

WE CAME HERE TO SHINE

by Susie Orman Schnall



About the Author

- A Conversation with Susie Orman Schnall

Behind the Novel

- Fun Facts About the New York World's Fair of 1939

Keep On Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

Also available as an audiobook
from Macmillan Audio

For more reading group suggestions
visit www.readinggroupgold.com.

*A
Reading
Group Gold
Selection*



A Conversation with Susie Orman Schnall

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

I've loved books as long as I can remember . . . Shel Silverstein, Beverly Cleary, Judy Blume. I've read them all. And though my favorite authors have changed, that love of reading is still strong today. After college, I worked for magazines, internet companies, advertising agencies, and nonprofit organizations doing marketing and corporate communications. It wasn't until after my youngest son started kindergarten that I even considered writing fiction. Four books later, I'm so happy I pivoted and became an author.

Is there a book that most influenced your life? Or inspired you to become a writer?

At the time I was writing my first novel, I was highly moved by and influenced by *The Middle Place* by Kelly Corrigan. Throughout the years, though, so many books have influenced me—the way I think, the way I see the world, the way I see my place in the world. And so many books have provided me an opportunity to laugh, cry, and connect with humanity at large. Some of my all-time favorite books include: anything by Jane Austen or Jeffrey Archer, *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett, *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, *Daisy Jones & The Six* by Taylor Jenkins Reid, and *Small Great Things* by Jodi Picoult.



How did you become a writer? Would you care to share any writing tips?

I had been writing freelance articles for magazines and websites and I felt like my next challenge would be to write a novel. So I signed up for a course to provide structure and discipline. As the day of the first class approached, I almost talked myself out of attending—the idea of writing an entire book seemed intense and daunting. As encouragement, I told myself that if I hated the first class, I didn't have to do the homework. I went to that first class, I did the homework, then I went to the next class, and by the end of the course I had written several chapters of what would turn out to be my first novel, *On Grace*. Today, upon the publication of this, my fourth novel, I look back and feel astonished by and proud of what I've accomplished.

A Few Writing Tips

1. Read around and read up: Read books in the genre you hope to publish in. It's important to know the expectations and conventions of the genre—not that you have to follow them exactly, but so you know what readers and editors are looking for. And read books that are more advanced than the level you currently write at. That's where all the juicy learning takes place.
2. Don't hem and haw. If you want to write, write. It's just like anything else in life. Learn as much as you can about the industry and the craft, put in the hours doing the actual work, understand that rejection is part of the business, set goals, keep going until you've achieved them, and then set new goals.
3. Do your research. People come up to me at my events all the time and ask me questions: How

*About the
Author*

do you find an agent? What should I do with my children's book manuscript? There are a bazillion blog posts, and courses, and magazine articles galore on everything you want and need to know about book publishing. Use those resources to help you get where you want to be.

What was the inspiration for this novel?

It all began when I read Esther Williams's autobiography, *The Million Dollar Mermaid*, and learned about her experience swimming in Billy Rose's Aquacade at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco in 1940. I had never heard of Billy Rose or his famous show, so I did some research and fell in love with the history of the Aquacade and the New York World's Fair of 1939 in particular. I thought it would be fun to write a character who had a similar experience to Esther Williams, and the story developed from there.

Can you tell us about what research, if any, you did before writing this novel? Do you have firsthand experience with its subject? Base any of the characters on people from your own life? What is the most interesting or surprising thing you learned as you set out to tell your story?

I did a great deal of research on the 1939 World's Fair before I began writing the novel and during as well. I wanted to ensure that the details were accurate and that readers didn't have to question whether something that is presented as factual in the story really happened. Similarly, I wanted everything that came from my imagination—the characters, the story lines—to be rooted in the actual history of the fair, the people who attended, and the contemporaneous events that were



happening in the United States and abroad.

I began by reading a number of books, websites, and newspaper articles about the history of the fair: about how it was conceived, the players, pavilions, attractions, daily events, food, overall look and feel, etc. I especially enjoyed firsthand accounts—written and filmed—so I could absorb what it would have been like for children and adults in 1939 who were lucky enough to experience this slice of history.

