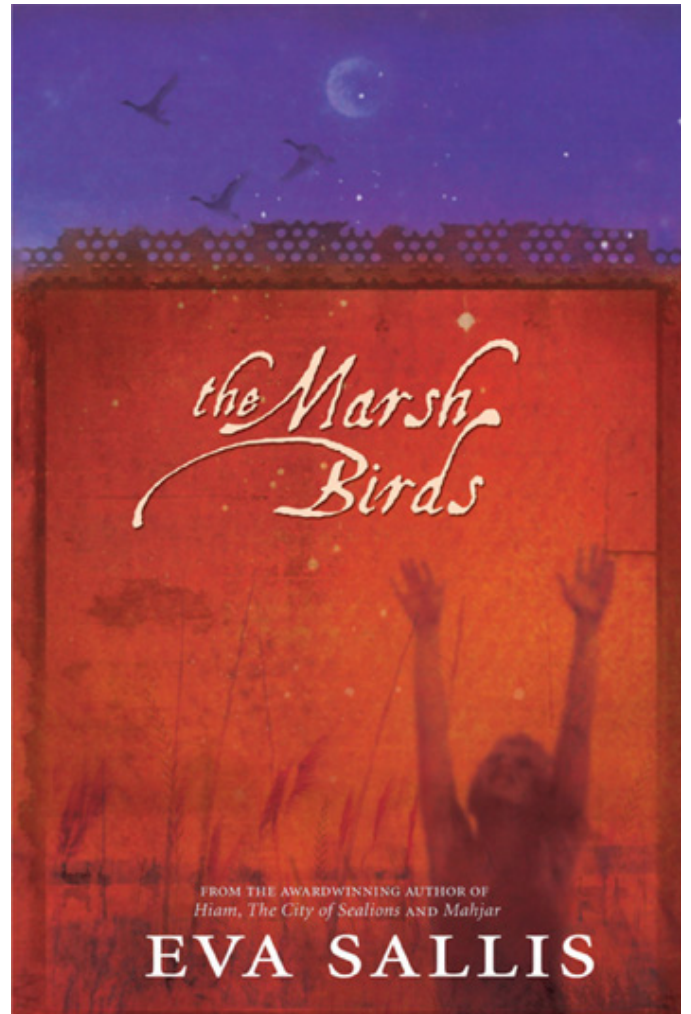


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About Eva Sallis

Eva Sallis was born in Bendigo. She studied Arabic intensively for seven years and lived in Yemen while undertaking research for her PhD in comparative literature. She now lives and works in Adelaide.

She won *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award in 1997 for her first novel, *Hiam*, which also won the 1999 Nita May Dobbie Literary Award and was shortlisted for the *Courier Mail* Book of the Year in 1999 and the National Fiction Award in 2000. Eva's second novel, *The City of Sealions*, was published in 2002, her novel-in-stories, *Mahjar*, in 2003 (which won the Steele Rudd Australian Short Story Award in 2004), and *Fire Fire*, her novel of gifted children growing up in a dysfunctional family in 1970s Australia, was published in 2004.

She has been active in recent times in raising public awareness of the rights and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. She is one of the co-founders of Australians Against Racism and scripted the controversial television commercial, 'Faces in the Crowd', which aired in 2001 on Human Rights Day. She also developed the hugely successful 'Australia IS Refugees!' schools essay/story competition, which ran nationwide in 2002 and again in 2004.

Dark Dreaming, a compilation of the best entries, was published in 2004.

'A woman of many cultures' (Originally published in *The Age*, February 15, 2003, by Anna King Murdoch)

It seems to be a rare young writer who can survive the heady pleasure of winning a major award; you only have to look at how few continue to publish and mature over a lifetime. Eva Sallis, who won *The Australian/Vogel* Literary Award in 1997, is showing unusual signs of staying power. She followed her fine first novel, *Hiam*, with a less well-received but highly imaginative second novel *The City of Sealions*; a third novel *Mahjar* is being published in April, and she is working on a fourth *The Marsh Birds* and a fifth called *The Arsonists* [published as *Fire Fire* in 2004] simultaneously.

