

READING GUIDE for *THE ISLANDS OF DIVINE MUSIC* by John Addiego

About the Book

The Islands of Divine Music is in some ways a classic, sweeping family saga about five generations of a large, extended Southern Italian family set against the historical events of the times they are living in – the great depression, World War II, the Cuban missile crisis, minor and major league baseball (including the Negro Leagues), the Vietnam War, the anti-war movement, its aftermath, and the new millennium. It is also a “reflection,” as in mediation, on the presence, or not, of “the divine,” both in the universe and in people’s lives, and questions about its relationship with “the profane,” including profound suffering.

It begins with the story of the very precocious Rosari, who as a little girl immigrates to America with her parents at the turn of the 20th century because of a crime she unwittingly committed. After her mother’s tragic death, which for the rest of her life she seeks to deny, she crosses the country with her father from New York City to San Francisco, where she meets and marries the much older Giuseppe Verbicaro – a silent, semi-literate immigrant “who would love and confound her for fifty years.” After the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, he finds his gift – the ability to tear whole buildings down with a single sledge hammer, lucrative work following the earthquake. As he and Rosari bear five living children while he disappears for months at a time to who knows where for work, he builds with his sons a successful contracting business that supports the entire immediate and extended family, administered and managed by his youngest son, Joe, who Rosari kept in school, recognizing his superior intelligence. What Rosari never knows about Giuseppe because he never tells her is that he believes that God speaks to him directly. And when he is 79 years old, God instructs him to marry a teen-aged, pregnant, Mexican prostitute named Maria, who bears a son, Jesus. While Rosari’s response to his bigamy is, “Well, that does it. Enough is enough,” her daughters overcome their outrage and astonishment enough to go see about this Maria and baby “Hay-zeus, you say?” in the process essentially adopting them as members of the family. Consequently, the child Jesus develops a sibling relationship with several of his step-nieces and nephews, especially Joe’s three oldest children – Penelope, Paulie, and Angelo. The two youngest siblings are Mickey, who dies before reaching age 30 from Down syndrome, and Janine, who as a young woman brings the story to one full circle through her ties to the dying Rosari. But it is the profound effect that Jesus’ life and tragic death has upon the three oldest siblings that brings the novel to its final resolution -- a reunification on the Island of Women in Yucatan of the Verbicaros, each of who have spent most of their respective adult lives isolated on their own separate “islands.”

Two other characters who figure prominently in the novel, living on their respective “islands,” are Rosari and Giuseppe’s other two sons – Uncle Narciso, the oldest, and Uncle Ludovico, the middle son. “Ciso” (pronounced Cheezo), as he is called, is a handsome dandy as slow witted as he is good looking. “Lu,” on the other hand, is a passionate, former third baseman in the old San Francisco minor leagues. They each carry key pieces of the family narrative, including one averted and another ill fated brush with what Rosari calls The Black Hand, along with much of the novel’s comic relief. They also have significant influence upon the fates especially of Paulie and Angelo.

With respect to *The Islands of Divine Music* as a “reflection” on “the divine” and its relationship to the profane, this novel can be described as “*Winesburg, Ohio* meets *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.” By revealing an entire family through the stories of individual characters – “islands” – Addiego creates his family saga somewhat in the manner of Sherwood Anderson. And by infusing the narrative with the music of “magical realism,” allowing “the boundaries between what is ‘real’ and what is unconsciously real to flow together,” Addiego is able to explore and manage at least two of his most important concerns about and interest in “the divine.” First is the way he uses Gabriel Marquez’s gift for investing seemingly ordinary people with larger than life qualities, mythical even. People like Giuseppe, who can single handedly reduce a whole building to rubble with a sledge hammer. Or take Narciso, who loves to drive and simply gets in his car and lets the road he happens to be on take him to wherever it goes, driving oblivious to rules of the road, conditions of weather, or other vehicles and drivers, leaving them to get out of his way as they can. His charmed life, along with his personal charm and innocence, raises him into

the larger than life category while simultaneously evoking the old adage of God watching out for fools and angels. Second are the absurd notions of divine intervention that life's ironies lead some people to believe and act upon with varying consequences, some harmless, some benevolent, some violent, some tragic, many of them appearing in complex combinations. These arise from outright delusional thinking – Giuseppe's belief that God speaks to him directly, for instance – to the simple or naïve superstitions of baseball culture as embodied in Paulie's good luck ritual behaviors when he plays or watches a game -- a trait of character that has consequences both tragic and benevolent in the course of his life.

