
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

to be sung
underwater

a novel by



Tom McNeal



A conversation with Tom McNeal

Willy Blunt is very vivid on the page. Was there a real-life model for Willy? When you started writing, did the story grow out of the characters, or vice versa?

There was a rough model for Willy, a friend I'd known since he was twelve and whose death was imminent when I started writing the book. When he was in his early twenties, this friend was betrayed by a woman he was absolutely crazy about. The woman moved breezily on, but he never completely recovered from it. After my friend died, I had the powerful need to give him—or the fictional character roughly based on him—a more introspective girlfriend, one who might not have completely forgotten him. As for the chicken-or-egg, character-or-story question, who can say? I do know that until I've got characters whose company I really want to keep for a while, nothing moves forward.

You bring Judith Whitman so powerfully to life in To Be Sung Underwater. What were your inspirations for her character? As a writer, do you encounter any particular challenges when inhabiting a woman's perspective versus a man's?

Judith is much more a composite character than Willy. I have a friend who is a film editor in L.A., and she generously helped me with those details. The rest comes from observation, I suppose, and from whatever it is—voyeurism, empathy, curiosity—that makes a person want to write in the first place. The challenge is the same whether the character is male or female: what will make a reader believe in and care about this person and this predicament? The strong emotional reactions some women have to

Judith have been the surprising thing. There are readers who don't much like the decisions Judith makes, who pronounce her unlikeable, in fact, but I always thought of her as smart, curious, and almost courageous in her sense of purpose. She has backbone. She knows what she wants and goes after it—but she's also self-aware enough to look back and wonder how big the bills have been for her decisions, and who has paid them.

You might call To Be Sung Underwater a cross-country novel, with set pieces in Vermont, Nebraska, and California. How important is a sense of place to you when you set out to write a story?

Well, I love Vermont and California, but of the three settings mentioned, Nebraska is the one to which Judith, in the end, wants to return. As much as anything, that's a reflection of my own yearnings. My mother has always told great stories about growing up in Nebraska, and when we were kids, we'd take annual trips back to the farm where she was raised. I loved it there, and I loved the stories she told, so when I began to write in my early twenties I moved back to a little town called Hay Springs, a fictionalized version of which became the setting for my first book, *Goodnight, Nebraska*. A couple of times now I've written about characters who come to Nebraska as outsiders and eventually see it as an elemental place where a fulfilling life can be led. A feeling still comes over me when I go back there—it's as if you can see farther and breathe deeper—and when Judith returns to Nebraska after a long absence, I wanted her to be struck by this sensation, too. Fiction is often about finding out where you belong.

What are you drawn to more as a writer—young love like that between Judith and Willy, or love that has an older vintage?

One way to answer that is to say that in the making of the book nothing was more pleasant than writing about the summer when

Judith and Willy fall in love, and nothing was more difficult than writing the last section, when they look back from a great distance and try to make some sense of it all. But, really, the pull between two people of any age, along with the elements that work in resistance to that pull, are always going to interest me as a reader and a writer.

How did you come up with the book's title? Does it have a special significance for you?

I came up with the title in much the same way that Judith came into contact with Samuel Barber's choral piece, which is properly called "To Be Sung on the Water." She mishears it in the living room of her father's home. I misheard it in the guest cottage where I was working on the book, and the mistaken phrase took hold. I loved the idea of hearing music underwater, probably because I've always loved the altered way we receive sounds when we float in an ocean or a pool or a lake, and, in the end, Judith's perspective is altered in a similar way. As for the choral piece, I recommend it. It's an incredibly beautiful, somber, evocative song, based on a poem by Louise Bogan, to which Barber applies rhythms that suggest the pull of oars, or so it seems to me. By the way, I learned recently from a friend and former student of mine, Janet Elsbach, that there's a term for mishearing a phrase and rewriting it in your head: it's called a "mondegreen." Isn't that something? And now I've figured out a way to drop it into this Q and A.

You've been involved in the construction business and built your own house in California. What are the parallels between building a house and building a novel?

I wouldn't want to carry this too far, but clearly you need to have some design in mind, although I should say I'm not the kind of writer who starts out with a full set of working drawings. But I

suppose it's not much of a stretch to think of building a house and writing a book in parallel terms. And on the most basic level, one happens board by board and wall by wall and the other happens word by word and chapter by chapter.

What are you working on next?

Another novel. Three principal characters in a rural setting. I'd give more details, but I guarantee that anything I say now will bear only the sketchiest resemblance to the final product.

How do you respond to reviews?

