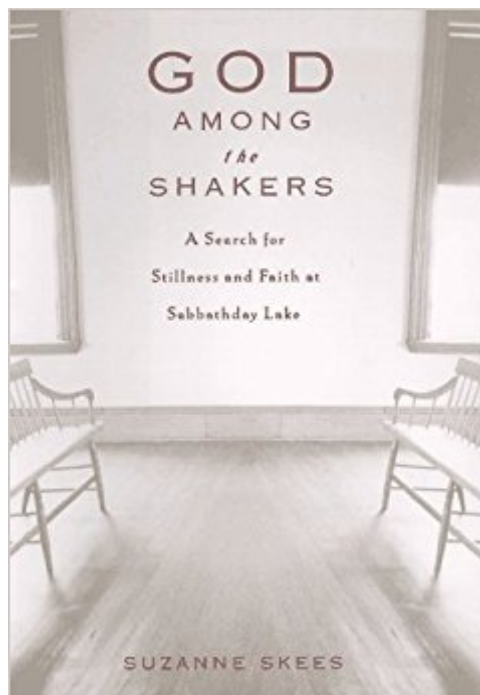




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# God Among The Shakers: The Search For Stillness And Faith At Sabbathday Lake



## Synopsis

In the tradition of "Plain and Simple" and "The Cloister Walk", this book offers a rare, intimate account of one woman's journey into the world of the Shakers--a radical Christian sect whose belief in a Mother-Father God, equal rights for all, and direct interaction with the spirits of the dead shocked other established religious communities Print ads. NPR sponsorships .

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Shakers have long been a misunderstood Christian sect. At the time of their arrival in America in 1774, they were persecuted as witches who spoke in tongues and participated in wild orgies; today they are known more for their handcrafted furniture than for their beliefs or history. While their name stems from their original practice of employing frenetic dancing as a way to invoke the spirit of God, the modern Shakers work toward an inner stillness through labor, simplicity of living, and prayer. Though often confused with both the Quakers and the Amish, with whom they share certain traits, the Shakers are unique in that all of their members are converts (they are bound to lifelong celibacy), they embrace technology when it allows them to work more efficiently, and while they have turned away from the values of modern society, they do not insulate themselves entirely from the outside world, particularly when it comes to working with other denominations for humanitarian causes. Though thousands joined the faith in the 19th century, today only eight Shakers remain, all of them working together on a farm in Sabbathday Lake, Maine. It was there that Suzanne Skees, a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School, spent a month living and working with the Shakers in an

effort to understand and document their way of life. Ostensibly a work of journalism, Skees's motive for writing *God Among the Shakers* was as much personal as professional: "I went to the Shakers to look for God, who lately had been absent from my harried, distracted days.... I was living the American dream. Striving to build a career, family, and home. Along the way, however, hope had been lost to frenzy, and my spirit had dried up...." It is this effort to analyze, if not remedy, her lapsed spirituality that provides the most insightful passages of the book. She views her immersion into their community as a personal test of faith, and the approach--along with extended quotations--results in a candid and colorful view of the Shakers that often reads like a series of intimate conversations. Skees successfully conveys the appeal of their approach to life while acknowledging the difficulties in achieving simplicity in an increasingly complex world. Though her prose occasionally leans toward sentimentality, her firm grasp of the history and theology of the Shakers makes her book informative, but it is her honesty in detailing her own transformation that makes it rewarding. --Shawn Carkonen

Skees weaves together a popular history of Shakerism with an account of her month-long visit to Sabbathday Lake in Maine, the last living community of Shaker sisters and brethren. Skees, a journalist who writes on women's spirituality, studied comparative religion at Harvard Divinity School, a kindly, open-minded institution whose intersecting currents of academic study, pastoral training, and spiritual probing amply prepared the author for her work. The chapters are structured around themes central to Shaker life including celibacy, God, communion with spirits, relation with the outside world, prospects for survival and based on both research in the community's library and conversations with its eight permanent residents. Skees contrasts the intensities of Shakers past with the wise mellowness of Sabbathday's current members. There are instructive sections on Shaker dance, music, and ritual observance. Perhaps from a wish for heightened contrast, Skees presents herself, a married woman with three sons, as too grounded in worldliness and sex ("I loved men with abandon") ever to take up the Shaker path. But the authorial persona, which tends toward exaggeration and sentimentality, intrudes on the discussion. "Lusty phalluses and looming egos" do not, pace Ms. Skees, define men of the world. Card cataloging, a task that the librarian, Sister June, performs, is not an "ancient process." And people today do not use words like "verily" and "else times," as the author quaintly insists on doing occasionally in her own speech. Skees's surprise over the outward ordinariness of deeply religious people, and over the loss of self that sometimes occurs there, seems disingenuous; what else, after all, had she been learning at Harvard Divinity School? The Shaker voices communicate over the author's annoying obtrusiveness so that