One of my favorite ways of understanding the fair was through eBay! I purchased memorabilia, including Heinz pickle pins (the most popular souvenir from the fair), postcards (blank and filled out), guidebooks, maps, and even an original Aquacade program. The most exciting finds were actual copies of *Today at the Fair*. It was remarkable and transporting to turn those yellowed pages and to have a real-life keepsake of what my character Max worked on every day.

The cherry on top was a visit to Flushing Meadows—Corona Park in Queens. There are few remains from the 1939 fair (and only a bit more from the 1964 fair), but being able to see the footprint of the fair and to walk the paths that my characters walked was extraordinary. It brought it all to life!

Are you currently working on another book? And if so, can you tell us what it's about?

At press time, I'm still in the conceptualization and plotting phase for my next novel, which will stay true to my past work by exploring themes of women realizing their professional dreams against evergreen workplace challenges all set against an interesting slice of American history. In this case, the world of culinary school.

*About the
Author*



Fun Facts About the New York World's Fair of 1939

I was able to include many details about the fair in *We Came Here to Shine*, but there were so many aspects of the fair I found fascinating that didn't make their way into the final version of the book. For instance:

An Oasis: The Fair Corporation spent \$1,500,000 on landscaping and considered the endeavor a serious and important undertaking; thus, the grounds were lush with trees and flowers. Plantings around the fair's 1,216 acres included 10,000 live trees, 400,000 pansies, 500,000 hedge plants, 250 acres of grass, and a million tulips given as a gift by Holland.

Rainbow of Colors: The colors of the buildings were part of a master plan conceived of by the fair's Board of Design. Thus, from the Trylon and Perisphere (the only true-white buildings on the grounds), the structures on each of the main thoroughfares extended in a particular color, deepening toward the darkest version of that color the further it was from the center. For example, the buildings along Constitution Mall progressed from rose to a deep burgundy. Additional colors were utilized in murals, sculptures, and other effects.

The Daily Count: The National Cash Register Company erected the world's largest cash register (forty feet tall) atop a building in the Amusement Zone. It displayed the real-time attendance of the fair in giant numbers that measured two-and-a-half feet tall.

Introducing . . . Television: At its exhibit in the Communications and Business Systems Zone, RCA, the Radio Corporation of America, revealed television for the first time. With the assistance of



RCA employees named Miss Television, fairgoers were able to participate in a demonstration that allowed them to see themselves on the screen. In addition, the first commercial television broadcast in New York was of the fair's inaugural ceremonies on April 30, 1939.

Meet the Middletons: The Westinghouse Electric Company created an hour-long film as a clever way of advertising their exhibit at the fair. It starred the fictional Middletons of Indiana, who were meant to represent the typical American family visiting the fair, and is still available for viewing on the internet. Today's observers have argued that the film is a piece of corporate propaganda and an argument for capitalism over communism, but it serves as an important audiovisual relic of the fair in its glory.

Masterpieces of Art: This art exhibit was worth \$30,000,000 and was heralded as "one of the most important exhibitions of old masters ever displayed under one roof." There were approximately five hundred paintings and sculptures spanning the years from the Middle Ages to 1800 and featuring artists such as da Vinci, Titian, El Greco, Rembrandt, Goya, and Michelangelo. Artwork was lent from museums around the world.

Do Not Open 'til 6939: Westinghouse buried the first time capsule on September 23, 1938, for display at the 1939 fair. More than one hundred items meant to represent life at the time were inside, including Bausch & Lomb eyeglasses, a slide rule, a plastic Mickey Mouse child's cup, Elizabeth Arden makeup, Camel cigarettes, asbestos cloth, a dollar bill, wheat seeds, a leather-bound rag-paper copy of the Holy Bible, and messages from noted men, such as Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. The capsule also included a fifteen-minute newsreel containing

speeches by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Howard Hughes, and Jesse Owens; clips of sporting events, such as a Harvard-Yale football game and the Big League All-Star baseball game of July 1938; a fashion show in Miami; and a demonstration of the United States's military prowess from an event at Fort Benning, Georgia. Westinghouse also created a time capsule for the 1964 New York World's Fair that was buried on October 16, 1965. A monument at the site of the time capsules still stands at its original site at Flushing Meadows—Corona Park in Queens, New York.

