



Holy Ghost Girl: A Memoir

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Donna Johnson's remarkable story of being raised under the biggest gospel tent in the world, by David Terrell, one of the most famous evangelical ministers of the 1960s and 70s. *Holy Ghost Girl* is a compassionate, humorous exploration of faith, betrayal, and coming of age on the sawdust trail.

She was just three years old when her mother signed on as the organist of tent revivalist David Terrell, and before long, Donna Johnson was part of the hugely popular evangelical preacher's inner circle. At seventeen, 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 faceoffs 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, the caravan of broken-down cars and trucks that made up his ministry evolved into fleets of Mercedes and airplanes. The glories of the Word mixed with betrayals of the flesh and Donna's mother bore Terrell's children in one of the several secret households he maintained. Thousands of followers, dubbed "Terrellites" by the press, left their homes to await the end of the world in cultlike communities. Jesus didn't show, but the IRS did, and the prophet/healer went to prison.

Recounted with deadpan observations and surreal detail, *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.

Holy Ghost Girl: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review Holy Ghost Girl: A Memoir for online ebook

Ciara says

why in the hell is this getting such great reviews? it's not a bad book, but it is far from a great book. it is a memoir written by a woman whose family followed the revivalist faith healing preacher david terrell when she was a child. in fact, johnson's mother became terrell's "second wife". they were never actually married because terrell felt that divorcing his first wife would undermine his position as a holy man. terrell fathered three daughters with johnson's mother, & although the book never gives us an exact count, he seems to have fathered like sixty other kids with god knows how many other women.

i had high hopes for this book because i like memoirs & i like weird cult-y shit. this book opens with a pretty exciting hook: johnson's sister calls to invite her to their quasi-step/half-brother's funeral because terrell intends to raise him from the dead. i was hoping for a whole lot of similar hijinks. instead, the book focuses primarily on johnson's very early life traveling with the revival & the various foster home-type situations she & her little brother lived in while their mother joined the ministry in other countries. johnson's mother got involved with the ministry when johnson was three, & johnson conjures up very detailed & specific memories of that time, including many long tent revivals that mostly just involved johnson being bored. not being a religious person, i can only assume that religious events are indeed pretty boring to a three-year-old, but having also been three years old, i have my doubts that an adult can actually remember specific events that bored them at that age, even if they do seem extraordinary from an adult perspective. the fact that the overwhelming majority of the book focuses on johnson's life as a very young child bothered me. it just seems implausible to me that she would have such clear memories of her early life. she concedes a few times that her memories may be things she was told when she was older, but literally three-quarters of the book takes place before johnson is seven years old.

by the time johnson was in eighth grade, she was dating older men (some were even college-age), wearing pants, watching TV, & living in a beautiful home that terrell purchased in cash for johnson's family (including the three younger half-sisters he fathered). she claims that she made a deal with the devil, selling her soul in exchange for "the world" (ie, everything prohibited by her holy roller childhood). terrell's ministry was raking in the dough. terrell owned like five ranches & dozens of luxury cars. he had come to think of himself as not just a preacher, but also a prophet without sin. johnson writes about how she had trouble accepting belief of terrell as a sin-free prophet when she knew he was fathering children with her mother outside of his marriage, which was obviously a sin. but she also claims that she saw him restore a deaf child's hearing, & that he healed johnson herself of some weird disease involving fatigue & a rash. i sure wish she would have explained what the disease was (& she must know, because it later recurred & she started taking medication for it).

this was the part of the book i would have liked to know more about--terrell's delusions of being a prophet, his attempts to evade the IRS, johnson's growing disenchantment with the ministry & belief in general, her attempts to navigate the larger world having been raised in such a strict religious environment. but all of this is glossed over in fewer than fifty pages. why? perhaps johnson hasn't yet sorted out her feelings about all of these issues? perhaps she was reluctant to write anything too critical about terrell? i don't know. but it was a major disappointment. i expect that johnson as an adult would be far more capable of having clear memories of things that happened when she was 16 than things that happened when she was three. so why were the teenage recollections given such short shrift? & even putting aside the fact of the early childhood memories being unreliable, it's worth pointing out that they were also tedious & repetitive. i didn't come to this book looking for word for word transcripts of david terrell's sermons, but that's what i got & it was really dull.

in short, definitely an interesting concept for a memoir, rather poorly executed.

