its witty way. I became so used to the normal, on-going level of levity that when an especially funny bit leapt out, it became that much more hilarious. The book's focus is on being child-free. While many of the book's passages will wander away from that point, each one eventually does return to the central premise. That said, Kirkman mentioned on her podcast that she plans to write a second book which will not be related to the themes of the first. I have no idea what her topic(s) will be, but based on the strength of her debut, I'll definitely be pre-ordering it.

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. I Can Barely Take Care of Myself too!

By Molly Lehmann  
There is nothing I don't like about Jen Kirkman. I was first introduced to Jen when after I had read Heather McDonald's book and I caught a clip of a Facts of Life parody from Chelsea Lately in which she played Jo. I was instantly drawn to her as a performer. As I aspiring comedienne and child free by choice 34 year old woman I felt compelled to read this book when I heard about it. I loved EVERY second of it. This book is more than just being about not wanting kids. It spoke to me on different levels. Also, it was definitely the book I should have been reading at the moment. I feel so much of Jen's life growing up mirrored my own in many ways. It is refreshing and comforting to know someone you admire had similar experiences as you. I loved how she embraces who she is as person and as a former theatre geek, as well as stand by her convictions in her choice to not having kids. And she does it all in a positive and honest light. That is one of my favorite things about her. She doesn't apologize for who she is and what she believes in. This book has inspired me to continue on with my comedy and not be afraid to be who I am, as well as sticking by my reasons for not wanting kids. I urge you to read this if you are child free by choice or if you want just want a good read. You should support this funny lady, because she has so much to offer. I cannot wait for book two!

In this instant New York Times bestseller that's "boldly funny without being anti-mom" (In Touch), comedian and Chelsea Lately regular Jen Kirkman champions every woman's right to follow her own path—even if that means being "childfree by choice." In her debut memoir, actress and comedian Jen Kirkman delves into her off-camera life with the same snarky sensitivity and oddball humor she brings to her sold-out standup shows and the Chelsea Lately

roundtable, where she is a writer and regular performer. As a woman of a certain age who has no desire to start a family, Jen often finds herself confronted (by friends, family, and total strangers) about her decision to be “childfree by choice.” *I Can Barely Take Care of Myself* offers honest and hilarious responses to questions like “Who will take care of you when you get old?” (Servants!) and a peek into the psyche—and weird and wonderful life—of a woman who has always marched to the beat of a different drummer and is pretty sure she’s not gonna change her mind, but thanks for your concern.

“Jen Kirkman has written an excellent—and very funny—guide to promote not having children. Thanks girl, for saving me the time.” (Chelsea Handler) “If you’ve ever been told you’d ‘change your mind’ about anything in life—when you knew that you wouldn’t—this book is for you. Jen has a unique, fresh and funny way of reminding people that sometimes, you really do know what’s best for you. I’m glad she didn’t change her mind about writing this smart, brave, and heartfelt book.” (Sarah Colonna comedian and New York Times bestselling author of *Life As I Blow It*) “Boldly funny without being anti-mom.” (InTouch magazine) “Very funny. . . . the core of the book is about not wanting to have children, and the ways in which society gets up in your face about it. . . . I laughed out loud several times.” (TheHairpin.com) “Full of humor, wisdom, and laugh out loud moments.” (The Kentucky Democrat) “A standup comedian’s hilarious explanation for why, gee, thanks for asking, but she isn’t going to change her mind about not having children.” (Tampa Bay Times) “Kirkman puts her comedic talent to use by snarking to her readers about the ridiculousness of baby culture, overly-enthusiastic parents, and total strangers who feel it necessary to publicly pry. And since it’s a good bet that those readers feel the same way, this book may very well strike a funnybone.” (Savannah Morning News) “A seriously humorous stance on deciding not to have kids. . . . With the novelist’s penchant for self-flagellation and exploitation, and jokes punctuating at least every page, this book is ideal for the woman who needs a quick comeback for those who criticize her about not wanting kids, or for those just looking to laugh.” (Publisher’s Weekly) “Between these charming, cringe-worthy, and badass tales, Kirkman successfully convinces us she isn’t meant for motherhood. It’s safe to say she’s much better suited to birthing books.” (ThirdBeatMagazine.com) “This book takes you through the journey of Jen Kirkman’s misunderstood child-free life. I’m now convinced of two things: Jen is freaking hilarious and she should definitely not have a baby—she should have a Valium.” (Whitney Cummings creator of *Two Broke Girls* and *Whitney*) “Jen Kirkman’s wickedly original yet totally universal debut about the expectations of others kicks so much ass you’ll agree with her even when you don’t. Not for the stupidly over-sensitive. For lovers of great!” (Greg Behrendt #1 New York Times bestselling author of *He’s Just Not That Into You*) About the Author Jen Kirkman is a world-touring stand-up comedian and the author of the New York Times bestseller *I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales of a Happy Life Without Kids* and *I Know What I’m Doing—And Other Lies I Tell Myself: Dispatches from a Life Under Construction*. Her Netflix original comedy special *I’m Gonna Die Alone* and *I Feel Fine* streams worldwide, and she has released two comedy albums, *Self Help* and *Hail to the Freaks* (which hit #13 on the Billboard charts). She was a longtime writer and panelist on the E! Network’s *Chelsea Lately* and the narrator of many episodes in the award-winning TV show *Drunk History* on Comedy Central.

