



ALLEN & UNWIN'S
Book Group Guide
Conversation Starters



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Welcome to

Allen & Unwin's Reading Group Guide

for *Sign* by Colin Dray

Book, food & drink pairings

Books should never be discussed on an empty stomach! And while wine, cheese and crackers are always a sure thing, if you're looking for something a little different you might want to consider resurrecting some favourite snacks from your childhood. Perhaps each member could bring a plate?

About the book

A captivating novel full of strength, quiet courage and the struggle to overcome silence.

Sam is a young boy recovering from an operation that has left him unable to speak ever again. He lives with his mother and sister Katie, all dutifully cared for by Aunt Dettie, their father's sister, who believes herself sympathetic to his pain.

Their father abandoned the family some time ago, but when their mother begins to date again, Aunt Dettie reacts very badly.

After an unexpected phone call, Aunt Dettie packs Sam and Katie into the backseat of her car and tells them that she's taking them to Perth to be reunited with their father.

As Dettie drives the children across Australia in the middle of a sweltering and dangerous bushfire season, her behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, and the children begin to realise that there is something very wrong.

Voiceless, Sam can only watch helplessly as the family trip becomes a smoke-filled nightmare.



About the author

Colin Dray grew up in rural New South Wales, where he fell incurably in love with Shakespearean heroines. He holds a PhD in the Arts and teaches English literature and creative writing from time to time. His short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Meanjin*, his criticism has appeared in *Australian Literary Studies* and *Antipodes*, and his poetry has been burned to ash for the sake of humanity. He now lives in the Illawarra region with two daughters who are the most delightful people he has ever met. *Sign* is his first novel.

A note from the author

How did the idea for your novel originate?

Road trips! As horrible as this may sound, this tale of kidnapping, deceit and madness was born out of my recollections of the long holiday road trips that my family would take when my sister and I were much younger. Touring neighbouring states with my family, bound together in the experience of sweaty car seats, ramshackle caravan parks, salty snacks in roadside rest stops, and perpetual summer sun radiating through the windshield.

Years later, while researching urban myths, and Australia's early folk tales of children in the wilderness, the memory of these languorous journeys resurfaced, mixing into a claustrophobic, torturous brew. Suddenly children were being snatched away. And there was a fire. And madness. And cancer. And possibly violence.

. . . My parents just gave us colouring books.

Conversation starters

- *Sign* has a distinctively Australian voice. How do you think the author achieves this?
- While clearly set in the recent past, the author doesn't give any specific time markers. Did you get the impression that this was the 1990s, 1980s, 1970s or 1960s? Does it matter?
- Do you think that setting it in a time before the internet and mobile phones heightens the sense of isolation and helplessness that Sam feels?
- The journey Sam goes on is much more than just a physical one. Despite the trauma of the operation and its aftermath, along with the road trip he is subjected to, do you think the experience ultimately makes him stronger?
- What impact do you think Jon has on Sam? Consider this in terms of how he later views his relationship with his father. Also, his acceptance of not being able to communicate with his voice.
- Aunt Dettie's unravelling mental health dominates the second half of the book. At what point did you pick up on the fact that she was becoming unhinged?
- Despite her general prudishness, Dettie is a dedicated smoker. What do you think is the author's reasoning for giving her this contradictory character trait?
- What are your feelings towards Dettie? Do you feel empathy for her?
- When Sam and Katie are finally safe and on the phone to their mother, she repeatedly tells Sam that she is sorry. What part, if any, do you think she played in events?
- When you were reading *Sign* how did you think the novel would end? How did the actual ending compare to your prediction? What alternate endings would you consider as plausible, given the build-up of tension?
- The author has left one particular plot-line unresolved. What do you think the author's reasoning for this is? Do you think it adds or detracts from the novel's conclusion?



Just for fun

- ☞ Sunburn features throughout *Sign*. Recount your own most memorable sunburn incidents.
- ☞ The experience of travelling in the Australian summer with the sweaty stickiness of vinyl seats in cars devoid of air-conditioning, evokes low-rent family holidays for generations of Australians. Do you have fond memories of these trips or horror stories?
- ☞ Pick out a passage that strikes you as particularly moving or interesting and read it to the group.
- ☞ If you could speak with any character from the novel, who would it be and why?
- ☞ What three questions would you ask them?
- ☞ Who would you cast in a movie adaptation of *Sign*?

If you liked this book ...

May we suggest the following?

- ☞ *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey
- ☞ *To Become a Whale* by Ben Hobson
- ☞ *Hope Farm* by Peggy Frew
- ☞ *The Other Side of the World* by Stephanie Bishop
- ☞ *Breath* by Tim Winton