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Some kids told lies to be special. Calvin told lies to be normal. The son of a missionary family, he looks forward all year to summer vacation in Portofino--especially since he'll once again have the chance to see his beloved Jennifer. But even in this seductive seaside town in Italy, the Beckers can't really relax. Calvin's father could slip into a Bad Mood and start hurling potted plants at any time. His mother has an embarrassing habit of trying to convert "pagans" on the beach. And his sister keeps a ski sweater and miniature Bible in her luggage just in case the Russians invade and send them to Siberia. Dad says everything is part of God's plan. But this summer, Calvin has some plans of his own. From the author of **Saving Grandma**, this delightful coming-of-age novel will bring a smile of recognition to anyone who's ever been embarrassed by their parents.

Portofino Details

Date : Published January 1st 1999 by Berkley (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780425166949

Author : Frank Schaeffer

Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Religion, Travel, Faith

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From Reader Review Portofino for online ebook

Phyl says

If you're still in the fundamentalist and/or evangelical fold and are familiar with the writings of Francis Schaeffer -- or even if you've left in the last few years -- the novel Portofino by Schaeffer's son Frank is bound to be unnerving. Especially if you've also read his recent autobiography, *Crazy for God*.

In Portofino, Schaeffer writes about the son of an American missionary family living in Switzerland, following two of their summer holidays in the Italian town that gives the book its name. We immediately suspect biographical elements in the book, given that Calvin Becker's family teaches intellectual ideas in a setting similar to L'Abri, the institution founded by Francis and Edith Schaeffer. The two family holidays take place in 1962 and 1965, about the same years that Frank would have been Calvin's age. And Calvin, like Frank, is eventually sent to a boarding school in England because his education is sorely neglected in Switzerland while his parents concentrate on their more important ministry.

The similarities between the Schaeffer family and the fictional Becker family become more obvious as eleven-year old Calvin views the world through a strict Reformationist theological prism.

For example, he fully accepts that the Italian family he spends time with on the beach is "obviously not saved." When he takes a single sip of wine the family offers him, he judges himself: "...now I was drinking wine just like the Spaniards did while they laughed and swore and tortured real Christians because they would no longer worship Mary, whom we know was an ordinary girl, not anything special, but they worshiped her because they were pagans who served the Pope not our Lord. Now I drank wine too!"

This wrestling between viewpoints -- believing the strict Calvinist teachings of his parents while secretly being embarrassed whenever fellow vacationers find out about them -- the acceptance of some bizarre interpretations of the world (see the Spaniards, above), yet trying to enact those beliefs in daily life -- this all suggests just how odd and difficult it must have been to be a Schaeffer child.

Yet the behaviour of the Becker family is clearly overdone, a caricature, overemphasized merely to create humour from the contrast between a strictly Calvinist Protestant missionary family and the casual worldly atmosphere of Europe in the 1960s. Right?

We might assume this, if not for the autobiography, *Crazy for God*. The dark Moods of Ralph Becker are described in almost exactly the same words as the Moods of Francis Schaeffer. Elsa Becker's smug, upper class Christianity (and secret contempt for her husband's lower class) are astonishingly similar to Edith Schaeffer's attitudes in *Crazy for God*.

Just how fictional is Portofino, really? Especially reading how unreasonable and even violent Ralph's Moods are, and how they terrify his family. How tormented he is, having to live up to his ministry, his real self emerging only when he escapes to hike into the beautiful Mediterranean hills. Or escapes the holier-than-thou attitudes of his pious wife. And Elsa, broaching inappropriately intimate topics with her children, preaching judgementally to strangers and family alike in the guise of public prayer, swinging between overbearing control of the children and virtual neglect.

For some of us, the humour in Portofino tarnishes as we suspect that the novel is more than merely autobiographical, but is in fact Frank Schaeffer's therapeutic working out of quite a bad childhood. It's

difficult, now, to wonder if books such as Edith Schaeffer's L'Abri were merely an instance of wishful thinking, an expression of how she wished the personal lives of God's faithful servants could be, instead of how they actually were.

Very likely, anyone who hasn't heard of or studied Francis Schaeffer--- non-Christians, or people he would have considered more "liberal" Christians -- will find Portofino hilarious, as Calvin attempts to live his young life guided by sixteenth-century theology. But for those who once idolized Francis Schaeffer and his teachings, the book is more like a devastating obituary.

That may not be all bad. Portofino and its real-life counterpart, Crazy for God, remind us yet again of the dangers of the Cult of Personality. It's as bad in a "Christian" context as, say, in a Stalinist. Unfortunately for us, and more unfortunately for Frank Schaeffer, who had to live through it, it seems to be a lesson we need to be taught over and over again.