Fun Facts About the Aquacade

Trudy: Another star of Billy Rose's Aquacade was Olympic gold medalist (Paris 1924) Gertrude Ederle. She is known as the first woman to swim across the English Channel. On August 6, 1926, she departed Cap Gris-Nez, France, just after 7:00 A.M. and arrived at Kingsdown, England, fourteen hours and thirty-one minutes later, beating the records of the five men who had accomplished the feat prior to her.

Brrr: May temperatures in New York City in 1939 were colder than normal, which resulted in unpleasant pool conditions for the swimmers. Thus, Billy Rose installed an expensive heating system in the pool to keep the water at seventy-five degrees. As fall weather crept in, Rose put in an additional \$10,000 to increase the pool temperature to eighty-two degrees. Rose also spent around thirty dollars a day on steaming hot coffee to keep his swimmers warm.

Heading West: After the Aquacade's great success in New York in 1939, Billy Rose also staged the



show at the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco. He chose seventeen-year-old Esther Williams, a champion swimmer who would become a Hollywood film star, to be the female lead, and she was joined by male lead Johnny Weissmuller. (Olympic gold medalist and film star Buster Crabbe took over Weissmuller's role in New York to swim alongside Eleanor Holm—at that point, Mrs. Billy Rose—during the New York fair's 1940 season.) Williams's Aquacade audition was held at the Los Angeles Athletic Club pool during her lunch hour from her job at the I. Magnin department store, where she earned seventy-six dollars a month. During that audition, Williams wanted to show Rose how strong she was, so she dove into the pool and handily completed one hundred meters. Rose told Williams that instead of swimming fast he wanted her to “swim pretty” and offered her the job on the spot. She boarded a train to San Francisco the very next night. In her fascinating and informative autobiography, *The Million Dollar Mermaid*, Williams recounts episodes when she was seduced by Rose and Weissmuller. She tells of confidently rebuffing them both.

Thwarted Dreams: Before swimming in the Aquacade, Eleanor Holm was a champion swimmer who had won a gold medal in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics and was a member of the 1936 U.S. Olympic team. However, in what would become a scandal of the time, while on the SS *Manhattan* en route to Berlin for the Olympics, Holm was kicked off the team after being accused of being drunk and breaking the 9:00 P.M. curfew.

Aquabelle Number One's Salary: Esther Williams was swindled by her unethical agent while

Behind the Novel

swimming in the 1940 Aquacade. She entrusted her agent with her finances and was unaware of what her salary was. Billy Rose issued Williams's weekly \$500 paychecks to this agent, but he took more than his fair share and paid her only \$125 a week. Master of Ceremonies Morton Downey (another man that Williams, in her autobiography, accused of harassing her) revealed that information to her. Holm apparently made \$2,000 a week in the same role, but, according to Williams, this didn't bother her as Holm was more accomplished. Williams would go on to confront her agent, and this episode became the inspiration for a story line between my character Vivi and her agent, Jack.



Recommended Reading

***The Million Dollar Mermaid* by Esther Williams**

This is the book that piqued my interest about Billy Rose's Aquacade. It also gives a great behind-the-scenes account of being a movie star in the middle of the last century.

***The Good Girls Revolt: How the Women of Newsweek Sued Their Bosses and Changed the Workplace* by Lynn Povich**

This book tells the story of the discrimination suit filed against *Newsweek* in 1970. Though it's set thirty years later than *We Came Here to Shine*, if you're interested in the topic of women in journalism, it's a must-read. Also, I loved the TV spin-off, *Good Girls Revolt*, and was disappointed that it was canceled after the first season.

