

Discussion Guide

for the **Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma** Book for 2006

The Saints and Sinners of Okay County
by Dayna Dunbar

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Biographical details provided by Dayna Dunbar

A “Touching” Story

Dayna Dunbar’s first novel succeeds as a portrait of a woman, a community, and an era. Female protagonist Aletta Honor fights tremendous odds and past ghosts and emerges from the frays a better woman, a better mother and better armed for the future. As Aletta travels her painful path to a new life, readers are also treated to a group of colorful friends and some often hilarious situations. *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County* fills the bill as a regional novel and a feminist novel peopled by fascinating and well-drawn characters.

The Saints and Sinners of Okay County describes central Oklahoma to a “T.” Dunbar uses Yukon as the palette for the fictional community of Okay, Oklahoma. From kolaches to Garth Brooks, Dunbar uses Yukon fodder well. Readers find out how people in central Oklahoma speak, celebrate, drink, and drag Main Street; they discover how tall beehive hair-do’s really are, how wheat is harvested, how Oklahomans adore lake activities, and how

hard it is sometimes to say “no” to an abusive, yet handsome husband. The setting of 1976 provides readers with the post-hippie/Vietnam Era, the day of America’s Bicentennial which allows Americans and Aletta to begin again. This novel celebrates Aletta’s “birthday”; she renews herself and enters the future. All looks bright for our heroine at the novel’s close, but Dayna Dunbar takes her readers on a heck of a ride to get to that last page.

Dayna Dunbar’s first foray into creative writing was in college, but it was a disturbing and discouraging experience that made her believe she would never succeed as a writer. It wasn’t until several years later that she began writing screenplays because, as she says, “it became more painful to not write than to just go ahead and let this voice inside me have a say and have the writing potentially turn out to be awful.” She began writing screenplays and then worked on the crew of the film “William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet” starring Leonardo DiCaprio. This spurred her creativity even further,

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and after finishing the film, she wrote four screenplays in four years.

While working full time in sales, she attended the University of Santa Monica and received her master's degree in psychology. As part of this program, she wrote her first novel, *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County*, and received the University's Student of the Year award. Shortly after graduation, Dunbar found an agent at a writer's conference who, shortly after signing her, sold her book as part of a two-book contract to Ballantine Books. Her second novel, *The Wings That Fly Us Home*, is a sequel to the first and arrives in bookstores in March 2006.

Because she started writing screenplays first, she has had to learn the nuances of the novel genre. The most difficult part for her was developing characterization—illuminating for the reader what made characters tick, what they thought, what they feared, and what they dreamed. This aspect of writing is, according to Dunbar, what makes “a novel a novel.” She's pretty good at creating characters too, for the characters in *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County* come alive with the turning of pages.

Dunbar creates wonderful, yet tortured Aletta, the seer and the betrayed. The entire novel pivots on Aletta; everything in the plot and the actions of the characters stems from her fear. And Aletta has plenty to fear. She is assailed by the human and the non-human—unpaid bills, unfaithful husband, unpredictable mother, uncontrollable speed boats, and unwanted psychic powers.

The prospect of pure poverty prompts Aletta to try anything to provide for her three children and unborn son. Even though there is the supernatural in this novel, it is a very realistic piece of literature. *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County* does reflect a “slice of life.” Financial despair drives people

to attempt unique endeavors to increase the bank account balance. Everyone knows a hurting family with money problems. In addition to being realistic, the novel is also naturalistic, for characters find themselves at the mercy of their pasts, their environment and their abilities.

Aletta's life is realistic for a woman living in the 1970's, the 1990's, the 1920's, whenever. Unfaithful spouses have caused untold misery and grief, and Jimmy Honor is one of the best cheating husbands outside of a Tammy Wynette song. Dunbar makes the pain that Aletta feels come alive. She draws tortured children who love but deeply fear their alcoholic father. As most authors do, Dunbar writes from her own experience; as a result, she infuses the novel with a real, true voice. Aletta and her tale are authentic.

In terms of the naturalistic aspects of the novel, Aletta definitely has an influential environment. She mothers three children; endures a pregnancy; worries about unpaid bills, little food, unemployment; visits with unusual friends; has been abandoned by her husband; feels confused; and possesses unwanted psychic powers. Quite a cadre of influences. Indeed, she is a prisoner of herself, of her surroundings, and of her situation. Aletta cannot shake her gifts: her children, her clairvoyance, and her future. Through her tortured past, chaotic present, and unknown future, Aletta gathers her confidence and courage and forges on through unique temptations and hurdles, becoming more independent and less self-absorbed and needy. Her main problem is forgiveness. Once she forgives others, she can learn to forgive herself of her assumed shortcomings and failures.

