



Reading Guide for
THE COFFINS OF LITTLE HOPE
by Timothy Schaffert

A MIDWEST CONNECTIONS PICK

"**Sublime**...Essie Myles, an 83-year-old widowed obituary writer for a small Nebraska newspaper stumbles onto the story of her life. The paper's printing press has been working double-time since a New York publisher contracted it to print part of the print run for the final installment of a wildly popular YA novel series--part of a plan to keep the book's contents under wraps--and Essie kicks into high gear as well when she gets a tip from a local that her daughter, Lenore, has been abducted by her photographer boyfriend....Schaffert spins out the story and its offbeat characters with compassion, spoofing the nation's voracious appetite for "news"...**Piercing observations and sharp, subtle wit make this a standout.**"—*Publishers Weekly*, **starred review**

A note from Essie Myles, the narrator of *The Coffins of Little Hope*.

Dear Readers,

As many narrators do, I suppose, I've found myself with more to say, even though the book has long since gone to press. So let me tell you a few things about my approach to this story: I fancied myself a mix of both Harper Lee and Truman Capote as they lurked about Kansas researching *In Cold Blood*. Like them, I too sought the truth at the heart of a crime in a small rural town, and I too embroidered a tale of absolute fact. No, I didn't witness everything described in my book, and no, I wasn't privy to every conversation I relay, and no, I don't have 100 percent recall. But there is no doubt in my mind that I got nothing wrong. I've been writing obituaries for nearly seventy years, and you can't spend

all that time chronicling the dead without developing great insights into the habits of the living. And I'm a very reliable narrator. You can trust me on that one.

Sincerely, Essie "S" Myles.

Discussion Questions:

1. In this book, families are of varied structures and shapes. How do you think the author defines family?
2. Pop culture and youth play a critical role in this novel. How do you think age is treated?
3. What would you want said in your obituary?
4. For some characters in this book, performing magic tricks is a wonderful diversion and shared activity. How does the theme of magic flow through this book? What's the real magic this book depicts?
5. Truth is personal here, and relative. Or is it?
6. Part of this story is about another story. How do the two books and plots work together?
7. Did the girl disappear?
8. What is this book saying about change, both personal and cultural?
9. How does this novel portray motherhood?
10. Memory and memories are important to this story. How?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Schaffert grew up on a farm in Nebraska and currently lives in Omaha. He's the author of three previous critically acclaimed novels, *The Phantom Limbs of the Rollow Sisters*, *Devils in the Sugar Shop*, and *The Singing and Dancing Daughters of God*. His novels have been a Book Sense Pick, Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and a *New York Times* Editor's Choice. His writing has won numerous other awards and honors awards, including the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award, the Henfield/Transatlantic Review Award and the Nebraska Book Award. He currently teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.