

A Reader's Guide



Now Is the Hour

by Tom Spanbauer

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [Questions for Discussion](#)
- [A Conversation with Tom Spanbauer](#)
- [For Further Reading](#)

About the Book

"I love this book. The tale of Rigby John is rich with knowing—the prose is deft, funny, heartbreaking, and the story stays with you long after the last page is turned."
—A. M. Homes, author of *This Book Will Save Your Life* and *The Mistress's Daughter*

The year is 1967, and Rigby John Klusener, seventeen years old and fresh out of high school, is finally leaving his home and family behind in Pocatello, Idaho. As the novel opens, he stands on the side of the highway with his thumb out and a flower behind his ear, headed for San Francisco.

Now Is the Hour is the wondrous story of how Rigby John got to this point. It traces his gradual emancipation from the repressions of a strictly religious farming family and from the small-minded, bigoted community in which he has grown up. Transforming this familiar journey into something rich and strange and hilarious is the persona of Rigby John himself. Intimately in touch with his fears and palpably open to life's mysteries, Rigby John is a character whom readers will fall in love with, root for, and be moved by.

Now Is the Hour is a powerful, vastly entertaining novel of self-awakening, of the complex bonds of family, and ultimately of America during a period of tremendous upheaval.

A Book Sense Notable Book and a *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller

A Lambda Book Award Finalist

Selected as a Best Book of the Year by *Publishers Weekly* and the *Portland Oregonian*

About the Author

Tom Spanbauer was born in a trunk in the Princess Theater in Pocatello, Idaho. (Actually, he was born in the Bannock County memorial hospital.) He grew up in Tyhee, Idaho, an area twelve miles north of Pocatello. The family farm was bordered by the Fort Hall Indian reservation on one side. Tom was raised Catholic in a

community of Mormons and to get to the St. Joseph's School, he had to take two buses. There was always a mix of students on the bus. The Mormons all stayed together near the front of the bus, and the Indians filled the back rows. Those buses could be a scary ride. He attended St. Joseph's School until eighth grade, then for his freshman year he attended Hawthorne Junior High, then two years at Pocatello High School. He was part of the first graduating class from Highland High School.

In 1964 he began his studies at Idaho State College, which later became Idaho State University. Tom attended Idaho State for five years and graduated with a degree in English with a major in German. He was the first in all of his extended family to get a college degree. The summer after he graduated, he was accepted into the Peace Corps.

He received his MFA from the Columbia University Writing Program in 1986. Since then, Tom has written several acclaimed novels, including *Faraway Places*, *In The City of Shy Hunters*, and *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, which won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award for best fiction and was lauded as "dazzlingly accomplished" by the *Washington Post*. Tom now lives in Portland, Oregon, where he writes and teaches classes in Dangerous Writing.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Now Is the Hour* for every reader.

1. Rigby John admits to having very few memories before the birth of his brother Russell, but he has a clear sense that this event was a major turning point for his family. How does the birth of Russell alter the Klusener family dynamic? How do Rigby John's memories of life before and after Russell's birth shape his perception of his family, of his mother especially?
2. Young Rigby John identifies with his Aunt Alma's friend Theresa Nussbaum, the painter, and her assertion that an artist "travels the world looking for something inside" (p. 51). Why does Rigby John feel these words are "the biggest magic ever"? Do you agree with Theresa's statement? By that criterion, would you consider Rigby John an artist? Why or why not?
3. Rigby John and his mother have a very close, complex relationship, especially in the years before Rigby John reaches puberty. How do their shared secrets bind them together? How does their relationship change over the course of the novel? How does Rigby John's understanding of his mother's life influence the decisions he makes about his own life? Do you think Mrs. Klusener is a good mother? How so or how not?
4. Early in the novel, Rigby John describes the Mexican house as "No trees, no bushes, just alone. The old gray house looked so cold and lost in the middle of nowhere. Now that I look back on it, my dad was like that house. No wonder he hated Mexicans and Indians and black people so much" (p. 47). Do you agree with Rigby John's assessment of his father? When Mr. Klusener voices racist, sexist, and homophobic opinions, do you think he does so out of fear, hatred, or some other motivation altogether?
5. Throughout his life, Rigby John struggles with the sense of being an outsider. At home, in church, in school: he often feels he doesn't fit in. What factors contribute to his sense of otherness? When do other characters experience similar feelings? What does this say about being an outsider?
6. Sensitive, vulnerable, sweet Rigby John finds little affirmation for his rich inner life

in his early years, his days occupied by the constant work on the farm. As he grows older, he develops a passion for literature, and he often sneaks behind the barn to read. What does literature mean to him? Why is he so furtive about his reading habit?

7. When Rigby John needs to think, he often stands on a certain spot on the grain elevator. What does his desire for balance symbolize? What conflicting demands and desires, both internal and external, is he trying to balance in his life? Does he ever find balance?