Much of Aletta's pain comes from her struggles to live the dream that perhaps all females dream. However, her dream turns into a nightmare. Yes,

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she falls for the ruggedly handsome bad boy and marries him in hopes of taming him, but not dispensing with his rough and tough image; she bears his children and his cruelty and then lives a lie to save face and her femininity. The dream goes terribly awry; there is no storybook quality to Aletta and Jimmy's married life. The hardest realization of all for Aletta is finally accepting the fact that Jimmy would rather hold a liquor bottle than hold her.

When readers first meet Aletta, she is a woman scorned by her family. The utter desperation of her circumstances drives her to the decision to try to use her psychic ability to recreate a life for herself and her children. The experience leads her to face her tragic past, reconcile with her mother, and gives her the courage to finally leave Jimmy for good.

As readers, we share Aletta's fear and response to her overwhelmingly threatening situations. Readers grow to like her when she begins to take control of her life and of her gift and use her power for her own improvement. Dunbar and Aletta, in the final analysis, teach us that each of us is solely responsible for our futures. Regardless of our pasts, talents, or troubles, we can and must challenge the status quo to change and improve our own futures.

The future may not be much better than our yesterdays, but at least we will not tremble as we face tomorrow. Aletta learns that nothing is really as bad as she thinks it may be—if she meets it head on and willingly. We, like her, must use a “hands-on” approach to life.

Public Appearances

Dayna will be touring libraries throughout Oklahoma in 2006. Watch www.okreadsok.org for dates, places and times.

For more information

Oklahoma Reads Oklahoma
www.okreadsok.org

Dayna Dunbar
www.daynadunbar.com

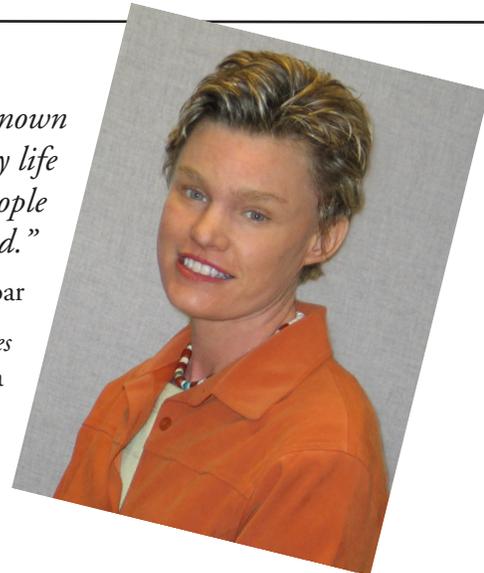
Ballantine Books
www.randomhouse.com/rhpg

Ballantine Reader's Circle
www.primapublishing.com/BB/read

“These characters are composites of people that I've known and it really taught me how much the people in my life are within me, that I'm a combination of all of the people that I've loved and all of the things that I've experienced.”

—Dayna Dunbar

(From an article that appeared in *Humanities Interview*, a publication of the Oklahoma Humanities Council, Winter 2006)



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Discussion Questions

One of the greatest rewards of reading a good book is discussing it with others. These discussions may be formal or informal, and may take place while in the car, over the dinner table, in the break room at work, at a library, or a bookstore...almost anywhere.

In addition to the following discussion questions, the Ballantine paperback edition of the book includes reading group questions and topics for discussion.

1. Look at the men in Aletta's life. If taken all together, how do they represent the "perfect man?"
2. Make a list of what events have affected Aletta's life—from worst to best. How did each event shape her?
3. Look at the women in Aletta's life: Nadene, Sissy, Joy, Ruby, Tessie, Isabella. What do they teach or contribute to Aletta's life and metamorphosis as a character?
4. How is Okay, Oklahoma like your community?
5. How is *The Saints and Sinners of Okay County* a novel about Oklahoma?
6. How does Dunbar empower women in this novel?
7. Describe Dunbar's writing style.
8. Discuss the ways that Aletta uses her psychic powers. Does she take advantage of her gift?

9. Can a person possess clairvoyance and be a Christian too? What is the role of religion in this novel?

10. Explain the novel's title. Who are the saints? Who are the sinners? Why? Do the sinners find redemption?

11. What is the theme/message of this novel?

12. Are there symbols in this novel? What are they? What do they represent? The dead little girl? The horn growing in Aletta's forehead? The church mob? The biker gang? The cars? Gypsy?

13. Discuss the role of alcohol and alcoholism in this novel. Why is it such a powerful catalyst of the plot's action?

14. Is Aletta a good mother? Why or why not? Is Nadene a good role model for motherhood? Explain your answer.

15. How is the novel multicultural? How does that element reflect Oklahoma?

16. Does Aletta do what other women in her situation would do? Is Aletta an "every woman?" Explain your answer.

Dr. Sara Jane Richter is dean of liberal arts and professor of English at Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell, Oklahoma. The scholar works with both the Kansas and Oklahoma Humanities Councils, presenting programs and lectures to communities throughout the region.