Finally, through its complex mix of classic family saga story telling and "magical" meditation upon much larger issues, both historical/political and spiritual, *The Islands of Divine Music* arguably rises from the level of "classic family saga" to Metaphor. Put another way, the Verbicaro's particular story embodies at least one authentic, archetypal version of our collective cultural experience, of what it was –and is -- to be "American" in the 20th century and beyond.

About the Author

The Islands of Divine Music is John Addiego's first published novel. He has published short fiction and poetry in a variety of literary magazines, among them **The Wisconsin Review**, **Prairie Schooner**, **The Ohio Review**, and **Sou'wester**. He is also a former poetry editor at the **Northwest Review Magazine**. Addiego received his MFA in English from the University of Oregon and is a certified teacher of Special Education.

Raised in a large extended Italian family in the San Francisco Bay area with historical similarities to the fictional Verbicaros, Addiego lives with his wife, Ellen, and daughter, Emily, in Corvallis, Oregon, where he teaches high school age students with special needs.

Interview with the Author

Do you come from a large extended family like the Verbicaro's?

(Chuckles) Yes, I do. My grandparents had six kids in the East Bay area, and my dad was the youngest son. I am, also, but with only two siblings. Both my brother and my sister are wonderful storytellers, but I think being the youngest makes you less the extrovert – listening and taking notes in the background. Being in a family like mine was a wonderful thing, but of course it can be hard if you want any anonymity. I remember that every time I'd be walking down the street, a car would pull up with an aunt or an uncle in it saying, "Hey you want a ride somewhere?" Actually, that may have been my impetus to go north as a young man. (laughs)

Are your grandparents of the same age as Rosari and Guisepppe?

Rosari yes, Guisepppe no. I made him a lot older. The Verbicaro name is from the Calabrian village my grandfather came from. My grandparents met right after the 1906 earthquake, in a refugee camp. And similarly to Rosari, my grandmother always said that 1906 was the year when three terrible things happened – the earthquake, the death of her brother, and meeting Vito [her husband]. (laughs). My grandmother was quite a wonderful character, but she did have a sharp tongue. Of course I only knew them as elderly people so I don't know what they were like when they were younger, but their kids always took her side of things and would just laugh along with her barbs. He took a lot of verbal abuse, in fact, but it was also clear that he was a very strong and stoical man. With his sons he started pouring foundations, and that ended up as a family business with everyone working for it – sons-in-law, brothers-in-law, even a couple of close friends, brothers from Louisiana. The other thing my grandpa did that was pretty brilliant for a peasant with no education who spoke very little English, was to buy land that came up

for auction, and then sell it at a profit. They struggled during the depression as did everyone, but during the war years and after the war [World War II], they did very well.

When my mother was in her late 90's, she started "revising" family stories I had heard before, changing facts, even. And she was not senile! Did your grandmother do that?

Oh yes! She was sort of famous for this. We could never figure out where she was from, exactly. And I hope I am telling *you* the truth – some things are the way *I* remember hearing them. But yes. She had this mysterious mother who we were never sure as to where she came from or her ethnicity. Sometimes she claimed that part of her family was French. We always thought it was because she didn't want to be taken as one of "those peasants from Southern Italy," especially peasants like my grandpa. But when I went to Southern Italy I saw that all the ladies were exactly like my grandmother, so I think that's where she was from! (laughs).

Did your grandmother's story telling style inspire the way you narrate your novel?

Yes. I loved this circular logic she had that at times would seem senile and then she would always come back to the original subject. She was a wonderful talker and knew everything that was going on in town, and in the family. So she'd start on one subject and then veer off into something radically different, and by all these associations she'd end up back where she started, and to the point of her story. It was a wonderful kind of chain of connections she would make.

How did you come to the title of this novel?

I thought of the idea of islands as island cultures at some point, and I really liked the idea of a story that had something to do with Alcatraz Island. Then I had this sense of something like the music of Sirens, or the music of some kind of mystical beings coming from an island. And there are ethnic islands, like Guiseppe and his North Beach island – a pocket of Italians living in a sea of Chinese. But as I developed my story lines it became apparent to me that the idea of the island -- and each of these characters being on his or her own island -- was very important in the novel.

This novel begins with a straightforward, chronological storyline of Rosari and Guiseppe, a classic tale of immigration at the turn of the century and the struggle to survive. And then you sort of jump off, and start visiting these various "islands." How did you decide to arrange them?