8. Schoolyard bully Joe Scardino is the source of many of Rigby John's social problems. How might things have been different for Rigby John if he'd never run afoul of Joe? Do you think Scardino eventually gets his just desserts?

9. Despite the prejudices of his upbringing, Rigby John forms an unexpected friendship with the migrant farmhands Flaco and Acho. When Rigby John is reluctant to go swimming with the brothers, he describes their insistence: "They did what any good friends would do. They helped their friend not to be afraid" (p. 128). Do you agree with his description of the duties of friendship? At what other parts of the novel do Rigby John's friends fill that role for him? When does Rigby John help his friends overcome their fears, and when does he fail to do that?

10. As Rigby John finds new friendships—with Billie, Flaco, Acho, George, Grandma Queep—he is little by little transformed. How does his relationship with each of his friends shape his life and his sense of self?

11. George tells Rigby John that he's waiting for Thunderbird to show him the way. When Rigby John later repeats George's words to Billie, he says that George is waiting for love. Is Rig right? What do you think George means when he talks about "Thunderbird"?

12. One night at Billie's, Mrs. Cody's old wedding dress is brought out of storage. What does the dress mean to Mrs. Cody? To Billie? What symbolism does Rigby John find in it? How does the night of the dress help strengthen the bond between Rigby John and Billie?

13. Throughout *Now Is the Hour*, there are many instances of Rigby John learning language and of his new knowledge transforming him. He excels in childhood spelling bees, picks up some Spanish so he can communicate with Flaco and Acho, talks for hours with Billie, and ultimately discovers the ugly power of words like "queer" and "faggot." For Rigby John, is mastery of language equivalent to mastery of self? Does language have the potential to affect everyone in this way?

14. *Now Is the Hour* is set in the late 1960s, a time when the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and antiwar activism were profoundly transforming American society. How do Rigby John's personal transformations connect him to these larger societal transformations? Could the author believably have set Rigby John's story in a different time or place?

15. Rigby John leaves home with a few items of sentimental value: Grandma Queep's pipe, Theresa Nussbaum's painting, a photograph, a wadded-up piece of paper, and a dollar bill. What does each of these items mean to him, and why did he select them for his trip? What would you have taken with you?

16. A reviewer for *Entertainment Weekly* wrote of *Now Is the Hour*, "The emotional complexity of Rigby's entertaining arc only makes one yearn to read about the San Francisco chronicles that surely follow." What do you think will happen to Rigby John in San Francisco?

A Conversation with Tom Spanbauer

Much of your fiction can be described as autobiographical, even *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, which takes place in a mythical, myth-busting Old West. How do you see *Now Is the Hour* in these terms?

My work is autobiographical in the sense that I go to places in myself where it is sore, or where there is something secret, or I run into some kind of silence in myself that feels like there's something hiding in there. I'm always investigating my own heart. Like Borges said, all writers are describing their own face. *Now Is the Hour* is no different. The intentions I had when I started *Now Is the Hour* were to examine closely a German Catholic farm family in Idaho in the late '50s and early '60s and to track the development of their sensitive male child.

The Klusener family is very much like my own family. You might say my own family is a departure point for the fictional family. I remember Ingmar Bergman commenting on one of his films. He had just directed his main character, played by Liv Ullman, through a suicide. When the scene was over he said something like "Thank God, now I don't have to commit suicide." My relationship to *Now Is the Hour* is quite similar.

My mother died while I was writing this novel. And with her death came the desire to try and put down on paper the complicated woman I knew. Writing is such a wonderful way for me to heal myself. In order to write something true, the writer has to become all the characters he is talking about. So Tom, the child of Marie and John, probably doesn't want to see his mother or his father as confounding, complicated, bewildered people who were full of contradictions. Tom, the child, would just as soon keep his parents set off in rarified place as demigods, whom he can in turn resent and rage at, or edify, or rebel against, or view in any number of ways that a child can behold his parents. By writing a novel, the writer gets to sit down in various vantage points, and from those points of view he can observe the lives of *his characters* in a way that the child, the son, could never do with *his parents*. What happens is forgiveness, or at least the process of forgiveness. And it's real forgiveness because it's not done out of conformism to a religious or cultural ideal. One comes to forgiveness because, through the gift of fiction, the author has literally lived through the lives of his parents inside their skins.

It may seem arrogant, the assumption that I could actually be my mother or my father. I don't claim that. What I am doing is not trying to represent my parents in a factual or "real" way. What I am really doing is going to my own soul, to how these people impacted me, how they tried to love me, how they tried to make me in their image. By investigating these sore, secret places in me—and by being faithful to the true artist's spirit, in that my intention is not to judge but to really want to know—by investigating the marks my mother and father made on me, I can come to understand who these people were.