Paul Thomas says

A cute, somewhat endearing story about a boy in a born again Christian family that takes an annual vacation to Italy. However, the story is pretty flat, and the writing is average. I almost gave up on this 200 page "novel" for lack of development a few times, so I can't imagine why it is part of a trilogy. I certainly won't read the next two.

The story never develops. We know early on that Calvin is a likable 10 year old boy who has a younger and an older sister. We know early on that his parents are born again Christian missionaries, and that this dominates their family life. And we know that many seaside Italian towns are picturesque, wonderful places to vacation. That's pretty much the whole story.

The voice of Calvin never changed in the 4 years that book #1 covered. At first he's an endearing 10 year old boy, full of mischief and simple sentences. Towards the end of the book, he is nearly 14, talks the same way, and seemingly wears the same clothes and eats the same amount of food. Anyone know a kid who changes this little from 10 to 14? His development, both academically and emotionally is retarded to some extent from home schooling and such an insular life, but really, the only change is that he starts to notice girls. Wow. Perceptive writing.

Finally, Schaeffer goes way too heavy on the religion piece. There are pages and pages of prayers and sermons and descriptions of born again beliefs. While I do think that he does much of this tongue in cheek, it just gets boring.

Midway through I had to check to make sure that this wasn't a Young Adult book. It wasn't marked as so in Goodreads, but it is kind of like a Hardy Boys book. Great is you're Calvin's age, but lacking for an adult.

Mitch says

This novel has such a wealth of detail about the inner workings of certain lives that I can't help but believe that the author has drawn heavily on his own experiences.

The reason I rated it so low is primarily because the author's portrait of a dysfunctional fundamentalist Christian family on vacation. He painted them all as outrageously self-righteous liars and hypocrites. The characters are unbalanced and unlikable.

The father is particularly awful. He seldom attempts to control his rage and he treats his family cruelly, both mentally and physically...until the book's climax, that is. Then he acts completely out of character. It isn't consistent or believable.

Furthermore, the narrator is a boy who lies pretty much constantly and spends far too much time talking about his budding discovery of sex. He refers several times to the interesting characteristics of "His Thing" and it's antics. Reading about this in these terms gets tiresome really quickly.

The descriptions of Portofino and the local people were good, but not enough to save the central characters. It seems there may be a sequel. I'll be sure to avoid it.

Bert Stanaland says

Excellent!!! This is the honest, innocent account of life in a super religious missionary family, who are out to convert the Catholics in Switzerland and their vacation spot in Italy and yet Mom uses her prayers to correct the Dad and maintain her superiority over him. Dad has a nasty temper and even went so far as to throw all the supper dishes on the floor in one of his tantrums, and yank the toilet tank off the wall. This is humorous, and fun, just charming. I hated to see it end. No profanity and no sex. Good job, Frank.

Sarah Rigg says

I read this directly after reading the author's memoir about growing up in a fundamentalist Christian family famous in those circles, and enjoyed this novel by Schaeffer as well. A funny coming-of-age story.

Eric says

I loved it. A young boy's amusing attempt to be normal in a religiously fanatic family. Good stuff, especially if you went to one of those kinds of churches, colleges, etc. Should be on the shelves of reasonable church libraries in the "therapy" section.

Becky says

Having grown up in a family with fundamentalist leanings, I resonated with Calvin's desire to be "normal" and burst into laughter at several points as Schaeffer painted a picture of how ridiculous we Christians can sometimes seem. At the same time, the book paints a sad picture of broken people who feel the need to hide their brokenness behind religious platitudes. I kept changing my mind about whether I liked the story or not, and the 3 star rating reflects the fact that I still can't make up my mind.

Allan says

I first read this book 20 years ago, and revisited it in preparation for my holiday to the Ligurian coast, where the story is set. Told from the point of view of Calvin, the son of American Protestant fundamentalist missionaries, the narrative features two summer holidays in Portofino, one in 1962 and one in 1965. In addition to the dysfunction of the family, which can be at times sinister, at times amusing, the beauty of the area and the personality of the locals is brought to life by Schaeffer's writing. Looking at his bio, this might be due to the fact that the novel seems autobiographical.

An enjoyable read, and the perfect start to my holiday!

Richard says

I grew up Fundamentalist so I can relate to this book.

Bob Henry says

This coming of age story is a real page-turner. I found myself at times laughing out loud, sometimes embarrassed, and often relating to Calvin's family. This is a fun novel with rights of passage and moments of brilliance all wrapped into one vacation destination. Frank Schaeffer does an amazing job of creating the tensions of a pastors family, but keeps it authentic and often very raw. This is not the "Christian Novel" that many are expecting, instead it seems more a memoir of the struggles facing a family trying to live above and beyond reality through extreme pious devotion. I enjoyed this book.

