

Serendipity

a novel

LOUISE SHAFFER



A Reader's Guide

*A Conversation with
Louise Shaffer*

RANDOM HOUSE READER'S CIRCLE: Your background is unusual in comparison to most authors'—you were a soap opera actress and then a TV writer. What made you want to start writing novels?

LOUISE SHAFFER: The smart-aleck answer is, I was over forty and I wasn't about to have knee surgery. That's what we call it in show biz when an actress's PR person announces that she's taking off for six weeks to fix an old dance injury, and when she comes back those lines on her face have disappeared. Sometimes her knee works better too. Anyway, I wasn't about to do that, and landing jobs was getting harder and harder—okay, it was impossible—and I still had to make the mortgage.

But that's not the whole story about my switch. I'd always loved writing and telling stories. When I was a kid they worried about my grasp on reality—in fact, some of my nearest and dearest still do, because I love the imaginary worlds and people I get to create when I write. It's probably the closest I'm ever going to get to playing . . . well, not God, but a really powerful person. In many

ways, I like writing better than acting because these are my stories and my characters and I get to say what I want to say. And no one in publishing has ever, ever suggested that I should have knee surgery.

RHRC: Which character in *Serendipity* felt most natural to create? Whom do you identify with most?

LS: Oh, Lord, that's such a good question. And the answer is, all of the characters were natural for me. But then, my characters always are. As an actress, I was trained to find something I could identify with in every character I played, and believe me, it was fun trying to find, say, your inner Lady Macbeth. So when I started writing, I realized that every one of my characters is me—sometimes in ways that I don't even recognize. And then, one of the perks of the whole writing thing is that some of my characters are also the person I'd like to be. Lu, for instance, is a huge musical comedy star, which is what I always dreamed of being when I was a teenager. Other kids of my generation listened to . . . well I don't know who they were listening to, since rock and roll left me cold, but I was swooning over Ezio Pinza singing "Some Enchanted Evening."

RHRC: *Serendipity* is a different novel from your others. What made you shift settings? And you so vividly capture a New York City that no longer exists. What is your relationship to the City?

LS: Thank you for saying that about my vision of New York City! I come from the tri-state area, and when I was a kid the only place I wanted to live was Manhattan. When I was growing up I visited it all the time with my folks to see theater and opera. When I was in my teens I studied acting in New York, and when I moved there in the seventies I couldn't believe my luck that I was actually living

in what I thought was God's country. I floated around for years just feeling privileged to be in a place with so much diversity and energy. I still feel that way. To me, New York is a magical place where something wonderful can happen to you anytime just because you are there. And if the miracle doesn't come along on a given day, you can still get some fabulous dim sum for dinner. I love New York City. I want to go back there—but not while I have so many dogs and cats.

RHRC: You've now written four novels. What is your writing process like? Do you have a set routine? What inspires you, and what do you do when you get stuck?

LS: I guess I do have a process—it's evolving, so I don't really notice it, but it's there. I always have a story I want to tell, which is usually some sort of spin on my own life. Then I create characters who are believable doing whatever it is that happens in the story. At least, I have to believe they'd do it. Then I play out the consequences of what they did.

As to specific routines for writing, I wish I were that well organized. Basically, I kind of wander around the house talking to myself until I feel like I've got the plot worked out, then I spend a lot of time emailing to ease myself into my writing head, and then eventually I get scared about my deadline and I just start doing it. The first few days are the worst. I tend to fall asleep a lot at the computer. The weird part is, I love to write. So I don't know why I dance around it so much. When I'm stuck, which happens a lot, I stop trying to figure out what I want to do next and go clean the kitty litter. Most of my big breakthroughs come to me that way. I think it's because it's an activity that gets me away from my desk, so I can't keep on beating my brains out, and yet it's not the kind of activity I really want to focus on, so my right brain gets a

lot of latitude to play around. When I'm working—especially on revisions—I have happy cats with exquisitely clean litter.

RHRC: Complicated relationships between mothers and daughters have come up in a few of your novels. What interests you about the dynamics between the generations?

LS: That's a great question because I was about to say that I don't write about complicated mother-daughter relationships and then I realized that, yeah, I do. Talk about not recognizing a piece of yourself in what you write. I just think mothers and daughters are so important to each other: Your mom is your role model as well as your parent. You learn how to be a person from both of your parents but you learn how to be a woman from your mother. For so many of us, the dreams and the hopes came from our mothers—the ones she told us about, and the ones we inherited from her without her knowing she was passing them down. In my case, that setup was heightened by the fact that my father died when I was young so my mother was an even stronger influence on me. And I'm fascinated by the question of how much of what we are is in our genes. I guess I find it very romantic to believe that certain traits are handed down in families. It sort of puts us and all our attempts to control things in perspective. And I like that.