Francis Bacon, in his artist's statement for his exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1990, said, "[The artist] has to wash the realism back onto the nervous system by his invention...It's an attempt to bring the figurative thing up to the nervous system more violently, and more poignantly...In trying to do a portrait, my ideal would really be just to pick up a handful of paint and throw it at the canvas and hope that the portrait was there." What Van Gogh said about painting goes for fiction as well: "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer."

The character of Rigby's mother, and his relationship to her, is central to the book. She's a complex character, and, as you've said, she's based on your own mother. Was it difficult to write about her?

Really, my job as a human being was to leave my mother and find a life of my own. I know that's the case for every child. Every child must move on and grow and come to

his or her own identity. For me, leaving my mother was an especially difficult task. At a very early age, I could sense how sad and lonely she was and it was always a great heartache for me. It wasn't so much hard for *me* to leave *her*. I was ready to live my life. What was hard was the thought of her without me. Imagining my mother alone was a great sadness to me.

Only recently, I had a stroke and I found that the cause of my stroke was that there was a congenital hole in my heart. When the doctor told me the hole in my heart was where my heart was connected to my mother's heart and my body had not closed the hole the way most bodies do, I knew immediately that hole had to be filled. The metaphor didn't only suggest the likeness, it was the hole itself.

The actual writing of the book, though, was a labor of love. My mother died three years ago and with her death came a lot of understanding. Her death gave me full permission to write her story.

In George Serano, you've created a significant Native American character. Your own family lived next to a reservation, so clearly some of your interest in Native Americans comes with your geographical territory. But obviously your interest goes way beyond that; what's that about?

When I returned from the Peace Corps and went back to Pocatello, there were all of a sudden Native Americans everywhere I turned. It really felt like a Hollywood casting agent had decided to put Native peoples in my hometown. It was scary to realize I had lived by these people all my life and never really seen them. I learned a lot in Kenya about race and humanity, and I was ripe with that knowledge when I landed back in Idaho. Part of my interest was in how something can appear seemingly out of nowhere, when in reality it had always existed. How does a person do that? How did I do that? So my interest in Native Americans began with an investigation of my own racism. It led me to a very particular individual named Clyde Hall, who was raised all my life right alongside me on the reservation. I never knew him but he knew me, or rather *of* me, because of my family. My father leased Indian land and farmed it. Clyde and I became blood brothers in 1968. We actually cut each other's wrists and placed our bloody open cuts against each other. Those days, you could still do stuff like that. It has been through this relationship that I have come to know and love a lot about Native Americans and their culture. The most particular aspect of Native religion that appealed to me was the simple premise that everything is alive. My brother is the spiritual leader for the Naraya dance, which is the Ghost Dance, in the tradition of Wovoka. I have taken part in this dance many times and I am part of the Naraya community. I have also taken part in sweat lodges and other Native American ceremonies. Twice I was present at the sacred bundle opening and have danced with the Thunder Pipe, the most sacred relic of the Blackfoot people.

The story is set at a very particular time, the culturally transformative period of the 1960s. How does that figure into the novel?

In the 1960s, even in rural America, in the sticks of Idaho, change came—in drugs, music, and ideas. It was a period when small-town bigotry took its first big hit. A lot of what Rigby John has to contend with is the racism, sexism, and homophobia of the time, which was very heavy in a place like Pocatello and especially heavy in our household in the form of the father's worldview. The incredible choice that Rigby John makes, I doubt if he could have made this choice without the presiding spirit of the '60s. People were out to expand their consciousness. Change was a palpable feeling in the air we breathed. We were all busting loose from the tight-assed '50s. If you follow the music as the novel proceeds, you can sense the change that was going on. At the beginning Rigby John is listening to the Everly Brothers' "Wake Up, Little Suzie," then the Supremes and the Motown sound. By the end of the novel he's listening to Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." Songs like "Chapel of Love" and "Love and Marriage" were popular songs as Rigby John was coming into puberty. By the time he's seventeen,

he's listening to "A Day in the Life" on the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album. It was such a huge cultural change. The beginnings of the cultural war that we're still fighting, really. People were tuning in and turning on and tripping out. For a while there, we really did believe we could change the world.

For Further Reading

The following paperbacks from Mariner Books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed Tom Spanbauer's *Now Is the Hour*:

[*Fun Home*](#) by [Alison Bechdel](#)

[*The Member of the Wedding*](#) by [Carson McCullers](#)

[*Laughing Boy*](#) by [Oliver LaFarge](#)

[*Red Ant House*](#) by [Ann Cummins](#)

[Home](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Map](#)
[**Privacy Policy**](#) | [Trademark Information](#) | [Terms and Conditions of Use](#)
Copyright © 2007 Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.