

Reading Guide for *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God* by Timothy Schaffert

Interview with Timothy Schaffert

How long did it take you to write *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God*?

I wrote it in a couple of years working from material I had been thinking about several years before and characters I developed years before. But I was doing other projects at the same time.

Was it an easier to write this book than to write your first novel *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters*?

No. This was a difficult book to write. The characters are older than the ones in the first book, and their situations are more difficult.

Why did you want to write about characters like Hud and Tuesday?

There's something about that life on the edge, that kind of ragtag experience, that stimulates my imagination. Their world is broken and mysterious and funny. Their perspectives are informed by their appreciation of ironies.

Most of the people in the community where I come from marry young. And often those marriages don't work.

You appear to be familiar with the psychological landscape of divorce. Why?

My parents still are together, and I have never married. But my older brothers are both divorced. It is something most families have to deal with. I wanted to examine a divorce that was unsuccessful. Tuesday and Hud still belong together. I was interested in the complexities of that.

Your story seems sensitive to the effect divorce has on children. Where do you think you derive that sensitivity?

I grew up pretty close to my nieces and nephews. One brother is six years older and another brother is eight years older. They were getting married and disassembled from those marriages when I was in my teens, and I was aware of the feelings of their children because there was that personal connection.

Often in divorce children become tools of the divorce. Often times partners will use children to get back at one another.

Why does religion appear as such a driving force in this book?

I grew up with a lot of religion. I grew up in the Lutheran church. When you live in a small town, it's fascinating to see how big a role religion plays in people's lives. The religious experience of the characters in my book doesn't reflect mine, though. My experience was much less strict than the fundamentalism that I grew up around.

Confusion and complexity play a part in my own religious understanding. Throughout adolescence you're clinging to anything you can that makes any kind of sense.

Growing up in the 70s and 80s, I don't remember anything like the Daughters of God. However, today's Christian rock groups are highly sophisticated in their marketing. I thought of the Daughters of God that way, that is, as savvy capitalists.

What do you think 60s-era movies like *Hud* and *Breathless* have to teach people? Red, the owner of the drive-in featured in your book, is trying to educate people via movies, according to the narrative.

I don't know that there's anything useful to be learned from movies, but much that can be intuited, much can contribute to our own self-invention. I think that, in deciding who we are, understanding where we fit in the world, we look to films to help us articulate it all. We take gestures, styles, and ways of speaking, from the actors in movies. We communicate who we are by talking about our favorite movies. I think that the education that Red wants to give the community via his drive-in is simply a cinematic education. I think he fancies himself a film scholar, introducing the people of the town to movies they wouldn't see elsewhere.

Your main character's name is *Hud*. Why did you give him this name? And of course his wife is Tuesday, named after an actress whose work is concentrated in the 60s and 70s.

As for the names: A friend of mine watched "Hud" one night, and the next day insisted we all call him by that name, which we did. He had fallen asleep halfway into the movie, though, so he didn't see all of Hud's nastiness play out, including his aggression against Patricia Neal. (In McMurtry's novel, "Horseman, Pass By," on which "Hud" is based, Hud rapes the housekeeper; in the film, it's left somewhat ambiguous.) I liked the idea of someone being impressed by Newman's look and style, enough to overlook that he's a cold-hearted snake in the film; it seemed to fit with the character in my novel. And it's also a little tribute to my good friend Justin, a.k.a. Hud. (And to Larry McMurtry.)

You, and your characters, seem to have an affinity to the movies of the 60s. Why?

I don't know that I feel particularly close to the movies of the 60s, any more so than film from any other time, but I do think there was a rebel cool in the actors of that era that my characters would feel moved by. I can imagine Red, a film buff, wanting to name his daughter after a devil-doll like Tuesday Weld, and I can imagine Hud being attracted to the notion of falling love with a girl named after Weld.

A school bus is a major setting in *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God* and also in your first book *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters*. As a rural kid, you must have spent a lot of time on school buses. Is this the reason they have figured prominently in your novels?

I did spend a lot of time on school buses growing up. So much so, that the bus really was a kind of sub-community for me, outside of school. You were tossed together with people that you didn't necessarily hang out with, yet formed bonds and friendships with them simply by nature of spending a few hours a day with them in such close proximity. I don't

think I read much on the bus, because I always had people to talk to. And I often spent much time talking to the bus drivers, as well.

When I was in the third grade, my bus crashed into a car in a country road, but I had gotten off the bus at an earlier stop to walk home. There were some broken bones and bloody gouges among the children who got tossed around, but nothing critical, though the bus driver, a very sweet, soft-spoken woman named Rose, never quite adjusted afterwards, and eventually quit the job. And there was a part of me that regretted not having been on the bus when it crashed . . . like I'd missed out on some moment of kinship among this busload of misfits. (And a part of me that morbidly speculated that God had influenced me to get off the bus . . . that if I'd been in the accident, I would have been terribly injured.) There are probably hundreds of other stories too . . . when I think of going to grade school, I think of being on the bus.