despite herself her work fills a gap in the growing genre of reportage on the inner life of modern religious communities. -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I grew up within fifteen miles of the Shaker community in New Lebanon, NY and spent countless hours at the Shaker Museum and Library in Old Chatham, NY, but I realized as I read this book that I knew almost nothing about the surviving modern day Shakers. This was fascinating reading--the evolution of the Shakers and the boundary spanning that goes on between the members of the sect and members of the World is thought-provoking. I understand the author's fascination with the Shakers and her desire to see and participate in their world first-hand. I also understand her ultimate decision that the Shaker way was not a choice that she could make, but that she took important elements of that way back with her to her very contemporary life. This is an excellent book for those who are interested in America's utopian communities and how the roots of those communities are still present in our America.

This one, I'm afraid, isn't worth opening, and certainly not worth buying. Anyone who's curious about Shaker spirituality won't find much besides worn-out platitudes and Valley Girl depth here. I hasten to add that the fault lies with the author, not the Shakers. Skees claims she went to Sabbathday Lake to search for "faith" and "stillness," but her book is screechily gossipy and ill-informed. Just two examples out of dozens: (1) She seems absolutely obsessed with Shaker celibacy, returning to it again and again throughout the book. She's equally unable to appreciate that religious celibacy is an ancient practice and unwilling to believe that Shakers and other celibates aren't as aflame with seething hormones as she describes herself. So instead of exploring the spiritual merits (or lack thereof) of celibacy, she focuses on how unnaturally bizarre it is. Her conclusion is worthy of a "People" magazine profile: she sagely decides that Shaker dancing must be a hot and heavy substitute for sex (p. 131). Presumably she would say that the ecstatic dancing of Hare Krishnas, Sufis, and Hasids is also nothing more than sexual frustration. (2) Although she's a Harvard Divinity School graduate, her innocence of traditional Christian spirituality is astounding and, cumulatively, exasperating. She gushes, for example, at the Shaker teaching that Christ is available to anyone who opens his or her heart to God, without the slightest recognition that this is a staple of Biblical teaching and subsequent centuries of mystical commentary. The upshot is that she hands the reader this spiritual gem as if it's an esoteric secret only she and the Shakers know about (p. 96). In doing so, she tends to trivialize it by wrapping it in melodrama. I don't enjoy being so negative about Skees' book. But now that spiritual writing has become something of a publishing industry,

sophomoric texts like this are being churned out by the scores, and readers need to be wary. God-seekers from all or no faith traditions--as well as those wonderful, God-inspired people, the Shakers--deserve better than the latest gushings of Yuppie gurus.

The author is one of those people who believe that the reader is as interested in her every thought as they are in the Shakers. This wouldn't be so bad if there were intellectual content to her thinking, but instead the reader is subjected to her aversion to the monastic life because she wants to learn about "art, music, dance, and wine." Leaving her family for a unique, three-week visit to the last Shaker community, the author tells us all about her guilt of leaving her children (with their father), her yearning for their little arms about her neck, and so forth. I had to give up half-way through the book. The opening scarcity of interesting information never improves. There is no discipline to Skees' thinking nor to her reporting. She does not even mention the important doctrine of progressive revelation, which allowed each generation of Shakers to be founders of their religion. Instead we hear about her wish for a cup of coffee and other tiny musing that wouldn't interest anyone else. We are captured in the context of her self-involvement. This author is a Harvard divinity graduate - and that demonstrates something very say about Harvard divinity studies. Her reporting of Shaker history is superficial. She seems to have no insight or compelling interest. She marshalls the obvious facts and repeats them to us. If only someone who truly cared to understand into the soul of the Shaker religion and had written this book!

Author has a fluent, warm style; certainly not "journalistic" or "academic". Don't expect to learn much of value or pertinence about the historical United Society and its true uniqueness and achievement. But it is a marvelous insight into the social dynamics and culture of what purports to be an ember of the once blazing Kingdom. If the author doesn't know quite what she's looking for, neither do her hosts. God bless them all. It's a lovely read.

I would not classify myself as a Shaker scholar, however, I have read a variety of works about the people of today and those of yesterday. I don't think Skees' descriptions of the Shakers of today are completely accurate. I would caution folks to see that this book was more about how Shakerism might fit into her own life, almost a comparison. I didn't see this as a picture of the spirituality of the Shakers as much as it is the spirituality of Suzanne Skees.

An excellent, thoughtful and poignant examination of today's Shakers. Comparisons are made

between current and historical beliefs with a focused personal view of the people who are Sabbathday Lake's Believers. I feel as if I know these people. And I like them. This book is a great read. Don't delay, buy it now.

I found this book at the library and thoroughly enjoyed it. This was my introduction to the Shakers. I had never heard of Mother Ann Lee and after reading this, I was thirsty for as much info on this fascinating woman as I could find. This was a very good journey, very well written and enjoyed...

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