

## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Throughout *Jesus Land*, Julia oscillates between close identification with David (referring to "our color," for example), involuntary alienation from him (as when he and Jerome are pitted against the rest of the family), and intentional attempts to separate herself from him (as she does during high school). Does her perception of her relationship with David affect her perception of herself? How?

2. Julia and David have very different attitudes toward the concept of "family." What does it mean to be a family? Is Julia's cynicism about it ever belied by any of her family relationships? Are any of them a source of strength for her? Does David's enduring hope for an accepting, united family harm him? Is his faith in the concept ever justified?

3. Julia has a number of very different sexual encounters in the course of the memoir. How does each of them shape her views about sex? Why do you think she doesn't tell David about Jerome?

4. Julia and David encounter a great deal of talk about faith. What do they have faith in? How does their faith differ from that of the adults around them?

5. What are Julia's attitudes toward race and how do they affect David? Is race ever used as an excuse by characters in the book to justify other issues?

6. Do Julia and David learn anything worthwhile from their time at Escuela Caribe?

7. How do horseplay and humor figure into Julia and David's relationship? What about fantasy?

8. Does the effect Christianity has on the predominant culture differ between Indiana and Escuela Caribe? How is the religion interpreted to enforce the status quo? Does the rigidity of the Christian culture of Escuela Caribe ever make it easier to subvert?

9. Throughout the book, Julia describes and names the music she is hearing. How is music used by Julia, her mother, and the people at Escuela Caribe?

10. *Jesus Land* is written as a memoir focused around the relationship between Julia and David. How does the form affect your reaction to the story? How would you respond differently if it had been written as a novel based on real events, an expose of Escuela Caribe, a documentary on racism in Indiana, or some other format?



*Julia Scheeres is available  
via phone or web cam  
for Reading Group discussions*

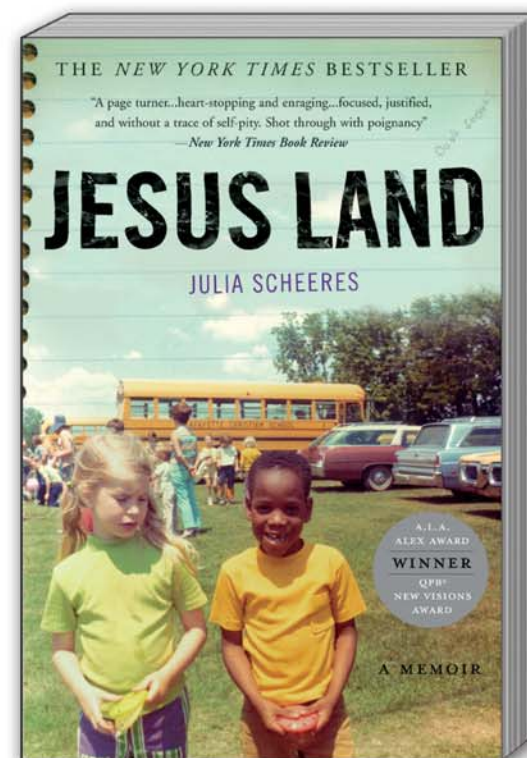
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# JESUS LAND

BY JULIA SCHEERES



# AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA SCHEERES, AUTHOR OF **JESUS LAND**

## **What's *Jesus Land* about?**

It's about my close relationship with my adopted black brother David, from our strict Christian upbringing in Indiana to our stint at a religious reform school in the Dominican Republic.

## **What inspired you to write *Jesus Land*?**

David was writing about these things before he died in a car crash at age twenty. After his funeral, I found a green notebook among his belongings in which he was writing about growing up black in a white family, about our intolerant Midwestern town, and about Escuela Caribe.

## **Why did you write it as a memoir?**

David and I were the same age. From the time he was adopted as a three-year-old to his death at age twenty our lives were tightly intertwined. We sat in the same classroom throughout grade school, joined in the same church groups, and attended the same reform school. Memoir seemed the natural choice to convey the intimacy and immediacy of our shared history. More than anything, *Jesus Land* is a love story. It's a story about how racists and religious zealots tried to drive us apart, and we ultimately prevailed. It's a story about a couple of misfit kids learning to survive in a hostile environment and the transcendence of sibling bonds.