When I'm working on a book, I spend a lot of time in the arrangement of the words. I want the sentences not just to bear the characters and their stories forward, but also to bring pleasure without distraction. So, like most everyone else, I appreciate the good reviews and cringe at the bad ones, but I'm especially pleased when the prose itself gets positive notice.

Were there particularly memorable moments that came from the publication process?

Nothing matches the note from Little, Brown editor Judy Clain saying that she'd stayed up late and then broken appointments the next day to read the book, and while finishing it in a New York City coffee shop had fellow diners wondering what she was weeping about. There were some funny moments, too, especially after the book came out. The most comical were furnished by something that my wife, Laura, refers to fondly as Manglish, which seems to result from English having been badly translated to Chinese and back again, original intentions flung like sucked bones. Laura and my niece, Adeline, embroidered tea towels with their favorite lines, as follows: "What if a initial adore is usually a single that unequivocally takes?" And: "The bed with

the nation coverlet is the initial place she as well as Willy ever done love.” Got to admit, those are fun to dry the dishes with. I myself am partial to this one, which pinballed its way from an interview in which I’d noted that hard circumstances can produce sturdy people: “It’s a some-more component hold up as good as you’re surrounded by a little flattering stout people.” I don’t care what your line of work is, you can never have too many little flattering stout people around.

Do you have a favorite among the recordings of Samuel Barber’s “To Be Sung on the Water”?

I do. It’s by the Cambridge University Chamber Choir under the direction of Timothy Brown. The album is called *Samuel Barber: Choral and Organ Works*. If you don’t want to buy the entire work, you can download just the one song: 89 cents well spent.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. In a departure from the normal course of her life that Judith calls a “swerve,” she rents a storage unit and registers it under a fake name. Where do you think that impulse came from?
2. Would Judith have started to think about Willy so intently had she not undergone her “swerve”? How might things have gone differently for her and her family had she never made that phone call?
3. Judith believes in the kind of love that “picks you up in Akron, Ohio, and sets you down in Rio de Janeiro.” What do you think of this “Rio Variation” on love? Do you think that such connections are almost inevitably short-lived? Is it the combination of brevity and intensity that makes them linger in the imagination?
4. Tom McNeal has said that while “the road less traveled” is the more overt theme in the book, he had in mind an examination of marriage as an institution. All of the principal characters weigh in on the subject at one time or another. Judith’s mother’s approach is aphoristic—“all marriages come with a pinhole leak”—but at one point Judith wonders if a successful marriage might not be defined as one in which “the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.” Using this as a measure, what do you make of Malcolm and Judith’s marriage?

5. To what degree does Judith make her mother's pessimistic pronouncements regarding marriage come true? Did you ever feel that those aphorisms had a dangerous power—that they were predictions Judith wanted to escape but couldn't?
6. Judith's daughter, Camille, is full of spirit and opinions and doesn't often kowtow to her mother, which Judith finds irritating. Did you see any connections between Camille and the younger Judith we see in the scenes from her youth?
7. What do you think of Judith's father, Howard Toomey, and his decision to leave Vermont and put down roots in Nebraska? What part do you think Judith's shallow roots in Nebraska—the fact that she's an outsider, not a native—played in her decisions about Willy?
8. Did you think that something untoward was happening between Malcolm and his secretary? How did you feel about the timing and the way that Malcolm discusses his relationship with her? Did you feel that Judith welcomed the suspicion that Malcolm was unfaithful, because it gave her license to hide her search for Willy?
9. Why do you think Judith goes to the trouble of getting sham identification cards made for “Edith W. Winks”? Have you ever been in a situation when you took a certain pleasure in your own anonymity—and the chance possibilities that came with it?
10. When he meets her, Willy calls Judith “*muy peligrosa*.” Is he right, that Judith is dangerous? Is he right in the way that she's dangerous?

11. What do you think about the way that Judith and Willy originally part ways, when she leaves for college in California? What would you have done in her place? If you were Willy, would you have tried to follow her?
12. When Judith sees Willy again at his cabin by the lake, he is a much-changed man. What do you think of his transformation? How might things have turned out differently for Willy had Judith stayed in Nebraska?
13. Toward the end of the book, Judith stares out the car window at “a flat treeless landscape without interest except for the occasional antelope feeding in the day’s last light. Deer can jump fences, but antelope can’t, or won’t, she couldn’t remember which. Willy had told her, a long time ago. How it was a failing that often cost them their lives.” How does this work as a metaphor? Who is the antelope and who is the deer?
14. What was your reaction to Willy and Judith’s final scene? Why does Willy do what he does? How do you imagine Judith’s life a year after the book’s last page?