Clacie says

Even though Donna's story mostly takes place in the 1960s it was relatable. My parents started attending an Assembly of God church when I was in the 3rd grade, so by default, I did as well. This was my first experience with church, and for the most part it was good. A couple of years later we moved to Oklahoma (aka Holy Roller USA) to take care of my grandma (dad's mom). She attended a Pentecostal church, spoke in tongues, danced around, went to revivals etc... and so we went with her. All of the stuff Donna describes in her book is pretty spot from what I've experienced. Then we moved back to Arizona 6 months later, and my parents were even more committed to church than ever before. They went to services 3 times a week, and I even remember us going to a Benny Hinn (a televangelist) event with a group of people from the church. I saw first hand a lot of the things Donna talks about in her book, and to this day I have no explanation for it, yet I still do not believe. This book was absolutely fascinating, the only thing I was hoping to hear about was if/when she lost her faith. I don't feel she's too clear about it. For me it happened in the 8th grade when a lady from my church was delivering groceries to a needy family and never returned home.

<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/61...>

Michael says

I have mixed feelings towards this book, it started off promising but it got repetitive at the end. Now I will say that this book reminded me a lot of my childhood because I grew up in the same charismatic environment. Healing, demons getting cast out, tongue speaking, pretty much everything that comes with the attached name, Pentecostal. While I did love the vivid scenes, this book read more like a novel than a memoir. It seemed like the story did not flow as well, it was mainly about the experiences that she dealt with growing up but I felt that it did not really go anywhere.

It was not really as consistent as it could be, that contributed to the rating of this book. It was not a terrible book by any means but I wanted something to wow me. I pretty much skimmed the majority of this book because this did not have any defined plot. I don't regret reading this but I wish that it would have been better written.

It was decent but I will not recommend it to anyone so that is not saying much.

Melissa says

This book follows Donna Johnson's family's involvement with the infamous "evangelist" David Terrell, who preached and healed while evading the IRS, fathering eight children with four women, and taking money from impoverished followers to fund a lavish lifestyle, before ending up in jail. He has since been released and is a travelling preacher once more.

This memoir is written in an open and honest style without a lot of explicit details, which I appreciate.

I found Donna Johnson's book to be tragic and depressing, as it deals with a lot of hopeless, delusional or emotionally damaged people. I can't think of much that is more tragic than this one man damaging so many people emotionally, spiritually and even physically (a girl died of a curible disease because her parents opted for Terrell's prayers rather than medical help).

While Johnson seems to have struggled with bitterness toward her mother, she doesn't seem to write with hatred. She seems to love and forgive those who have hurt her, and I really respect her for that.