Almost all of her fiction is inspired by her predominant interest —migrant experience and, particularly, the mysteries and beauty of Arabic culture. It is immensely rich material. But there is another less obvious element in her work: her own stressful background. Sallis's German father, Richard Hornung, was born in Palestine in a religious German community called The Templers, who settled there in the 1860s to be near the birthplace of Christ. When the State of Israel was created in 1948, the community was dissolved. They became prisoners-of-war of the British and were sent to Australia where they were placed in detention camps in Victoria and South Australia.

Hornung became a violist, married a New Zealand artist and, after having eight children, they moved to Germany, where Hornung taught at a Steiner community and also performed. During those three years in Germany, the family—'a Fagin collection of urchins'—would pile into a Kombi van during her father's holidays twice a year for historical travels. 'We looked bizarre because the eight of us all looked a bit similar,' says Sallis, who was eight when they returned to Australia.

Her father's reminiscences of his youth in Palestine made the Middle East a real place to Sallis rather than the mysterious Orient. 'My father talked more about interactions with Arab people that were very pleasant. It didn't seem to me at all strange that one day I would grow up and study Arabic and travel to the Middle East.' Back here, on an

11.3-hectare farm in the Adelaide Hills, the Hornung children—now nine of them, all born within 15 years—were kept isolated from the community and schools, taught by their mother. They would dutifully rise at 6 am to play cellos, violins and violas for the family's two string quartets, followed by practice on one of the two pianos. 'We always had to sing before people,' says Sallis. 'They (her parents) would line us all up and each of us would recite a verse of *The Ancient Mariner* and people would think "Wow!"'

It wasn't what it seemed. 'We had a very fraught childhood. My mother wanted to create a new society. She saw contemporary society as evil, fraught with psychic and physical poison. Educating us at home was part of keeping us pure and that's a very dangerous thing to do. You are telling them they're superior to other people and then they're let loose on the world with no social skills whatsoever.' Sallis never saw television until she was 16 when her parents got themselves a 'teeny' television. 'I think they couldn't resist.' After leaving home she watched it solidly for a week and sussed it out.

'The good thing my parents did was to surround us with music and art and books. Admittedly all of them were thoroughly censored but it was live music, art and books. My mother was a painter; we took it as given that we would paint and sculpt and generally invent and build. I could have gone into the visual arts. I still sculpt.' Her three older siblings are all professional musicians, including Alfred Hornung, the Melbourne-based cellist well-known for his Bach in the Dark performances. Her younger sister Lhibou Hornung, who has just won a university medal in Tasmania for a play she wrote and directed, was the fiddle player in the well-known Melbourne band Mutiny.

Eventually, the Hornung children rebelled against the restrictions and isolation. When the house burnt down four years ago, most of them returned to help clean up. 'We did all state that the best thing for it was a match. Indirectly, I write about my family by writing with compassion about the horrible things people do to each other. And the rarer, beautiful things they do to and for each other.'

As an adolescent, Sallis escaped her mother's frightening mood swings by riding her Arab horse Scheherezade, named after the great heroine of *The Arabian Nights* whose stories always intrigued Sallis. She read everything she could about Arab horses. 'She was extremely gutsy,' says Lhibou Hornung, who used to ride with her. 'The two of them were a force. We weren't really provided with saddles and bridles so we made them. Eva made the most ornate saddle I have ever seen. She just found ways to get around these things.'

During those years she also taught herself the Arabic script. Later, she would learn classical Arabic so well that the Arabs were openly admiring. 'Learning a language changes who you are,' she says. 'We're language-locked in Australia. Arabic saturates my world.' These days, she employs a Lebanese woman each Friday to play with her two-year-old son Rafael, speaking only in Arabic. Ironically, her husband Roger Sallis who comes from a Lebanese-Druze background, speaks little Arabic.

Since doing her doctorate on comparative languages (English and Arabic), Sallis has been 10 times to the Middle East by herself. In July, she will visit Syria with her son for a month's research. These solitary travels, without the protection of a man, have given her an insight into the advantages of women in Arab societies. 'I watched a friend of mine after she had a baby in Yemen. She was surrounded by women; there was no chance for her to have post-natal depression.'

There's something about it that works. But I don't idealise it because there is no way I could live like that. I found it very hard imagining a life not being alone.'