I wanted to work in a narrative fashion in which all the characters are all connected by family, but also they're connected by a progression of what's happening historically. So the Cuban missile crisis figures heavily, and also the Vietnam War. I was also moved by the story of one of the women from the Weather Underground who was so haunted by her actions [involving violence] that she turned herself in. So that became another piece of the story, something so emblematic of what that time was about. I wanted each "island" to have its own integrity but I also wanted to show how it reflected the other characters. So it does have a narrative push towards the whole family developing against a historical background. I did circle back to Rosari in Janine's trip to Italy and the tarantula. I thought about ending the novel there, but then I thought "No, no, there's a big piece that I want to explore with the siblings."

Why did you decide to focus on Joe's children? He is the son who is ashamed of his ethnic background and yet it is his kids who bring the family together again.

The dynamic of those children in that family were very central to the story for me. I also wanted to reflect on the wit and wisdom of Rosari there. She had been a very courageous and stubborn little girl and I wanted to bring that home through Angelo's daughter on the Island of Women.

And Giuseppe is certainly on his own island! Why did you decide to pair up this very bright young girl who can read and write and is interested in the world with this totally silent, illiterate man whose specialty becomes tearing things down?

(laughs) Somewhere along the line I realized that I was fascinated by the biblical story of Mary and Joseph and wondering what happened to him when his family found out what he'd done (chuckles). But his character was an interesting one to me, in that he could end up thinking that God was telling him to marry this Mexican prostitute who was pregnant with an illegitimate child.

What, exactly, is the Divine to you?

I have a strong sense of a force of Goodness that is a source of the divine for people. However, the ironies that are involved bring out these absurd notions of how divine intervention works.

Well it seems to be a product of delusional thinking among these characters.

In a way. But I also think that they are always "on to something." When Paulie is trying to make this connection with the divine that isn't really there, he makes another connection of what the Christ might really mean. I hoped for the same thing for Giuseppe, that he knew just enough about the "good book" to know that his role was to protect Mary and Jesus. Even though he didn't think that this was God's child, exactly, but he kind of thought it might be.

Well it seems like a very dark vision of the divine, in that you are forced to ask if the divine can exist without the profane, and without profound suffering, which is what happens to some of the characters in this novel.

Well that's a good question, and I can't answer it (laughs). But people who have idealistic streaks end up suffering quite a bit for it. That is one of the hardships of idealism.

You teach high school kids with special needs of all kinds – mental, emotional, developmental, and physical. Do you think your special needs kids inspired you in this line of thinking -- that they are in touch with something or things that we just don't recognize?

Oh yes, definitely. Some people who are just on a different wave length often understand something the way children do, for instance. And I do have a character with Down syndrome in the novel [Mickey] who has an encounter like that, when she helps "Santa Claus" out when he needs help. I think there is serious wisdom among a lot of people with serious disabilities. And I have had experience in the past few years with kids with high functioning autism, a very fascinating thing in terms of how all our brains work.

You claim that none of this novel is autobiographical, although you drew from your family history to some extent. So where did you get these characters?

(laughs) Well I do remember hearing Gordon Lish speak once about how all our characters are really a reflection of ourselves, in the Jungian sense that we are all the characters in our dreams. But I know that there are reflections in the novel of some real family members, even close family friends in some of the characters. I also know that it has taken me a while to be mature enough to write about them with empathy, to really identify with what it feels like to be a man in your forties or fifties, say.

Is there a character in this novel that you most identify with?

Well there's something between Paulie and Angelo that I do identify with, and each of them has some characteristics of my brother and me, although neither of us is like those two characters. Also this is a family of five kids, with Angelo being right in the middle. I have always been fascinated by what it must be like to be right in the middle of a large group of kids in a family. How does that middle kid distinguish himself from the others? In Angelo's case, he becomes the comedian. I like that character, and his dynamic with the rest of the family.

What did you mean when you said you wanted to write a "Gabriel Garcia Marquez meets Sherwood Anderson" novel?

(laughs) **Winesburg, Ohio** I read when I was young and loved it for the way a whole community is expressed by different characters. Reading Marquez gave me a sense of what can happen when you allow the boundaries between what is “real” and what is unconsciously real to flow together. I never wanted to write anything that was mystical or a fantasy of any sort, but the normal magic that is there in life is a wonderful thing. And Marquez does that so well. It reminded me of these heroic people of my own life. I wanted to try to evoke at least a little bit of that for some of the more mythic things in my novel, like Giuseppe, who can bring down a whole building with a hammer. There is something larger than life there.

It’s an old phrase, but would you say there is a theme of the sacredness of the ordinary in this novel?

