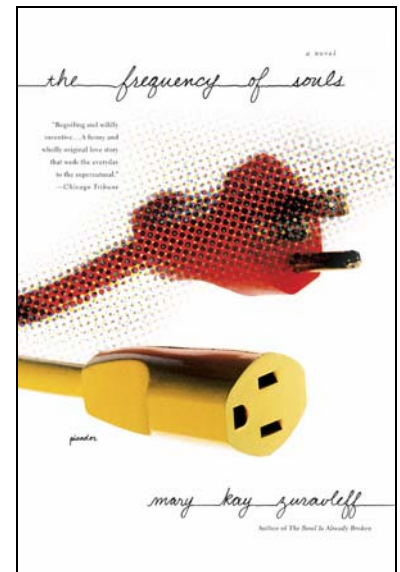


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Frequency of Souls

by *Mary Kay Zuravleff*

ISBN: 0-312-42485-X



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Frequency of Souls*, are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Frequency of Souls*.

About the Book

Winner of the American Academy's Rosenthal Foundation Award
Winner of the James Jones First Novel Award

George Mahoney is an electrical engineer who has been designing Coldpoint refrigerators for fourteen years when Niagara Spense is hired as his new colleague. Tall and large-boned, Niagara wears a different color of the same homemade dress everyday, is nearly deaf in one ear, and has glasses thicker than George's. George can not stop thinking about her, despite the fact that he is married and the father of two children. His attraction to Niagara reminds him of his high school relationship with the free-spirited Carol Greyson—that ended with him in military school and her at a home for unwed mothers.

Niagara asks George what brought him to electrical engineering, and he tells her how he came to protect his easy gullibility with facts and logic. In return, she reveals that after work, she is listening for electrical remains of the dead, "audible fossils," she calls them. Niagara's ingenuity casts an unflattering light on George's lackluster career and his family life.

The novel takes place during a crucial week in George Mahoney's life, when he addresses not only his need but also his capacity for imagination, ambition, and ardor.

“Beguiling and wildly inventive...A funny and wholly original love story that weds the everyday to the supernatural.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“Riveting ...Zuravleff has created some of the most wonderfully realized characters in current fiction.”—*The Dallas Morning News*

“Read this book! Zuravleff fashions small moments of comic wonder in this novel of family and FM frequencies, magic and flirting, metaphysics and doughnuts.”—*San Diego Tribune*

“Engaging...Zuravleff’s insightful yet gentle rendering of the absurd [allows] readers to connect fully with her quirky and endearing characters.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Page after page, the descriptions of the novel are laugh-out-loud funny. Smart and refreshingly tender...with a stylish ebullience reminiscent of Anne Tyler.”—*The News & Observer* (Raleigh)

About the Author

Mary Kay Zuravleff was born in 1960 in Syracuse, New York, and grew up there and in Oklahoma City, where her family eventually settled. She majored in mathematics and English at Rice University in Houston, studying writing with Max Apple, and has an M.A. in creative writing from Johns Hopkins University, where John Barth was her teacher. She moved to Washington, D.C., in 1982 to live on the grounds of the National Cathedral and then made Washington her home. For years she tutored or taught math or writing to students of all ages and abilities. She also wrote and edited, mostly for publications having something to do with art. She spent nine years at the Smithsonian Institution, first as an editor at the American Art Museum and then at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian’s Asian art museums.

The Frequency of Souls, her first novel, won both the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the James Jones First Novel Award; it was also nominated for numerous other accolades, including Britain’s Orange Prize. Her second novel, *The Bowl Is Already Broken*, has just been published.

Discussion Questions

Author interview, during which the author gets to question the reader

1. Out of curiosity, I asked my agent how he described my book as he peddled it about, and he said, “I tell people it’s a wild new mid-life crisis story.” “No, *my* book,” I said. Not only had it never occurred to me that I’d written a mid-life crisis story, but also, I’d been making fun of that topic for years.

How is *The Frequency of Souls* a conventional mid-life crisis tale? Unconventional? In fact, are these types of stories cliché in nature or, like coming of age or death of a parent, are fresh perspectives welcome?

