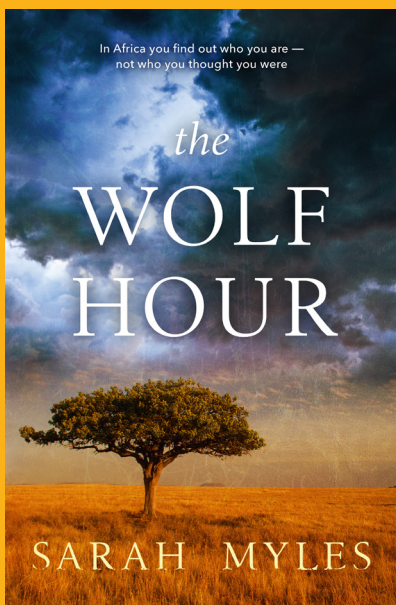




ALLEN & UNWIN'S

Book Group Guide

Conversation Starters



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Welcome to

Allen & Unwin's Book Group Guide

for *The Wolf Hour* by Sarah Myles

Book, food & drink pairings

Books should never be read or discussed on an empty stomach! And while wine, cheese and crackers are always winners, if you're looking for something a little different you might consider Pinotage, a red wine from the Stellenbosch region of South Africa, and some African-themed snacks like Biltong, Boerewors (a South African sausage) or Bunny Chow (a hollowed-out loaf of white bread stuffed with curry).

About the book

A searing contemporary thriller about an Australian family in crisis against the backdrop of war-torn Africa.

Thirty-year-old Tessa Lowell has a PhD in psychology and is working in Uganda to research the effects of PTSD and war on child soldiers. She joins a delegation travelling across the Congolese border, deep into the African bush, for peace talks with Joseph Kony, notorious leader of the Lord's Resistance Army.

At the camp Tessa meets thirteen-year-old Francis, already an experienced soldier and a survivor of shocking violence. The talks stall, and the camp is attacked by other rebels who take Tessa. Isolated in an increasingly volatile situation, she tries to form a bond with Francis.

In Melbourne, Tessa's parents are notified of the kidnapping, but learn there is little that government agencies can do. Desperate, they contact their son Stephen, an astute if manipulative businessman based in Cape Town. He agrees to search for his sister but has other reasons to contact the rebel forces.

As Tessa's time runs out, her family begins to fracture. Her parents arrive in Uganda to hear awful news about what she has endured. They also learn the devastating truth about the kind of man their son has become. Only they have the power to stop a terrible injustice. But at what cost to their family?



About the author

Sarah Myles began to write fiction after graduating in literature from Monash University, and studying at the University of Western Australia. She has trained and worked as a nurse, travelled through Europe, the Americas and Africa. She is the author of *Transplanted*.

Currently she divides her time between writing and family, living in inner Melbourne and on the west coast of Victoria.

A note from the author

How did the idea for your novel originate?

About ten years ago, I met an older Australian couple. A husband and wife; ordinary, concerned parents. They told me about their daughter who had just gone to Uganda to do research on war-affected children. I could sense their anxiety, 'She's book smart,' they told me, 'but she's naive.' Their protectiveness, and the familial friction—pride mixed with concern—was palpable, and this began something in me: that a young person can get in over their head was a lure, and from this chance encounter imagination kicked in. So first came the character of Tessa, eager, quixotic, perhaps too earnest, then Stephen, Tessa's totally different, anarchic and prodigal brother, and Francis, the child soldier Tessa encounters when she is kidnapped, and bit by bit the story began to take shape.

How long have you been at work on this book? Did the book involve any special research?

I have been working on this novel for about six years. The research has been vast and comprehensive and has taken me to places I wouldn't have dreamed of at the outset.

I have studied the culture, customs, socio-political history and languages of Uganda, specifically the Acholi people and the thirty-year civil war between The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government. The latter involved testimonials, recorded and written by victims, perpetrators, medical and rehab staff who have worked in the region, as well as perspectives from academics, international law practitioners and aid workers.

I have also researched the meetings and peace talks that took place with the illusive leader of the LRA, Joseph Kony, and allegations by the International Criminal Court focusing on those violent incidents associated with Kony's rebels, as well as the Ugandan government's aggressive counterinsurgency measures.

The book is set across Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cape Town and Melbourne. I have spent time trekking in Africa in areas like those I have written about, taking notes and photographing the landscape, wildlife, settlements and cities.

On PTSD, specifically involving war-affected children, I have researched and interviewed psychologists particularly in relation to diagnosis, treatments and research up until 2008 (the time my novel is set). I have also read numerous PhD theses of the kind my character Tessa would have written.

With respect to arms trafficking and illicit trade, I have studied the intricate global patterns which occur and continue to operate around the world. And in relation to the more action-type aspects of my disreputable character, Stephen, I have had the opportunity to fly in light planes and simulated flying a plane, specifically a Gulfstream jet. In addition, I have followed closely the ongoing big game hunting that remains a tourist 'pleasure' and is still regarded as a sport.

Among my personal experiences, and relevant to tension in the book, I have been mugged in one of the larger South African cities.

Conversation starters

- The author juxtaposes the beauty of the African continent and the warmth and resilience of its people against the brutality and aftermath of civil war. What effect does this have on the reader?
- As the delegation is about to begin their journey into the Congo to meet with Kony, Tessa is overcome with the feeling that she is making a mistake by going with them, but she goes anyway. Why do you think she does this? (Page 48.)
- ‘... what had really brought her here? Was it the chance to do the kind of research she believed worthwhile or, as Stephen implied, was it just another brand of tourism, a voyeurism that morphed into something less worthy than she hoped?’ (Page 31.) Throughout the book Tessa is constantly questioning her motivations. Do you think she resolves this for herself?
- What do you think of the way in which Tessa’s rape is dealt with?
- Despite Stephen’s warnings, Leigh agrees that he should save Tessa at any cost. Do you think she is right to be horrified by his actions after the fact?
- Can Neil’s violence towards his son be justified? Especially considering that they are arguing about Stephen’s involvement in profiting from violence.
- Neil and Leigh feel a very real responsibility for the actions of their adult children. Do you think that is a burden they should bear?
- Is Stephen an opportunist or a pragmatist? Discuss the differences and similarities between him and Tessa.
- Although the youngest character in the book, Francis often comes across as the wisest. Discuss him as a character.
- ‘... hope is a vulture; it can pick away the bitterness.’ (Page 34.) Is Dominic Oculi’s eternal optimism realistic or ideological? Does Francis’ ultimate reaction to this optimism surprise you or did it seem inevitable?
- The meddling of well-intentioned but not necessarily welcome foreigners is a concept raised throughout the book. Does the history/legacy of colonialism mean that Europeans have a duty to ‘fix’ the problems of Africa or should they leave it to the locals to determine their own future?
- When you were reading *The Wolf Hour* how did you think it would end? How did the actual ending compare to your prediction?

Just for fun

- 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 *The Wolf Hour*?