Phrodrick says

Great story telling The least believable parts are the least fictional

The best way to enjoy this book is if you know almost nothing about the author. Therefore this will have two parts. Why this is a good read and then what you do not need to know.

Potofino is a fun, funny and touching book. It is the first of three books about a teen aged Calvin Becker and his humorous journey from the self-obsessive awareness of childhood into the larger world view of a not yet adult. This is generally termed a coming of age story, but too often that means a story of first time sex. Calvin is fourteen as the story opens and what little he will see of sex is largely innocent not the central theme of the book.

Calvin's family is from an extreme side of the Christian Fundamentalist faith. His father is a minister, a missionary from America to serve the otherwise damned souls of Switzerland.

As the book opens the family is on one of their two annual vacations, this one to a then less popular (less expensive) Italian seashore town, Portofino. His mother makes a point of pushing their transportation

schedule to its limits as a way of proving that God will look after His Own and the Beckers, being among The Chosen, need not be too punctual. This is one of many aspects of the Becker Family's religious practices that will seem extreme. To an outsider they will seem unreal. There is some comic discription of these observances, but they are authentic to the Authors real life experience.

We will experience Calvin's vacation from his point of view. The narrative is sharp, insightful often funny yet it will retain something of the child's innocence even as is related by the adult Calvin who is the narrator. Much of this book is laugh out loud funny. Often I found myself having to see a world that should have been familiar, but was unique to the Becker family. Part of what make Potofino a good book is the richness of Calvin's insight, and Calvin's world.

This is not just a childhood romp. There will be major stresses within the Becker family and Calvin will have to deal with issues beyond his years. He will also build lasting friendships with people normally excluded by the exacting faith practiced by his family.

What you do not need to know.

All three of the Calvin Becker Trilogy are heavily autobiographic. The family makeup closely resembles Frank Schaeffer's family and the many of the events and places are drawn heavily from the facts and places of Frank's youth. The key to each book in the trilogy is that Frank will test some member of his fictional family and watch how the other might have dealt with these hypothetical - fictional developments. In Portofino the person most tested will be the Mother.

In all the Calvin books, Calvin will grow in mind and maturity by combinations of his innate character and the natural results of living, if partially, outside of the religious bounds of his non vacation life. Again the richness of the narrative carries the reader through this process while closely identifying with the adolescent.

Schaeffer uses his family and his experiences. This makes it tempting to think that the trilogy is ONLY thinly disguised autobiography or an immature effort to embarrass or put down his family. These books are fiction. One of the roles of an author is to take something familiar, make you see it in a new light and use it to create a believable fictional world. This is the same problem Phillip Roth has had and addresses in many of his books. The comparison is not unfair. Both writers have been accused of being disrespectful and damaging to the reputation of their families and their religions.

In the Calvin Becker Trilogy, Schaeffer is employing another artistic technique. The author creates an artificial problem, and tries to report, honestly, how his fictional characters handle this problem. Part of the method of controlling the fictional environment is to ground the fiction in the familiar and to build the story from the familiar. In this case the initial conditions are drawn from his real family and childhood. The specific events, conflicts and outcomes are the result of the author's ability to imagine and write.

Frank Schaeffer's Portofino imagines a world I enjoyed and recommend for your reading pleasure.

Kate says

This book is a stark reminder that Christians must not idolize their leaders.

Once I got over the disappointment of hearing about the dark side of the father character who is obviously based on Francis Schaeffer, I found this book to be very funny, keenly observant, and overall well-written.

Being both raised Christian and a Christian still, I could identify with some of the ridiculousness of the “Christianese” language and customs; however, I can’t help but be sad that, if Francis Schaeffer is represented well here, he missed the forest for the trees, and, though he may well have had an impressive intellectual grasp on the faith, was clearly without love, rendering it all vanity. No wonder his son is not a believer.

Overall, I guess I could say I was one part horrified, two parts amused by this book. It certainly has given me a lot to ponder.

WarpDrive says

A cute, delightful and endearing coming-of-age autobiography set in the madness of a fundamentalist Christian evangelical family.

The main character is a young boy attempting to be normal in this religiously fanatic family, whose mission, according to his parents, is to "convert the pagans" (*which is, according to them, essentially everybody who is not part of the particular, minuscule splinter of one of the many USA Pentecostal "churches" to which they adhere*), and whose pre-Enlightenment, 16-th century views can sadly still be currently seen in some population segments in some parts of the USA.