Justin Morgan says

I have to admit that I had some personal investment in reading this book and my review will be equally personal. I grew up hearing stories of the Prophet/charlatan David Terrell: horror stories from my mom and hero stories from my grandma. My grandmother was one of the infamous Terrellites mentioned in the book, who would haul my mom to his tent revivals and eventually to his Texas headquarters. So many of the themes that permeate the book also permeate the lives of my family, secret lives, paranoia, extreme religious fervor and and austerity coupled with religious disenfranchisement, abusive households and sexual indiscretions. My teenage mother was traumatized by Terrell during a service where she was publicly humiliated, demonized and accused (undeservedly) of secret sexual sin, turning her against organized religion to this day. My grandmother was a lifelong devotee of Terrell's despite all the scandals and jail time and continued to get his newsletters and send him offerings until her death. I grew up with her reciting his prophecies on the one hand, and hearing the emotionally charged stories of my mom on the other. Growing up with my dad and stepmom in rural Oklahoma, I had a very typical upbringing equally steeped in Holy Roller extremism on one hand and sinful excess on the other. I even went to a college founded by a tent revivalist. To say the least, this upbringing was very bipolar and had been foreshadowed by the upbringings of both my mom and grandmother. What was most interesting about the book and what I wanted so much more of, was how the author left the movement yet came to a place in her life where she can talk about it all objectively, honoring her upbringing and the Pentecostal experience while looking clearly at all of its hypocrisy and harmfulness. The depictions of the tent revivals are authentic and generous, and the strange conflicted feelings of childhood and even adulthood (toward abusive and highly dysfunctional family) left me very reflective. As much as I've walked away from my Pentecostal past, I've found myself unable to renounce it completely, instead reorganizing how I understand and interpret those formative religious experiences, and I think that Donna Johnson's own experience speaks strongly to that. This book is peppered with real-life characters straight from a Flannery O'Connor story, but the most interesting to me was the author's herself, who despite her full integration into normal, mainstream, and secular society still finds herself at some level, in Flannery O'Connor's words "Christ haunted" or at least "Terrell haunted." I just really hope that she is inspired to write more.

La Petite Américaine says

I couldn't stop reading ... in the train-wreck sense. This book was a lot like *The Glass Castle* with an evangelical slant. Speaking of which, this book will make you hate evangelicals. Kinda makes me wanna join their clan and copy their style though....you know, get up on the stage and say, "Jesus wants you to give me your money! Empty your pockets or face eternal hellfire for your sins! So sayeth the lord!!"

Damn good read, if you can take all of the depressing drama that comes with accounts of growing up under religious fanaticism.

Jesus wants you to read this book. (And to deposit \$50 into my bank account.)

Antonia says

I heard the author speak at a writers conference three years ago and was fascinated by her story. I bought the book immediately, but somehow it ended up in a pile of books and I never read it. Then I noticed that I could borrow the audio from my library consortium, so thought I'd give it a try. And I have enjoyed it immensely. The reader is awfully good. I know that people have very different tastes when it comes to readers. I didn't always like the way she did children's voices, but I loved her rendition of tent-revivalist David Terrell's "sermons," his ranting and raving and appeals to God.

Johnson's story of her childhood in an evangelical culture is riveting, both fascinating and devastating. Her family was part of Terrell's entourage as he traveled across the south, staging tent revival shows in which he lectured, hectoring, exorcised, healed, and induced the crowds (of thousands) to give him their money. Behind the scenes were infidelity, illegality, tax-evasion, and child abuse. The family was always on the move from town to town, traveling at night, living in cheap hotels or borrowed houses. The children had few clothes or toys (there was an Etch-a-Sketch) and only one another for friends and playmates. They were placed in foster care over and over, sometimes in intolerable situations.

Johnson doesn't sugar-coat the sordid facts, but she relates it all with the wisdom and equanimity gained from distance, at times with generosity, even humor. She shows how basically well-meaning people, under the sway of a charismatic leader, can fall into error, can do so much harm, inflict so much pain, all the time rationalizing their actions as right and just in the eyes of God. From a child's perspective, it's a confusing world where good and evil — which are supposed to be clear as black and white — are impossible to distinguish. All they can do is try to be good, try to be worthy in God's eyes, and hope for a miracle.

The most interesting questions are those that Johnson is still, perhaps, struggling to answer. Most importantly, who is the real Donna Johnson? And who was David Terrell, really? True believer? Con man? Showman? Magician? Crazy man? All of these, but there's no doubt of his power — over the crowds, over young women, over his family. Still Johnson acknowledges that he was the closest thing to a father as she was going to get. Did he really perform miracles? No, but how do we explain the restoration of hearing to a boy who had been deaf since birth?