Yes, that’s a wonderful way to put that. In common objects and occurrences, things can have a sacred aspect, become sacramental in a sense, where the object becomes transcendent. That’s what I really wanted to explore, and do it in a way that’s sort of playful, so it wasn’t didactic in any way.

Speaking of aspects of the divine, this novel is full of stories of baseball, real and imagined. And there is maybe nothing in our shared culture so full of what we call superstition. Paulie’s obsessive baseball rituals very much take on a magical quality. They also prefigure the way his life turns out.

Yes.

Another dynamic that I find so interesting in this novel is the fundamental difference in the respective world views of Paulie and Angelo. Angelo believes that most things in this world are a hoax, and Paulie on the other hand sees things quite differently. And when they collide, so to speak, or meet again as adults, that creates some of the more interesting scenes in the novel. Beyond that, the resolution, the coming together that the family reaches at the end comes out of that very friction between the two of them.

I really did like their explorations of faith, and why things work the way they do, or don’t, as the case may be. I think theirs are two different streams of the way that we deal with reality. And finally Angelo, although he remains skeptical, is at least willing to entertain the notion that there could be something a lot bigger and wonderful than he is willing to admit to. And Paulie is willing to believe right from the get-go and feel the punishment for the things he does.

Another of my favorite characters in this novel is Uncle Narciso, who so totally lives in the “now” that he can’t function in the world the way the rest of us do. The scenes he is in are so absurd that they take on a “magical” quality, and they are so terribly funny. Throughout, there is great humor in the way you treat the question of the sacred versus the profane existing side by side, the basic question of whether one can exist without the other. Do you think that you’re of a disposition that you tend to come at things with a basically comedic vision, or way of looking at the world?

(laughs). I think that in many ways I do, and that that is why Angelo is really the center of this story in so many ways. He realizes that you have to be able to laugh at the absurdities we see all around us, sometimes in order to bear them when they are painful, even full of suffering. But you know, I realize that another source for this quality lies in the Italian folk tales of Italo Calvino. I used to read them to my daughter, and we both loved them. Still do. A lot of their humor lies in this absurd timing that happens within the action of those stories. I certainly hope that I am not using this to make fun of anyone, but there is this way that people just do these crazy things, in a very sincere way, that I really enjoy. And this is something about the family that I am so fortunate to be from. There was always a lot of laughter, not at anyone’s expense, but just in recognition of the foolish things we all do sometimes. And I know it’s a terrible generalization, but I have always found that Italians just don’t take themselves all that seriously when it comes right down to it. Especially if you have a mother or grandmother like Rosari who can unstuff a shirt, just like that!

What's the one thing that you would most want a reader to take away from this novel?

Fiction that I love to read has a way of reflecting on things that I knew, but that I didn't quite understand until I got these particulars by way of some other voice. And I would love it if a reader, even if they are from a radically different background, could feel a similar connection to my reflections.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

Questions for Discussion

What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience that you could identify with in this novel? If so, how did that affect your response to the novel?

How would you describe the tone and style of this novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel? Were there elements that you found difficult to understand? If so, what were they?

How many ways can you identify that the author uses the idea of the "island"? What does that say to you about how the characters and the various story lines interact with one another?

What are some of the themes you can identify in this novel? What leads you to your conclusion?

Do you personally have a sense of "the divine"? How does it compare or contrast to the author's? Did this affect how you interpret the novel? What is the role of Maria and Jesus in this novel?

How do you interpret the relationship between the various characters' encounters with "the divine" and their relationship to the profane, including suffering? How would you answer the question as to whether one can exist without the other, and why?

Who are your favorite characters in the novel? Why? Which ones are the most interesting to you, and why?

What is your understanding of "magical realism"? Someone has explained it this way: In certain cultures, including Latin America, there are people who believe that dream life is just as real as waking life. They also believe that the dead are just as alive as the living, and present at all times. Their writing reflects those beliefs. Did you find the author's explanation helpful? In how many ways do you see this quality in the novel? For instance, think about the scene where Narciso broadsides a truck hauling sheep out in the desert and the language the author uses to describe what happens to him. Did you find anything suggesting the magical there?

How many ways does the author use humor in this novel, and how did that affect your interpretation of the various storylines?

Would you recommend this novel to a friend to read? Why? If not, why not?

Recommended Reading

One Hundred Years of Solitude, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson

Italian Folktales, by Italo Calvino, trans. George Martin

Ironweed, by William Kennedy

Song of Solomon, by Toni Morrison

Umbertina, by Helen Barolini

I Know This Much Is True, by Wally Lamb