

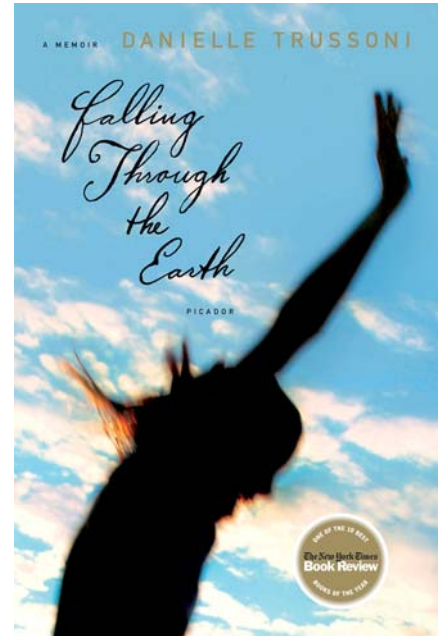
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Falling Through the Earth* *A Memoir*

by Danielle Trussoni

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Falling Through The Earth* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Falling Through The Earth*.

### About the Book

From her father, Danielle Trussoni learned rock and roll, how to avoid the cops, and never to shy away from a fight. Growing up, she was fascinated by stories of his adventures as a tunnel rat in Vietnam, where he risked his life crawling headfirst into holes to search for American POWs held underground. Ultimately, Danielle came to believe that when the man she adored drank too much, beat up strangers, or mistreated her mother, it was because the horror of those tunnels still lived inside him. Eventually her mom gave up and left, taking all the kids except one: Danielle. When everyone else walked away and washed their hands of Dan Trussoni, Danielle would not. Now she tells their story.

As Danielle trails her father through nights at Roscoe's Vogue Bar, scores of wild girlfriends, and years of bad dreams, a vivid and poignant portrait of a father-daughter relationship unlike any other emerges. Although the Trussonis are fiercely committed to each other, theirs is a love story filled with anger, stubbornness, outrageous behavior, and battle scars that never completely heal.

Beautifully told in a voice that is defiant, funny, and yet sometimes heartbreaking, *Falling Through the Earth* immediately joins the ranks of those classic memoirs whose characters imprint themselves indelibly into readers' lives.

*Falling Through the Earth* is the winner of the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award for 2005–06. It was chosen by Marilynne Robinson and James A. McPherson. The award is given every two years by the workshop to honor the best book written by a graduate of the workshop during this time.

“Vivid and engrossing . . . a wonderfully complex and penetrating book. This is an accomplished debut from a writer with many talents.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“A richly textured history and timely reminder that a war's victims aren't limited to those in uniform nor demarcated by geography.”

—Anthony Swofford, author of *Jarhead*

“A heartbreaking story of missed connections . . . this excellent memoir is much more than the sum of its parts.”

—*People* (four stars)

## About the Author

Danielle Trussoni, who grew up and now lives in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin. On the strength of the first twenty pages she ever wrote (which became part of this book) she was admitted to the Iowa Writers' Workshop from which she graduated in May 2002.

## Discussion Questions

1. When we meet Daniel Trussoni, he is a man broken by the events in his life. His brother says he came back from Vietnam a changed man, that war scarred his soul and divorce broke his heart. Which do you think has damaged him more? Is the war responsible for everything that happened to the Trussoni family?
2. Daniel was neither for nor against the war -- how did that affect his experiences there? Why did Daniel join the tunnel squad? Did he feel he could handle the worst war had to offer and come out unscathed? How did living in mortal fear every moment affect him? Did the suffering Daniel experienced in Vietnam bring him the wisdom and strength he expected? Why didn't he consider the consequences?

3. By the time Danielle is eleven, the household is deteriorating and her father knows he is losing her mother. Her mother takes a night job and is spending more time out of the house. How is Danielle affected when her mother draws away from the family? Did the fact that her father encouraged her to be independent make her inaccessible to friends?
4. For Daniel there was never any gray area -- either his children were for him or against him. Why did Danielle always cover up and apologize for him? Her mother thinks Danielle did not love her. Why does she choose her father over her mother? Why would Dan want Danielle to come live with him? How did being Dad's favorite affect her childhood? Why did she leave her siblings?
5. Danielle went to church as a part of her Catholic-school curriculum. During her parents' separation, the Father of the congregation is killed. How does that incident affect her burgeoning feelings of faith?
6. How was Danielle affected by seeing Rita Trussoni, her half sister? Did it feed Danielle's fears of abandonment and banishment?
7. Danielle steals from her father and one of his girlfriends, and then later she shoplifts. Her father always instilled the importance of trust in his children. Why does Danielle steal?
8. At one point in their development, Danielle switches places with her sister Kelly and becomes the vulnerable one in the family. Why? How does Kelly learn to survive her father? Was it by becoming pregnant and raising a child on her own?
9. When she is in college, Danielle tells her father she wants to write about the tunnels, even invites him to accompany her to Vietnam. But he only wants to forget the whole experience. He says, "I gave that war to you." Do you think that is true?
10. While she is in Vietnam, Danielle feels the place has a powerful hold over her. How does the stalker there act as a metaphor for what overcame her father?
11. In Vietnam Danielle meets Jim and Patty. Jim explains what he thinks is the difference between WWII and Vietnam veterans: WWII vets came back winners. Through his trips back to Vietnam, Jim seems to have put his demons to rest. Discuss how Jim and Patty's marriage survived and Danielle's parents' did not. Everyone in her family advocates looking forward, not back. Has that been a mistake?
12. How does her father's alcoholism affect the family in general and Danielle's relationship with him in particular? Does her father understand the effect of his outbursts on her and his other children? He was diagnosed with PTSD a full thirty-five years after the war, but Daniel doesn't believe his problems really affected his family. Does Daniel ever take responsibility for how he treats them?
13. Danielle and her siblings are exposed to many women coming through their father's house and at Roscoe's bar. How did this affect their behavior? As she gets older, Danielle is

attracted to troubled men, ones she feels she can rescue. Her first experiences of sex are negative. How has her relationship with her father influenced her relationships with other men?

14. As she gets older Danielle does not speak to her father for long periods of time. When and why does she begin to break away? How similar are father and daughter?
15. Why does Danielle really go to Vietnam? Is it only to discover the forces that formed her father? Does she accomplish what she intended? Once she experiences Vietnam, is she able to come to terms with her father at last? Does her journey bring acceptance or healing? When Danielle is in graduate school, she receives a tape from her father with scenes from her childhood. Can she now make peace with him?

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