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**I Can Barely Take Care of Myself**

**INTRODUCTION** I’m sitting on my couch in just a bra and sweatpants. For some reason I also have a cocktail ring on my right finger and a feather headband atop my head. I’m too embarrassed to wear the feather-band outside of the house—although I guess not too embarrassed to commit to print that I’m wearing it and knee-high pom-pom slippers late at night. When I’m on a writing procrastination binge I start playing dress-up, and I just got bored and quit halfway through, so now I’m procrastinating my game of dress-up by finishing writing the introduction to this book. This is just one example of what it is to be me. Besides the usual distractions from life—friends calling in tears because they’re heartbroken, flat tires, deaths in the family, leaks in the ceiling, work—I pretty much have the ability to do whatever I want, whenever I want because I don’t have children. That’s not the only reason why I don’t want children—it’s just one perk. And yes, I don’t want children. As far as I know, I can have children. But I’m not great with kids and the thought of raising them scares me—it’s more terrifying to me than an empty house in the woods or a clown doll sitting in a chair. You’re just so screwed if you find yourself in any of these situations! There’s no way out! Most people assume that “doing whatever I want” includes partying all night and enjoying my hangover without a toddler sitting on my head. But I’m actually pretty mild. I got nervous one time after taking Benadryl three nights in a row to fall asleep. I fantasized about whether I would have to call my loved ones before checking in to Betty Ford or would someone from the rehab center go through my iPhone for me? I remember asking my mom when I was little if I could go live at this place in Boston called “The Home for Little Wanderers.” I didn’t realize that it was a facility for orphans. It sounded to me more like a place for free spirits who knew that even if they loved where they were one moment, that could change tomorrow. One thing I know about myself is that everywhere I go is my new favorite place. And I’m not a cold, heartless vagabond either. If in my wandering I end up reading to children at a zoo in Madagascar—wonderful! I don’t hate kids. I just hate the idea of dragging a kid around with me as he or she is forced to adapt to my lifestyle. I also don’t want to have to carry animal crackers around in my purse. I have a picture of my cat from childhood, Mittens, on my living room wall. He’s been dead for twenty-four years. When friends ask me why