The biggest miracle is that Donna Johnson survived her painful and emotionally abusive childhood, got an education, and wrote this astonishing and insightful memoir. Despite her horrific past, she's generous to a fault in portraying this world with understanding and compassion. It's a world where good intentions coexist with human faults and frailty, demons vying with the better angels of our nature. Johnson writes of how she led two lives — one under the tent, the other outside it. Every time she turned toward one, she necessarily turned away from part of herself. In the end, she comes to recognize that she is a product of both, that both lives are hers, that it's not a matter of belief or nonbelief. She doesn't have to choose anymore.

Favorite quotes:

"Doubt is a lot like faith: a mustard seed's worth changes everything."

". . . God, the all or nothing ego at the center of the universe."

Here's the opening of the book: "Donna, I don't know if you're going to the funeral, but I hear Daddy is gonna try to raise Randall from the dead. Call me."

How can you resist?

Gina says

One of the first things I would warn you about is set aside some time if you're going to start reading this, because you will not want to put it down.

Donna is but a 3-year-old toddler when she was brought into the life of a traveling tent revival show, led by David Terrell when her mother signed on as organist beginning in the 1960's. Terrell had fanatical followers, called "Terrellites" who would follow them around to hear him preach and offer to "heal" them.

Donna became a part of Terrell's innermost circle, but what went on behind the scenes was totally different than what Terrell preached. Terrell had many secrets that would have shocked his loyal followers. Donna's mother was but one woman who bore children for him.

At the beginning, they were a ragtag bunch, traveling in broken down vehicles, hoping to make it to their next destination. As the money poured in, the vehicles became a lot fancier (think Mercedes) and an airplane was added.

This is a sincere autobiography that pulls no punches as to what Donna went through, along with the rest of her family members, at the hands of Terrell and his loyal followers. Some followers even left home to join cult communities, awaiting the end of the world. At times humorous, at times teeth-grinding, and always spellbinding, this is a book well worth reading.

Not a spoiler as it is well known - Donna left Terrell's "evangelical" ministry (which seems more like a cult) at age 17 to forge her own path. I am glad she did.

Nancy says

"Donna, I don't know if you're going to the funeral, but I hear Daddy is gonna try to raise Randall from the dead. Call me."

That's the opening line of *Holy Ghost Girl*, as memorable a first line as any I have seen. Donna Johnson's memoir of a childhood spent on the "sawdust trail," the tent revival circuit, brilliantly fulfills the promise of its opener: it is fascinating, heartbreaking, and in the end, as enigmatic as the charismatic preacher who dominated Johnson's girlhood. Johnson tells it like she saw it, with the bewilderment and awe of the little girl that she was when her mother became the organist for "Brother Terrell's" traveling revival. When Johnson recounts miraculous cures and silver-tongued preaching, she leaves the reader as confused as she was herself: Brother Terrell is as much of a mystery at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. Were the cures real? Was the preaching from his heart? Anointed by God, or con man? Hypocrite, or merely a human being too frail to bear a divine burden?

If Johnson knows, she isn't telling. Though her acerbic humor brightens every page, she doesn't waste it on cheap shots. Johnson doesn't patronize or demonize the revivalist crowd; she simply opens the tent flap and invites the reader in to marvel at the contradictions: the preacher who fasts nearly to the point of death in order to be worthy of God's call, but forces his wife to cohabit with his mistress; the heavenly warrior who risks his life to defy the KKK while carrying on blatant affairs; the believers who pour out their meager resources to serve hungry children in Africa while viciously abusing their own. *Holy Ghost Girl* held me from its first line to its last: it's no exaggeration to say that it's the best memoir I've read in years, and no one to whom I have recommended it has disagreed.

Thanks to the Library Thing Early Reviewer Program for my copy of this book!

Lisa Napoli says

Really great. I have a particular fascination with tent-revivalists, dating back to my life in the southeastern US long ago. Actually, before that. I can't imagine how hard it was for Donna to write about her young life with these people, including a mother who would be locked up as an abuser in modern times. A beautiful compelling memoir.

