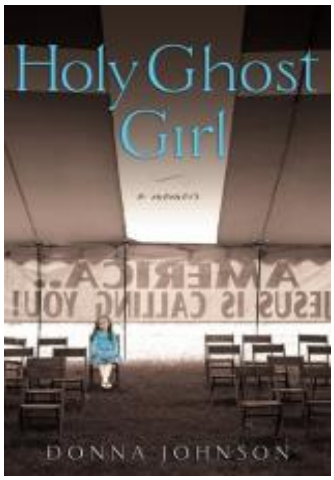
Holy Ghost Girl: A Memoir

by Donna M. Johnson



About the Book

Long before the Blues Brothers coined the term, Donna M. Johnson?s family was on a mission from God. She was just three years old when her mother signed on as the organist for tent revivalist David Terrell. Before long, Donna and her family were part of the hugely popular evangelical preacher?s inner circle. At 17, she left the ministry for good, with a trove of stranger-than-fiction memories. A homecoming like no other, HOLY GHOST GIRL brings to life miracles, exorcisms, and face-offs with the Ku Klux Klan. And that?s just what went on under the tent.

As Terrell became known worldwide during the 1960s and ?70s, he enthralled --- and *healed* --- thousands a night, andthe caravan of broken-down cars and trucks that made up his ministry evolved into fleets of Mercedes and private jets. The glories of the Word mixed with betrayals of the flesh, and Donna?s mother bore Terrell?s children in one of the secret households he maintained. Terrell?s followers, dubbed ?Terrellites? by the press, descended on backwaters across the South to await the apocalypse in cult-like communities.

Johnson?s personal story takes us into the heart of a mystical and deeply flawed family where the norms are anything but normal and where love covers a multitude of sin. Recounted with the deadpan observations and surreal detail only a kid would notice, HOLY GHOST GIRL bypasses easy judgment to articulate a rich world in which the mystery of faith and human frailty share a surprising and humorous coexistence.

Discussion Guide

1. How much did you know about tent preachers before reading HOLY GHOST GIRL? What was your opinion of them and how did it change --- if at all --- over the course of the book?

2. Have you ever attended a revival meeting? How would you categorize your own spiritual beliefs?

3. Have you ever witnessed something that you couldn?t explain? Did you let it sway your beliefs or did you dismiss it?

4. What does Johnson seem to be saying about the nature of belief when she discusses how her personal miracle came and went?

5. Why would Brother Terrell risk his personal safety defending blacks from the Ku Klux Klan while he ?told racist jokes in private? (p. 55)?

6. A United Nations report indicates that the Pentecostal movement has "been the most successful at recruiting its members from the poorest of the poor.? How would you explain this? What does this movement offer the poor that others do not?

7. It?s always a little jarring when one begins to see a parent figure as a fallible human rather than a perfect being. Did Johnson?s recollections of Carolyn resonate with memories of your own mother or father?

8. In what ways did Brother Terrell anticipate the broader, more mainstream evangelical movement? Are any of his teachings reflected in today?s mega churches?

9. The idea that wearing Levis indicated that ?Donna has been taken over by a lesbian spirit? (p. 234) seems preposterous today --- and even to Terrell in the 1960?s. Can you think of anything considered taboo today that might be accepted unblinkingly twenty or thirty years from now?

10. Johnson opens her book with news that Terrell plans to try to raise his son Randall from the dead. How did this prepare you for the story that she was about to share?

11. Compare HOLY GHOST GIRL to other coming-of-age memoirs you?ve read and enjoyed. Is there a common thread that draws you to these stories?

Author Bio

Donna Johnson has written about religion for *The Dallas Morning News* and other publications. HOLY GHOST GIRL won the Mayborn Creative Nonfiction Prize as a work in progress. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, the poet and author Kirk Wilson.

Critical Praise

"Donna Johnson's unapologetic treatment of her childhood immersed in the Pentecostal tent-meeting movement is flawless. She is honest in her retelling of events, yet her tone is even and sympathetic. The author?s focus is on David Terrell, charismatic leader of a traveling group of believers, her mother who is dedicated to his cause, and the myriad

other children and adults who are a part of her extended family. Terrell is weak of flesh but strong in will-power --- a popular preacher and healer who is on the rise in religious circles. His tent meetings are huge and as donations begin to flow in, excess and the downfall of his ministry soon follow. With a background similar to Johnson's, I can attest to the familiar, authentic Pentecostal content in her story. This is an excellent book for those wanting to know more about the Pentecostal faith of the mid-1900s and the beliefs that kept them going in the face of spiritual disaster."

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