## **What was the inspiration for the title? How have people been reacting to it?**

I came up with the title years before the "red state" connotation entered the popular lexicon. I picked the title *Jesus Land* because the book deals in specious facades, like the amusement park. Beneath the much-hyped "family values" morality of the Bible Belt, you'll find child abuse, intolerance, and racism. Given the rise of the Christian Right in America, I think my book's exploration of this sanctimony is timely.

## **What are your religious leanings today?**

Devout hedonist...agnostic...secular humanist. Seriously, I hate labels. Having been brainwashed from birth as a Calvinist, it took me years to shake my religion entirely. Until recently I still prayed on airplanes, more from rote habit than a belief that a supreme being would protect the tin can I was flying in. I lost my religion by degrees. The first step was witnessing the hypocrisy of the Christians around me as a child. The second was escaping the rigid subculture I grew up in and meeting secular folks who were much more moral and trustworthy than the Christians I was told to revere. Subsequent steps were being excommunicated from my church, and then

shunned by my childhood community when I dared to show up for Sunday services during a nostalgic trip back home.

## **Your experiences in the book notwithstanding, have all your experiences with devout Christians been bad?**

No. My two sisters are powerful examples of laudable Christians. They adhere to the New Testament's gentle-Jesus love-one-another philosophy and don't ram their beliefs down people's throats.

## **Is Escuela Caribe still open?**

Yes, and it's thriving. The school continues to be a dumping ground for the problem teenagers of rich Evangelicals. For \$3000–\$6000 a month, you can buy your kid a cot in a cramped dormitory, a lousy education, and PTSD nightmares for the rest of her life. (But at least she won't get knocked up.) When I returned to visit the school in 2001, there were several more student homes, so between the high tuition and the staff's missionary wages, the owners must really be raking it in. Although the administration told me things were "less physical" than when I was there—i.e., students weren't body-slammed as much—the accounts of recent alums refute this claim.

## **Did you keep in touch with any of your Escuela Caribe classmates?**

I haven't been able to locate my former housemates, but I have connected with other alumni using the Internet. We started a Yahoo group to discuss our experiences with New Horizon Youth Ministries as well as a website to expose the truth about the reform school empire at [www.nhym-alumni.org](http://www.nhym-alumni.org), which includes accounts of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse at the hands of the staff. Given that we didn't dare criticize the school while we were students there and were unable to confide in our classmates due to a system that rewarded narcs, these forums have been tremendously cathartic for many people.

## **What has the reaction your book been? What was the best response you have gotten? What was the worst?**

I've gotten a lot of e-mails from readers who identify with *Jesus Land* because they, too, felt like outcasts as kids because of their race or beliefs. I guess the best responses I've received are from people who knew David and regaled me with funny anecdotes about him that made him come alive for me again. Worst response—one Canadian reader was angry with my depiction of my Canadian housefather at Escuela Caribe. I called him some choice words that she found offensive. She failed to understand that *Jesus Land* is writ-



ten from the perspective of a temperamental seventeen-year-old American girl. Really, I have no bone to pick with Canadian people in general.

## **What was the writing process like for you? Was it hard to deal with all the memories from your childhood?**

There were times when I had to go cry in my pillow after writing down a painful scene. There were days when cleaning the cat box was more appealing than sitting down at my desk. I grew quite sick of my seventeen-year-old self by the last draft of *Jesus Land*. But there were also nights where I had amazing dreams about David, about adventures we had together—real or imagined—and I felt incredibly close to him the entire time I wrote the book. Unfortunately the frequent dreams stopped once I turned it in.

## **Since the book's publication have you met a lot of people who have had similar experiences?**

If you consider e-mail and online encounters real, the answer is yes. Especially alumni from Escuela Caribe.

## **What advice would you give to someone who is struggling to deal with their own upbringing?**

Hang in there. Someday you'll turn eighteen and your life will be your own. That day may seem far off now, but when it does arrive, you'll have decades to live freely. Try to keep that in mind. Meanwhile, find someone—a sibling, friend, teacher—to confide in. This will help you keep your sanity. Speak out if you're being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused; protect the sanctity of your own body above all else. If you don't stand up for yourself, no one else will. And always stay true to your own values, no matter how disorienting or overwhelming the forces around you. Adolescence is just a blip in the span of a lifetime. Your future is wide open. Use it wisely.