Caitlin says

Donna Johnson grew up on the tent revival circuit of the 1950's and '60's. Her mother was a follower of David Terrell's ministry, playing organ for his traveling ministry. If you've never been to a tent revival, this may all seem very strange, but for many Americans these revivals are a part of a normal spiritual life - an addition to their regular church-going schedule. Tent revivals are a place to hear what I always think of as Holy Roller-type preachers. These preachers are often Pentecostal and people within their tents can be heard and seen speaking in tongues. Faith healing is another frequent component to these events. If you're still confused it might help to think of people like Oral Roberts - just about all of the early televangelists came out of the tent revival circuit.

Whether or not you are Christian, tent revivals are a unique experience. My Mississippi grandmother was Southern Baptist and took me to one that occurred as a part of the Webster County, Mississippi Centennial celebrations. I don't remember a lot about it other than the smell of the tent, the heat and the flapping of the funeral parlor fans (paper fans on a wooden stick donated by the local funeral parlor), and the amazing singing. People brought picnic lunches and stayed all day and into the night as different parts of the same community came together under the big tent.

Donna Johnson grew up on this circuit, hauled around in the backseat of cars, living wherever the faithful provided, as her mother played organ for David Terrell. Later, the family lived in Houston as her mother continued her long-time affair with Brother Terrell. While Ms. Johnson left the church at 16, it is clear within her writing that she did not leave faith entirely behind and it is the uneasy compromise she appears to have reached between her life before and after Brother Terrell that provides the underlying tension throughout her memoir.

Ms. Johnson is at her best when describing her childhood - the days and nights under the tent, backseats and borrowed houses, lack of food, uncertainty in everything except the love of Brother Terrell. She is very

skilled at picturing this from her childhood eyes and at keeping her adult self safely on the sidelines. The later parts of the book, events that follow after her mother left them and then returned, are much less clear-eyed, more hazy, less connected to reality and perhaps that is as it should be after a childhood under the bigger-than-life tent - what comes next feels up for grabs.

Well-written, honest, funny, tragic, and often surreal, Holy Ghost Girl gives the reader an up close look at a different kind of life while avoiding sensationalism and judgment.

TinaB says

Holy Ghost Girl is one of my favorite memoirs to date....and not because of the scandals or the sad often heartbreaking child neglect that went down, but because Donna's story was so honest and in the mix of soap opera drama I heard a girls voice similar to my own and found so many things I could relate to.

Donna walks readers through her childhood years living with her mother and a traveling caravan of tent revivalists, where miraculous healings, chanting women and exorcisms were the norm.

David Terrell's message was almost the same of what I remember growing up- Donna explains some of the same things I saw as a child- people rolling around on floors, yelling, chanting, moaning and shaking. Instead of being frightened or thinking these things were weird it was just apart of her daily life...just like mine were. There were of course plenty of differences in her experience, there wasn't scandals or visible abuse in my childhood church, just a bunch of freaks rolling on floors.

I appreciated the candor and honesty of Holy Ghost Girl and only wish Donna would have shared her current feelings on religion and where she is spiritually today.

Narration:

The narration was perfect for this story. Carrington's voice was raspy, it fit the persona of Donna and brought to life the scenarios being told in a unique presentation that made you feel right there with the screaming and weirdness of a tent revival.

Karen says

Donna Johnson's mother joined Brother David Terrell's tent revival circuit as an organist in the early 1960's and Donna and her brother Gary spent most of their childhood in this world, traveling the South and hearing the Gospel every night. This is a fascinating look at that world, especially as seen through the eyes of a five year old. When Carolyn Johnson becomes Brother Terrell's lover, as well, despite his having a wife and children, the picture becomes even more complicated. The endless sea of substandard housing and fasting required by the life is treated as normal because that's all Donna knew. When Carolyn decides to leave her kids and travel with David, as she does several times, they experience a mix of caring and mistreatment which makes you just want to strangle the author's mother. Donna, however, keeps you from doing that with her perceptive and even-handed viewpoint. This viewpoint enhances the look at the evangelist most familiar to us through Elmer Gantry or Jim Bakker, too, as Donna, as a child, is swept up into the fervor. As she grows older and begins to question her faith, she is torn between seeing miracles performed and the

hypocrisy of the religious grown-ups around her.