His resilience and attempts at normality, in the face of all this weirdness and fanaticism, are quite endearing and they contrast, oftentimes with a hilarious effect, with the holier-than-thou attitudes of his pious mother, and the troubling millenarian, righteous and ferociously uncompromising views of his father, whose fundamentalist, Bible-touting Christian beliefs do not prevent him from (*or maybe provide a justification for*) acting as a dictator in his family; a family which he frequently terrorizes with his unpredictable, sinister and even violent moods.

The setting is the holiday resort of Portofino in the 60's, where the boy's family spends the summer vacations in 1962 and 1965, a location whose relaxed atmosphere, and beautiful natural environment of the Ligurian coast, provide a sometimes hilarious contrast with the tensions and dysfunctions of his family.

A very nice little book, a page-turner deserving a good 4-star rating.

Michael Perkins says

This novel, about the author's fanatical Protestant fundamentalist family, published in 1999, is a companion volume to a memoir the author wrote about that family, "Crazy for God" ([link below](#)), published in 2007.

What makes these books different than similar accounts is that the author's parents were part of what has been called "evangelical royalty." Before I go into what that is and specifically who his parents were, I'd like to offer a bit of clarification that I think is important to understand per the implications of the beliefs and behavior of such evangelicals, especially given that they've emerged from hiding during the Obama years to vociferously support Donald Trump.

After I read "Crazy for God" awhile back, I told a neighbor that the father character was subject to stormy

moods, heavy depression, and sometimes beat his annoying, smug pietistic wife. My neighbor's response was: "people are people." This is true, but it misses the point of what standards these people are supposed to live up to based on their Bible.

I know the Bible well, and the Apostle Paul, who was focused on trying to convert Gentiles in the "pagan world," asserts in several places in his epistles that the most important "witness" to the reality of the Gospel are the lives of the Christians themselves. Supported by the Gospel accounts, Paul taught that when one converted to Christianity that the Holy Spirit entered into their being and gave them what was essentially supernatural power to behave well in a way that would not otherwise be possible.

To clarify, Paul even gave a list of character attributes, "the fruit of the Spirit," that should be evident in believers: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These are supposed to be the proof of the faith, not debates about "creationist science" or C.S. Lewis-style apologetics.

What we have in these two books, and in many in our society who call themselves Christian, is a lack of these attributes replaced by an outward show of piety (that Jesus, ironically, condemned in the Pharisees) and an obsession with being "saved" or chosen by God. And judgmental attitudes toward those who are not saved. (This includes the poor because, obviously, they have not been elected by God).

So, according to the New Testament, if the Holy Spirit is real and working in these people, they also should be experiencing "the peace that passes all understanding" instead of deep depression and anger, as the minister-father displays all the time in both of the author's books. Instead they are supposed to be models of kindness to the people around them, Christian or otherwise. I submit that a majority of the most outspoken Christians I have known over my adult lifetime have flunked that test, failed by their own Biblical measure. (And by this I don't mean that they are not perfect, but that they frequently behave in the exact opposite fashion of the character traits that Paul lists above).

As for the author's father, he was a Calvinist missionary named Francis Schaeffer. I recognize him from the 70's, which according to Time Magazine included 1976 as "The Year of the Evangelical." Schaeffer was what my father would have called a poseur. He and his family were from Philadelphia, but they moved to Switzerland where they built a kind of commune in the mountains where young seekers were supposed to come and see the wise man about the meaning of life. I saw him speak once in California. He wore knickers, a white ruffled shirt, a goatee, and long hair combed straight back.

He was a pseudo-intellectual who thought he could go around and preach to students to convince them to become evangelicals, or do likewise at his Swiss retreat. Those who visited the retreat, and even stayed for awhile, attest that they never saw him read any book but the Bible. And that, for example, he learned about Existentialism by reading a cover story in Time Magazine, instead of reading actual books by these thinkers. But Schaeffer often spoke as if he were steeped in deep reading and the arts.

It was only later did I learn that the knickers-man joined forces with the Moral Majority. He believed not only that America was a Christian nation, but also should be a theocracy. His belief system was called Dominionism. It essentially meant ruling the country under Old Testament laws. It's partly based on the utterly false notion that the "Founding Fathers" were evangelicals instead of Deists. It's the classic confusion of the Puritans with the Framers of the Constitution.

And I am sure I don't have to go into detail how this thinking, and the behavior that goes with it, is still with us in spades in America.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9...>

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I've added a humorous story from the book in the comments section below....

Marlene says

Calvin Becker, the lad featured in Portofino, is one of the most self-absorbed, devious characters I've come across. In Elsa Becker, the author sketches a very strong-willed woman who uses her hyper-spiritual to manipulate others. The best thing about the novels is the wicked sense of humor. However, from this trilogy it is clear that Frank Schaeffer scorns his family but continues to make his living off of their fame. He is still hooked in! He needs to individuate and get on with his own life.