***The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* by Erik Larson**

If you love world's fairs then check out this book that tells the stories of two men—one a famed architect, the other a serial killer—and their ties to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

***The World of Tomorrow: The 1939 New York World's Fair* by Larry Zim, Mel Lerner & Herbert Rolfes**

I read a lot of books about the New York World's Fair of 1939; this is the most comprehensive and has hundreds of photographs.

1939NYWorldsFair.com

A breezy, enlightening, and well-organized website created by World's Fair historian Paul M. Van Dort

Reading
Group
Gold



Keep On
Reading

that contains everything you've ever wanted to know about the New York World's Fair of 1939.

Uncommon Type: Some Stories by Tom Hanks

This book is a collection of short stories. One in particular, "The Past Is Important to Us," is about one man's visit to the New York World's Fair of 1939. The story has an interesting twist and wonderful descriptions of the fairgrounds and exhibits.



Reading Group Questions

Note: Many of these questions contain spoilers. Please don't read them until you've finished the book.

1. The World's Fair plays the role of another character in the novel. Have you ever attended a World's Fair yourself or know someone who has? If you haven't attended one, based upon the description in the novel, do you think it's something you would have wanted to go to? Why or why not? And how, if at all, did the fair's depiction in the novel teach you about, or change your impression of, this important event?
2. The New York World's Fair of 1939 took place as the Great Depression was winding down and as World War II was beginning. What do you know about the political and cultural landscapes of the time that inform the story lines of the characters and the timing of the World's Fair in general?
3. If you could time travel back to 1939, which exhibits or buildings would you visit? What souvenirs would you buy?
4. One of the opening quotes is by Eleanor Roosevelt: "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." What does that quote mean to you?
5. Are you more of a Max or a Vivi, or neither? Why? How did your impressions of each character evolve while reading the book?
6. What job would you have pursued at the fair during the summer of 1939? Would you have wanted to work for *Today at the Fair*, swim

Reading
Group
Gold



Keep On
Reading

in the Aquacade, work at one of the exhibit buildings, or something else entirely?

7. Were you surprised to learn that Sofia was Vivi's daughter? What else surprised you while reading the novel?
8. Do you blame Vivi for leaving her newborn daughter in the care of her sister, Maria, even though Vivi knew Frank was a dangerous man? Or do you think Vivi did what she had to do because Maria pressured her to leave?
9. How do you think Max handled the situation she faced in not receiving comparable work assignments to her coworker Charlie? How would you have handled her plight?
10. While reading the novel, did you hope Vivi would end up with her Los Angeles boyfriend, Gabe, or the Aquacade diver Dean? Or did you think she wasn't well suited for either?
11. Did you think Max and James were a good match? How did you feel about their relationship when the novel ended?
12. If you were asked to create a time capsule of the present day, what items would you recommend be included to represent our society?
13. What can we learn from Max's and Vivi's experiences about the challenges women faced professionally and personally in the late 1930s?
14. Have you read any of Susie Orman Schnall's other novels? How would you compare this one to those?



15. If you were making a movie of this novel, whom would you cast?
16. Did you take away any message from the story?
17. Reread the last paragraph of the acknowledgments. Why do you think this sentiment is so important to the author? Is it something that you find inspiring or interesting, or that you identify with in any way? Why or why not?

Enhance Your Book Club

- If your book club is near New York City, go as a group to the grounds of the fair at Flushing Meadows—Corona Park to see the site of the World’s Fair. Better yet, take one of the many tours offered of the grounds. And be sure to visit the Queens Museum to see their extensive World’s Fair collection.
- Wear late-1930s fashions to the book club meeting and play music from the era.
- Screen World’s Fair videos. Suggestions include *The Middletons at the Fair*, scenes from the Aquacade, and the seventeen amateur films by Philip Medicus that show a tremendous amount of the fair and its attendees (the Aquacade portion begins at time stamp 13:46 on Reel One). All can be found through a simple internet search.
- Visit 1939NYWorldsFair.com, search “Famous Chicken Inn Menu,” and look at the first image that shows up. Ask everyone in the book club to bring an item from the menu so you can all enjoy a meal that commemorates a crowd favorite from the fair.

*Keep On
Reading*