As a basically unchurched person, I came at this with a prejudiced point of view and was unsure, when I started it, if I was going to be able to be objective about it. I probably would never have picked it up to read if Book of the Month Club hadn't sent it to me to review. I am so glad they did. I would have missed a terrific memoir from a remarkable woman.

Sandy says

Strange book of a life hard to relate to in some ways, but understandable in other ways. I didn't know how to feel once the book was over, but it's a four star because I had a hard time putting it down...

^This was my response immediately after finishing the book. The more time I have had to reflect on it, I found that I could relate in many ways to the feelings and confusions of the past. I was able to meet the author a few weeks after reading the book and was stunned by her grace and forgiveness and realized that she had written about the painful past she lived. I now recommend this book to anyone and everyone if only to give insight and expand your horizons to lives different than your own, but emphasizing the humanity and characteristics we have in common with one another.

Kelly says

I was somewhat disappointed by this book. I expected more out of it. I don't understand how somebody that was only four or five years old could have such a vivid recall about things that happened at that age. Most of the book seemed to focus on the little details about the revivals, and not enough about the actual story, which to me was the fact that David Terrel is a crook. I was also surprised at how rushed the ending seemed. I would've liked to of known more about what happened to her after she left the religion and how she was received by her mother, siblings, etc. I don't think she focused on any of that enough.

Eris says

An interesting inside look at evangelical tent culture, with it's ups, downs and mysteries. Donna Johnson is honest with her recollections, keeping it clean by letting you know when the memories are faded or jumbled.

This memoir contains most of the elements one has come to expect from the evangelical holy rollers: infidelity, death, miracles, sin, fasting and embezzlement. Watching it play out through the eyes of a close witness takes away some of the cynicism you might have if you were to see this in a movie or in real life. Her own self doubts, faith, hope, and desire for things to be good even when they were not make this a human experience. When you hear news stories about the preacher who was caught with multiple families, big houses, embezzled money, you tend to wonder how anyone could have fallen for their scams. This gives a little insight into how such an empire can be built, and the mental scheming the preachers have to do even to themselves in order to maintain this lifestyle.

A good read, though I only gave it four stars because there **is** something missing from it's telling. It stumbles somewhat in places, but overall worth reading if you are interested in religious cults, memoirs in

general, or american evangelical christian culture.

Thomas Holbrook says

Memoirs can be many things: a record of memories, an autobiography, a conciliatory gesture, a chance at revenge, a confession or a combination of any/all. Good memoirs allow the reader to “take on” the life of the author in an intimate way and this present addition to the genre will be listed in the “very good” section. Whether the reader is religious, agnostic, atheist, socially conscious or just curious about learning of “a different life,” this book will supply plenteous grist for thought, dialogue and satisfy the longing for a good read.

Donna Johnson was born to the daughter of a Pentecostal Pastor and a Hollywood playboy during a marriage that lasted only long enough to produce her and her brother and occurred while her mother was “in rebellion” from her father’s strict religious rules. Upon her return to the fold of her family, Ms. Johnson’s mother was soon a member (as Organist) of a tent revival Evangelistic team lead by David Terrell. The author was three when her mother joined this ministry. For the next four years, Ms. Johnson’s “home” was that Evangelistic Team. Home, as a geographic location, did not exist as the tent (which could eventually hold 5000 people) was moved from location to location on a regular basis. The author witnessed miracles during the tent meetings (healings for deafness, muteness, and physical handicaps reversed) and a chaotic, confused and “worldly” life away from the tent.

Eventually, Ms. Johnson (and her brother) lived with various “caretakers” who were “friends of the ministry.” The “care” she received varied from literally being a part of a family to being routinely physically and emotionally abused, before returning her mother’s oversight. When this finally occurred the trio lived in cheap apartments in the more dangerous parts of whatever town they happened to land, being visited by “Brother Terrell” often enough that Ms. Johnson and her brother were told to act as if he were their uncle. Overnight the families situation changed, the trio moved from squalor to finery, the only cost was they had to keep “Brother Terrell” and their mother’s relationship a secret – as the evangelist was married. (It was later discovered that he had three other “families” besides the one he had with the author’s mother, with whom Terrell had three children.)