2. Here, I thought I was crafting a cosmological novel, what one reviewer called “secular metaphysics.” The questions that propelled me were: How do you know what you know? and What if you have powers you don’t believe in? Did this novel address your personal foundations of belief?

At the funeral for the Veteran, a Coldpoint employee whose body is frozen, the attendees talk about life after death: “George liked Massoud’s version of death as the portal to a banquet of heavenly delights. Lately, he had begun to wonder why most people’s avowal that it’s over when it’s over did nothing to help them walk away from demeaning jobs, wasteful habits, unloving marriages.” What do you think will happen to you when you die? Does your personal theory affect the way you live your life?

3. I picture George Mahoney as physically attractive; however, people have told me that their first impression of him in his short-sleeved shirt and glasses, peeling off his clip-on tie, stuck with them even after his handsomeness was described. Likewise, Niagara’s cloth-brown hair and homemade dresses kept her at arm’s length for some. What role does appearance play in this book? Do our physical attributes shape our personality? How does the attractiveness of characters affect the reader’s reception of them?
4. George describes electricity as a useful tool—about as complicated as a hammer—while Niagara deems it a mysterious animating life force. How is this difference emblematic of their personal philosophies? How does electricity function as a metaphor throughout the novel?
5. One reader wrote me a letter to say that if she ever had a daughter, she was going to name her Niagara. In fact, when the name “Niagara” came to me, the book took off. Why? With a name and a story like hers, why doesn’t she narrate the book?
6. I have visited many book groups, and I enjoy hearing the book get different readings. But let me tell you one strange experience that has repeated itself at least a dozen times. During the discussion, one woman will begin to deride Judy Mahoney as controlling and overly ambitious for her family; she will go so far as to pronounce Judy both unsympathetic and unbelievable. I will accept her opinion graciously. Then, as the group begins to break apart or this woman goes to the bathroom, a few members will urgently pull me aside to make the point that, of their gathering, that particular reader is most like Judy. What do you make of that?

George considers their different styles: “George understood Judy’s need to chart a course. He saw how he drifted, how he dealt with the detritus in his path or, more accurately, how he steered around it. Judy had a theory that women’s intuition was just a way women had of visualizing what they wanted and then making it happen.” Is Judy too pushy? Are you?

7. Everyone wants to know: why refrigerators? Why not dryers or some unspecified widget? Of course, an author has to make all kinds of decisions just to move ahead with a story; however, I got pretty excited by the metaphorical possibilities of refrigeration as well as the notion of the refrigerator as the family’s gathering place, their fire in the cave as well as their bulletin board. So I ask you, having read this book, do you look at your refrigerator any differently?
8. Judy labels George a “textbook passive-passive,” which she defines as “someone who does nothing in the cause of self-interest and holds it against no one when he is ignored.” George believes that “traits Judy had branded apathetic he credited as easygoing.” Whose opinion seems more accurate?
9. What do you make of George’s outside interests? For a potentially dull guy, he’s got a lot going on, what with the Carol Greyson past, his early attachment to dinosaurs, and his current interests in the weather and gospel music.

10. How would you describe George's parenting style? Is he the better parent to Sheridan and Harris, or is Judy? In fact, much of the novel is devoted to parenting. How does George understand or misunderstand his own mother? Was Niagara neglected? Even among the supporting cast, parenthood is an issue; for example, what kind of father was the Veteran, and how do Bev and Massoud handle their son?
11. People ask me about life beyond the last page: did George actually hear his mother? Will Niagara be successful in her research? What might Harris's future hold?

As much as I adore these folks, I'm done with them. They live between the covers of the book, but if I signed over custody to you, where might you take them?

12. Niagara reveals that the object of her affection died before she was born, thus confounding George: "What had he been calling love if not reveling in someone's physical presence, muscling up when they spoke your name? 'You love him?' George asked. When Niagara looked up, her eyes were misty and red, 'I love him more than nuns love Jesus.'"

What notions of love exist in this book? How do you recognize love?

For more information about the author's work, including upcoming readings or possible book group appearances, visit www.MaryKayZuravleff.com.

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