I don't just get another tuxedo cat, I say, "I loved Mittens because my mother changed his cat litter. Not me." I do have a small collection of stuffed-animal tuxedo cats given to me as gifts by people who, I assume, assumed that I needed something to care for. But those kitties are smashed down facefirst in a wicker basket in the bedroom. I'm afraid to look. I think they might be dead. The way most people feel about loving being a parent is exactly how I feel about not being a parent. I love it. And I can't imagine my life any other way. I'm one of those people in an ever-growing movement called childfree by choice. I think it's a clinical and defensive name for what sounds like an otherwise fun group of people. I've never actually seen members of this movement all in one place. I guess we're not as organized or fabulous or as into riding floats as gay people. We live in pockets of cities and suburbs all across America and the world and we may not have anything else in common with one another except that none of us right now has a toddler saying, "Mommy, please put a shirt on. It's inappropriate to sit around the house in a bra and why is there a peacock on your head?" So while I sit here on my couch at home dressed like someone halfway to senility, I'm remembering the time that I was sitting on a couch in my psychologist's office, wondering whether it was weird that I still had my sunglasses on my head during our session. I wondered whether I was too accessorized for sitting around figuring out my problems and analyzing my patterns. It feels like I should treat therapy like going through airport security (which I do a few times a month as a traveling stand-up comedian)—I should have nothing in my pockets, no shoes and no jewelry around my neck, nothing on my outside that can distract the person in front of me from seeing what I look like on the inside. That day I said to my shrink, "I feel like an outsider in the world because I never want to have children. When people ask me if I want children and I say no—they always say things like 'You'll change your mind.' I'm sick of it and I feel like I don't fit in." I don't know what I expected my therapist to say—probably her usual: "Was there a time in childhood when you felt like an outsider? Is this pushing any old buttons? You know if it's hysterical, it's historical." What I didn't expect was that she'd say, "You don't want kids? Why not? What's up with that?" What's up with that? "Oh no," I said. "Not you too! You're going to tell me I'm weird for not wanting children?" She explained that it's my reaction to those people that we need to work on—and that we don't need to attach any jumper cables to my biological clock. She suggested that instead of answering, "I don't want kids," that I should simply say, "It's not in my plans right now." Oh boy. She had no idea what I was up against at every cocktail hour/wedding/shower/holiday party I've been to since I started to ovulate. I'm convinced that people who want kids and people who have kids have secret meetings where they come up with their talking points. There's not one response to "I'm not having kids" that I haven't heard and I've heard the same questions and comments approximately one bazillion times: • If you don't have kids, who is going to take care of you when you're old? (Servants?) • Men have to spread their seed. It's in their DNA. (He can spread his seed all he wants. I have a magic pill that prevents it from growing.) • But it's the most natural thing you can do as a woman. (So is getting my period every month.) • That's selfish. You can't be immature forever. (And spending your days watching *Dora the Explorer* with a kid is mature?) • You have to replace yourself on earth. What will you leave behind? (There are a few plastic bags that I never recycled . . .) Random people who want me to have children are the same type of people who won't let up on me because I haven't watched *The Wire* and I never plan to. I just never got into *The Wire*. Is *The Wire* brilliant and life altering and does it make you feel less alone at night? Yes! That doesn't mean I have to like the show. I have no opinion on *The Wire*. It is just not a part of my life. I'm not trying to be cool or different. A Non-Wire Lover is not my identity. I just don't even think about *The Wire*. And yet people continue, "It's available on Netflix!" "I understand that it's easy to get." "You'll love it." "I won't. I might. I don't care." "How can you not watch it? Well, what kind of shows do you watch?" What will happen to these people if I never see *The Wire*? Are they at home feeling a phantom pain in their abdomens and thinking, If Jen would only watch *The Wire*, this bad feeling would go away. And in the same way my Netflix queue remains Wire-free, people seem really agitated that my womb remains baby-free. I took my therapist's advice and started getting cagey with my answer. But once I started saying, "It's not in my plans right now," it was taken as, "Yes, I plan to have kids someday." And then just to avoid arguments, I went through a phase of lying. "Yes. I want to have kids someday. I want to have kids right now. Anybody have a turkey baster? Let's kick this party up a notch. I'm ovulating!" But I'm not going to lie anymore. I've always been a little different. I was called a "freak" in high school because I wanted to be on a stage instead of on a lacrosse field. I went to a job interview at an office straight out of college wearing black tights, green nail polish, and clear jelly shoes. I got the job but my new boss took me aside to explain the office dress code. She asked me, "What were you trying to prove with that outfit? Why do you want to look weird?" I had honestly thought that this was a good outfit to wear. I wouldn't even know how to try to be weird. It seems like too much effort. Just like trying to be normal—whatever that looks like—often seems more trouble than it's worth. I mean, who really wants to wash her car in the driveway every Sunday (or even have a driveway)? My favorite TV show when I was six was *The Lawrence Welk Show*. I wanted to grow up and live in a world of bubbles and polka music someday. I went to the most popular girl in school's slumber party in the sixth grade dressed as Groucho Marx. (It didn't go well—you'll read all about it.) It may not be filled with bubbles and polka (actually thank God for that, my aesthetic and musical tastes have changed), but I've found a community of weirdos in the comedy world. I moved by myself to New York City and Los Angeles. All of my family and my childhood friends live on the East Coast. I decided to wander the country in search of a career as a stand-up comedian. Fifteen years later

and two comedy albums in, I'm doing just that for a living, in addition to writing and appearing on Chelsea Lately and playing the part of myself in the Chelsea Lately spin-off After Lately. My days consist of writing comedy and the occasional phone call to my sister to explain that the e-mail she just received from me saying "I'm pregnant, please call Mom" was really from Chelsea Handler, after she'd had her way with my computer. My twelfth-grade teacher Mr. Bergen would be proud of me. He wrote me a card when I graduated from high school that said in big black letters, GET OUT OF THIS TOWN. GET OUT WHILE YOU CAN, and a lovely note on the inside that encouraged me to follow my dreams because he could tell that I wouldn't be happy trying to conform on any level. Now, I don't think having a child makes you a conformist and I don't think that not having a child makes you a nonconformist—but I do think that following your heart no matter what other people have to say takes a real sense of self. My friend Shannon, who has two children, says that the judgment never ends. She had children—she did the supposed "normal" thing—and still people chastise her for not having six kids or for the fact that she doesn't abide by the latest parenting trends. "What? You breast-feed before sunrise? Oh no. You'll end up with a vampire." The bottom line is that the choices we make often make sense to us but can confuse others. Somebody is always going to be disappointed with your life choice, and my rule of thumb is that as long as I'm not the one who is disappointed, I can live with that. If you've ever been thought of as selfish and immature or told "you'll change your mind" about anything, I hope this book can be your card from Mr. Bergen. "Get out while you can"—get out of that mentality that there is a "right" way to live. (Well, technically there is, I believe it's called the Golden Rule, and you can find it either in the Bible or on a coffee mug, I forget.) I know some people think that not wanting kids means I'm cold, but I'm not totally without baby urges. I felt something when I saw my friend Grace's baby all swaddled in a blanket on the couch. She looked like a yawning peanut. She was just a content little lump, drooling and going in and out of sleep. And I got that feeling deep down inside that almost brought tears to my eyes. I got an urge and I thought, Oh my God. I want to . . . be a baby.