As Ms. Johnson became increasingly aware of the disparity between what she saw “in the tent” and the reality of life away from it, she began asking serious questions. “I believed Brother Terrell was a prophet and a healer. I knew he was a liar and an adulterer. I did not know how to reconcile the two (p. 264).” The more she looked and asked, the less able she was to continue in the charade.

Mr. Johnson’s honest reporting of her life and inner-world is the gift of this book. She displays the mystery of relationship(s) in all of its subtly, contradiction, turmoil and acceptance that is universally experienced but rarely voiced. She was reared in a loving, deeply religious environment that was and had “signs following” (miracles and glossolalia generally held to indicate one was “Spirit-filled”). The pathology of this relational system occurred when the interpretation of religious experience was left to one individual then followed by many without question. I have been deeply involved in religious life since I was fifteen-years-old; the religious body who helped make my education possible and whose local church ordained me have become reflective of a similar mindset. As a result, the very audience they hoped to reach is largely ignoring the message they hope to share.

Ms. Johnson has been shaped by her early experience and has struggled to find her Self a part from that formation. She has discovered that early reality remains deeply held within her present Self. Now, however, it rests beside the pieces that make up a more rounded individual – a person who asks questions and seeks their answer, one who rejects religiosity and all its parts while clinging to the truths she learned while “under the tent.” Such faith will not be destroyed though the Earth is shaken to its foundation.

Belinda says

Warning: This is a biased review. Not only do I know and really like Donna Johnson, I also worship with her in the pews of an Episcopalian church. I have had lengthy discussions with her over the years on the nature of resilient faith. I am unable to separate “Donna the author” from “Donna, whom I’ve known for more than 10 years.” You’ve been warned.

Everyone you know has a story that will make you laugh. And, they all have a story that will make you weep. On days when crisis and drama wash over me, leaving me sputtering and shaken, I try to remember I’m not the only person who has washed up on that beach.

Perhaps this is why memoirs are so fascinating to us – we can safely relish the personal, intimate stories of others without expending any of our own emotional energy.

That is, unless we’re reading about children. Donna Johnson’s memoir “Holy Ghost Girl” bravely starts when she is only three years old, when her mother sells everything and packs up her two kids to become the organist in the entourage of David Terrell, a renowned tent revivalist. Crisscrossing the southern states in the early 60s on the “sawdust trail,” tent revivals were massive happenings, part carnival, part church. Always controversial, never dull.

Donna brings us in, under the tent flap, to witness how this phenomena worked through exacting detail of the sights, sounds and smells of the people pulled to this kind of worship. Through her very young eyes, you see the mothers hoping for miracles for their ill children, you smell the sweaty flesh of arms raised in praise, and you hear how David Terrell churns the massive crowds of thousands with inspired and passionate preaching. And, later that night, when the crowds have all gone home, the two small Johnson kids curl up against their mother in the backseat of a car that hurtles down dark roads as they move on to yet another town.

At one point, Donna’s mother leaves the country with David Terrell to tend to orphans and other people’s lost children. Ironically, she also leaves her own children with a succession of strangers in varying situations. She pops in and out inexplicably over several years. And, then she comes back.

And when she returns, Brother Terrell starts to make extended visits to their house, gradually moving off the couch and into their mother’s bedroom. Three more children are born from this union, while Terrell also creates other families from similar liaisons.

And this is where you get angry for that little girl who can grasp the power of faith, but she can’t figure out why her mother disappeared. You get angry for the little girl who couldn’t fathom why her mother left her with people who hated her so much. And you are outraged when Brother Terrell plays “husband and wife” with her mama when he already has a wife and other children.

