The Annunciation of Francesca Dunn: A Novel

by Janis Hallowell



About the Book

In her evocative and imaginative debut, Janis Hallowell offers an intriguing premise: what if an ordinary community became convinced that one of its teenage girls had extraordinary healing powers? In Hallowell's inventive hands, the everyday and the divine become equally mysterious as young Francesca Dunn attempts to decipher the events of one startling chapter in her life.

Told from four points of view, **The Annunciation of Francesca Dunn** introduces us to a perceptive adolescent and the dynamic figures who shape her world. Through a series of ambiguous events, Francesca finds herself lauded as a modern-day Holy Virgin. Depending on whose perspective you accept, the evidence is either troubling or cause for elation. Francesca's mother, a scientist, is concerned about her daughter's safety (and sanity). Francesca's best friend wavers between faith, envy, and opportunism. To Chester, a visionary homeless man, protecting Francesca also means protecting his own need to believe in the possibility of healing and recovery. And for Francesca herself, the transformation brings a mixed blessing of fear and empowerment.

Just as Francesca's story unfolds through several attitudes, the novel itself inspires a variety of meanings. With each of her gentle revelations, Janis Hallowell stirs compelling questions about the tenuous road to adulthood, the contemporary role of religion, and the trustworthiness of humanity. We hope that the following topics will enhance your discussion of this beautifully crafted novel.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you have responded to Francesca's situation had she lived in your community?

2. What were the most convincing indications of Francesca's saintliness? What does her story indicate about society's varying capacities for faith?

3. The media provide us with hundreds of contemporary 'annunciators.' What does it take for them to earn our trust? Who serves as Francesca's annunciator?

4. In what ways does Francesca seek emotional and physical healing? Which men and women are most successful in easing the pain of her father's absence? Did the possibility of her divinity give her more or less power over the circumstances of her life?

5. When Anne meets with Carol Markowitz, she observes that the attorney 'was religious, or at least spiritual, which didn't always match my picture of a good lawyer. To me, religion had always meant dogma, and spirituality had always meant wishful thinking.' Do Anne's subsequent experiences, particularly with Father Gervais, change or reinforce those assertions?

6. Which of the novel's characters do you consider to be rational? Which ones are the most faithful? Are these two traits mutually exclusive?

7. At the beginning of the novel, Chester poetically characterizes those around him in terms of his olfactory senses. What might be some of the noteworthy elements if he were to describe you in this way?

8. Janis Hallowell strikes an ingenious balance of possibility throughout the novel; the gynecologist discovers that Francesca is partially virginal, for example, and Francesca's first encounters with healing are both absolute and imprecise. What could this indicate about the nature of myth and miracle?

9. Discuss the religious parallels presented in the novel, such as Rae's foot washing rituals (which reflects a Biblical account of the eve of Christ's crucifixion). Are all of the book's religious symbols Christian ones?

10. Sid and Jonah experience a kind of parenting that has little in common with Francesca's household. What does the spectrum of mothering look like in this community? Who are Ronnie's 'children'?

11. What do the novel's male characters (including the boy from Francesca's beach trip) have in common? In what ways are they distinct?

12. What is the effect of the novel's four points of view? Which one was most aligned with your outlook and life experiences?

13. Though the novel closes with Francesca, the opening paragraphs are Chester's. What makes this an effective storytelling device?

14. How do you define 'miracle'? Based on your definition, does Francesca instigate any miraculous events? In what ways does Sid's recollection of the restored rose serve as an appropriate benediction?

Author Bio

Janis Hallowell has been a potter and a graphic designer. She was awarded an associateship by the Rocky Mountain Women's Institute to write this book. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her husband and daughter.

Critical Praise

"Janis Hallowell writes with lucid grace..."

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