Who are some of your favorite writers? What are some of your favorite books?

I would say *The Last Picture Show* by Larry McMurtry; *Sanctuary* by Faulkner; *The Magic Kingdom* Stanley Elkin; *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. I always say my favorite book is the last great book I read.

When I was younger, I loved J.D. Salinger. In college, I liked southern writers like Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. I don't know if they influenced me, or if it was something about their sensibility that spoke to me.

Any guilty pleasures?

In junior high, I used to read Harold Robbins and Sidney Sheldon novels. My mother used to belong to book-of-the-month clubs, so there usually was a bunch on her bookshelf.

About the Author

Timothy Schaffert captured critical attention with his first novel *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters*, which Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* called "blithe, spirited . . . quirky, offbeat." And Schaffert again goes off the beaten path with his second novel *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God*, a story of off-kilter characters whose misadventures are set to the quirky cacophony of their bluesy down-home lives.

Schaffert says his writing is largely inspired by experiences growing up in the 80s-era Nebraska farm belt, where modern times did not always mean modern ways. "I suppose you could say I grew up around a hodgepodge of decadence and tradition," he says. My family was a traditional Lutheran farm family, but outside of our home, particularly in the small town near where I grew up, boredom provoked a fair amount of decadence."

In real life and between the pages, Schaffert blooms on home turf. He lives in Omaha, where he makes a living as a freelance writer and makes his mark as an arts activist, organizing literary festivals and cultural events. And during down time, he goes back to the family farm to help his parents cultivate their vegetable garden.

About the Book

Hud and Tuesday are living, breathing, squirming examples of the refrain that breaking up is hard to do. And not only is the marriage of the divorced duo asunder, their teenage son Gatling has broken away to follow the rhythms of an itinerant gospel rock band made of four fundamentalist, but less-than-angelic, beauties called Daughters of God. The erstwhile couple's eight-year-old daughter Nina is the one generous helping of sugar in their bittersweet lives. And Hud toys with the notion of kidnapping the child, hoping that she will act as the magnet that will draw his splintered family back together.

The Singing Dancing Daughters of God is a funny and heart-strumming tale about a night club piano player enamored with country music, old movies and a family he just cannot get a grip on. With a one-of-a-kind point-of-view, Timothy Schaffert's novel looks out on loves lost and found again and lives tangled and sorted out. He has composed a tale of everyday tragedy as real and frustrating as any cataclysmic world event. And he has written story of hope as palpable as sunshine.

"Achy-breaky dysfunction drives a messy, funny family drama in this smalltown Nebraska tale, told in a winning faux-naïve style...film, along with music, plays a wonderful incidental role throughout... Deft, sweet and surprising."—Publishers Weekly

Topics to Consider

1. What will become of Hud and Tuesday's relationship, following their adventure to South Dakota?
2. Discuss the theme of fight/flight throughout Hud and Tuesday's relationship, both in their direct interactions with each other, and their interactions through their children.
3. How is Hud's relationship to music, and the writing of songs, different from that of Gatling's?
4. How does church and religion inform the characters' lives? In what do the characters have the greatest faith?
5. What affect do the movies have on the characters' sense of romance? How do movies affect their senses of themselves?
6. What role does Halloween play in this novel and why do you think the author featured this holiday rather than another?
7. How are children both treasured and protected, or not, in this novel?
8. The book begins with Hud's ruminations about how society comes together over tragedy, grief, and loss. Is this book a tragedy, a comedy, or both?

9. How did Hud's and Tuesday's marrying young affect their lives and inform their regrets? What is their sense of family and sense of community, and how does this play out both in the family break up and in their hopes for reuniting?
10. Why do you think the author chose such distinctive names for his characters? How do the names develop the characters for readers?
11. How do Hud's and Tuesday's youthful expectations for moving beyond the limitations of their town color their sense of the future, their attitudes about their marriage, and their relationships with their children?
12. How much of their nostalgia for a better time is genuine and how does it affect their dreams for a future?
13. What role does music play in this novel?
14. Is this a love story? If so, whose?

Reading List

A Hole in the Earth by Robert Bausch

My Ántonia by Willa Cather

The Bean Trees by Barbara Kingsolver

Going Down Swinging by Billie Livingston

Final Vinyl Days by Jill McCorkle

The Last Picture Show by Larry McMurtry

The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters by Timothy Schaffert

Unless by Carol Shields