RHRC: Do you plan out your story lines before you sit down and write them, or do you see what happens as you go along?

LS: I plan, to an extent. I need to know before I start writing how it's all going to end. And I need to know what I hope the reader will get from the book—beyond a good read. That's a sneaky little trick of mine; I always have a message I want to get across—but

since I don't believe it's my job to preach, I try to slip in my opinions in a way that you can ignore if you want. And I usually have a plot twist in the middle that everything hinges on and I need to know what that's going to be and how it's going to work. But I don't always know how I'm going to connect all the dots and get from point A to point B. And I will never write it all down because if I did that, then I'd feel locked in. And I want to pretend that I'm this free spirit. Although actually I'm probably pretty well structured when I work.

RHRC: Which authors have influenced your work, and who are your favorites?

LS: For so many years I read southern authors because I was writing southern books, so that does color this list a little. I love *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Cold Sassy Tree*, and anything by Pat Conroy, Rick Bragg, Maya Angelou, or Russell Baker. Every once in a while, I still take a trip back to Louisa May Alcott. Then I have the authors I love for light reading and escape: Georgette Heyer, Philippa Gregory, Harlan Coben, Janet Evanovich, Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Dave Barry, Carl Hiaasen, and P. G. Wodehouse. I started reading Wodehouse when I was a kid because I saw my father—who was not a very demonstrative man—laugh out loud when he read Wodehouse, and I figured any writer who could get that kind of a response from Dad had to be really funny.

I'm not sure how any of these authors have influenced my writing except that I like to have a mystery at the heart of my books and I love books with some kind of historical context. And humor. I really hope readers get a laugh or two when they read my books.

RHRC: What are you working on now?

LS: The next book is going to be back in Vaudeville again. I love that genre because as far as I can tell it really was the entertainment of the American melting pot. You had all these kids from all these different ethnic backgrounds doing their thing. And I'm going to be writing more about a favorite theme of mine, which is second chances. And strong women. Also, this time I want to explore a love story more fully—romance always pops up in my books but it usually isn't the engine driving the story.

Questions for Discussion

1. How has Carrie's past affected her decisions and ability to choose a life path? Which characteristics does Carrie share with Rose, and how are they different from each other?
2. Shaffer is known for creating well-developed, convincing female characters. Which of these women did you most identify with? Sympathize with? Disagree with?
3. Carrie's best friend, Zoe, states that Carrie has "mommy issues." Why do you think mother-daughter relationships are often so complicated? How do you feel about the way Rose raised her daughter?
4. Why does Rose hold back so much family history from her daughter? How does Carrie's eventual discovery of what happened affect how she perceives her mother?
5. Rose is a complicated, dualistic character with a love-hate relationship with wealth and fame; she is constantly telling Carrie to be wary of one's ego. What, in your opinion, made Rose shun her

lifestyle after Bobbie's death? Do you think her choices made her happy?

6. What do you make of Rose's multiple copies of the same dress? What was her reasoning behind this?

7. How does Mifalda change over the course of the novel? How do you think she came to her decision regarding Lu and her new baby, and could you imagine doing the same thing in her position?

8. How do you feel about Lu's picking career over family? What other sacrifices do the women in *Serendipity* make in their lives? What betrayals do they make?

9. What attracts Rose so deeply to Bobbie Manning? How would you characterize their relationship, and in which ways does it change over time? Why does she go to such great lengths for him? On a similar note, what attracts Carrie to Howie?

10. How does Shaffer use ice skating as a symbol, for both Mifalda and Rose?

11. Carrie asks herself "Why do I always feel like I'm settling for an empty basket when I want one that's full? Why can't I let myself be happy?" What do you think the answers to these questions are, and how do you envision her future at the end of the book?

12. "Mama, Lu, and Rose," Carrie's uncle Paulie states, "standing in a line. Three young girls, handing down all the good and bad from one generation to the next. They couldn't get away from each other." What did each woman pass down to her daughter?

What role does family legacy play in this novel, and is it portrayed positively or negatively?

13. One of this novel's themes is that women can't do it all—career, family, love—successfully. Today, many women seem to be revisiting this idea. Do women have to choose their priorities? What about men?

14. If you were casting the movie *Serendipity*, whom would you pick for actors?