Despite my own fair share of parental drama, I grew up knowing the world makes sense in a somewhat orderly fashion. Imagine growing up watching Brother Terrell drag the devil from a young girl’s body. Imagine watching your stepfather rally thousands of believers every day, bringing them to their feet, pulling seeking hands to the heavens, and leading the Holy Spirit to their minds and tongues. Imagine growing up knowing that true faith and true believers are always richly rewarded.

This is the stuff that creates “an altered world view.” And this is where my personal experience with Donna overlaps my reading experience. I know she sees the world through a kaleidoscope of overlapping fragments of empathy, mystery, faith, love, regret, hope and laughter. Although I’ve known her for many years, the stories in “Holy Ghost Girl” are all new to me.

When I read the words on the page, I can clearly hear Donna’s calm voice with her “southern from everywhere” accent. The words flow like Donna speaks. From my perspective, this is an authentic retelling of her childhood, and it’s told very carefully, with respect to the living, and with respect to the sensibilities of a little girl who just can’t quite figure it all out.

Other critics have complained that pieces are missing from “Holy Ghost Girl,” and that Donna doesn’t share she has reconciled her childhood into her current life.

I think these critics demand too much. It’s her story to tell, and what she has taken decades to process has evolved into a mesmerizing read. I dare you to tell that three-year-old little girl otherwise.

Connie Bush says

I hesitated to write a review after first reading this book because I wanted to think about it more. My first reaction was of overwhelming sadness for the people who have been caught up in this cult, especially for the children. I come at this from a different perspective than many of the readers; David is my uncle, my father’s youngest brother. I have heard many of these stories but from a totally different perspective. My father knew the true stories of David’s childhood and youth, and to hear the version David shared with his followers is interesting to say the least.

Memories aside, I think it was a very well written book, and certainly kept my attention. Admittedly, some of that coming from morbid curiosity of one family member for another. To be clear, I barely knew David. Once he established his ministry, he had little time for family members, especially for the non followers. I thought it interesting that he completely eliminated two of them from the family tree saying he was one of seven children when he was one of nine. Maybe those were the two brothers who were the strongest dissenters!

I think Donna wrote an interesting and compelling book. I would certainly recommend it to others. I looked at it less as a commentary on tent revivalists, than a study in how harmful power and blind belief can be people. (Power for David, blind belief for his followers)

Paul Pessolano says

“Holy Ghost Girl” by Donna M. Johnson, published by Gotham Books.

Category – Memoir

Although tent revivals are still held they had their hay day in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Around 1960 and little know preacher by the name of Brother Terrell started on the circuit. He had a modest following and it was not unusual after a revival that the company would just make expenses or even be in the hole.

Donna Johnson’s mother, Carolyn, became infatuated with David Terrell and joined the group as an organist.

Donna tells of her time with the group until she left at the age of seventeen. It was hardly an easy life going from town to town, never having a real home, little if any schooling, and not knowing what kind of a reception you would get in the next town.

Brother Terrell was an excellent preacher that preached the fire and brimstone of the day. He was thought to have the power to see the future and heal the sick.

It was in the 1970's that Brother Terrell hit his stride. He became so popular that he was said to have the largest revival tent, encompassing an area of 1 1/2 to 2 football fields and could hold up to about 5,000 people. Money was no longer a problem. It was during this time that he had several relationships with other women, including Donna's mother. He started to acquire land and other personal items that included several luxury cars and a jet plane. He would often bring home bags of coins collected at the revivals and have Carolyn and Donna go through the coins looking for coins of value. They had several trash cans full of coins.

This all came to an end when the IRS caught up with Brother Terrell and word got out about his relationships with other women and his illegitimate children.

Terrell spent several years in prison and when he was released went back on the revivalist circuit. He never obtained the prominence he once had; the crowds instead of being in the thousands were now in the hundreds.

An excellent story that gives insight into the time of the tent revivals, the fire and brimstone preacher that goes from rags to riches and back to rags, a young girl caught up in living a life on the road and having to grow up with mixed feelings about religion and family life.

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