She had to elope with Roger Sallis 14 years ago because it was inconceivable to his family 'that they didn't have control over who their children married. The Druze have a reputation for being incredibly staunch and having very strong traditions.' Though her relationship with them is still 'a passionate mix of warmth and intolerance', Sallis's writing shows her increasing understanding of and respect for the Arab culture. In her second novel about an Australian-Vietnamese girl who must overcome the affects of her mother's tragic history, Sallis placed her among the Arabs in Yemen to find her answers, and she dedicates her new novel *Mahjar* to her father-in-law from whom she has heard so many anecdotes and stories.

The novelist Tom Shapcott, who has worked with Sallis at the University of Adelaide on a creative writing program, thinks that she is 'going to be one of the important Australian writers of her generation.' Not only does she have persistence, but her ability to speak classical Arabic fluently has given her 'a whole range of experiences and background which at this particular moment of our history is extremely pertinent.'

But with this unusual skill has come a difficult responsibility. In the last year, angry at the treatment of refugees in isolated detention centres, Sallis has felt fiction is not a strong enough weapon and that only activism can remove injustice. Last October, she wrote the script for a television commercial called *Faces in the Crowd* and, with the Melbourne clothing designer Mariana Hardwick, formed a non-profit organisation called *Australians Against Racism*. Her 30-second commercial, shown three times in every capital city on Human Rights Day, cost \$40,000. 'At the time I thought: 90 seconds and it's over and it took such an effort,' she says. 'I wouldn't do it again because I think \$40,000 can be spent better.'

She kept trying; this year creating the Australia IS Refugees Schools' Competition where children were encouraged to interview a migrant and write a story. 'It was enormously encouraging and invigorating and there was no hate mail.' Her next project is a billboard in each capital city. 'The worst thing that can happen to a crisis in this country is that it goes on and on so it is turned again into something invisible because journalists don't want to touch it. I think what drove me to do this was that I couldn't write good fiction about it. It was very raw and very present and I felt that if I wrote a book it wouldn't be art, it would be pleading and I couldn't find the transforming metaphors or characters.'

Sallis senses that her reputation as a writer may have suffered as a result of this political work. 'Novelists who become activists are seen as defective artists,' she says. It has been a sacrifice for her. 'I do enjoy coming up with projects but I don't enjoy the hate mail or the sheer effort it takes, but I can't not speak out about what's happening in Australia at the moment.' She also has no doubt that the subject of her fiction puts her at a disadvantage in Australia at this time. 'I think my work is easily dismissed as marginal because people easily dismiss Arab people as marginal. So as soon as I have an Arab woman as a subject I seem to be speaking about special concerns and not universal issues.'

But she is true to herself only. Recently Sallis gave up her job at the Adelaide University to concentrate on her new novel *The Marsh Birds*, in which she describes the terrible life of an Iraqi boy driven from his family and country. Birds—that perfect symbol of freedom—have been vitally important to Sallis all her life. On her half hectare of land near the beach not far from Port Adelaide, she cares for wild birds that have fallen from nests or been injured on the road. 'The

boys around our district bring them to me. There's a poem which I wrote at six: 'All the birds belong to me. You feel really blessed when a wild bird comes down near you.'

On writing *The Marsh Birds*—Eva Sallis

The Marsh Birds is a little bit hard to unpick in hindsight. A lot of things fed into it. In 1999 I began quite intensive research into the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, in Australia and overseas. This research is ongoing. In 2001 I co-founded Australians Against Racism Inc, and through two of our creative education projects, read a huge number (many hundreds) of refugee and displaced peoples' stories. These stories were from the full range of 20th and 21st century refugee experiences, and some from earlier. In 2003 and 2004 I spent many months researching Iraq and specifically the war and Saddam Hussein's family for a documentary called *Saddam's Wives*. I spent from 1997 to 2003 writing a novel metaphorically about totalitarianism (*Fire Fire*). I wrote an essay called 'Aftermath' for a book *Why the War Was Wrong* (Text 2003). I spent some time in 2003 researching orphanages and child abuse. I spent a lot of time in the past few years with families who had spent time in detention. And in 2000 my son Rafael was born.

And small moments, nadirs of those years, had a huge impact on me. David Oldfield, a One Nation politician, wrote in 2001 that Middle Eastern people come from a culture that doesn't care for children as much as we do.

All this fed what I wrote, but isn't really why I wrote it. I think that because I was saturated in these things, the story self-selected what was relevant to it. Everything seemed relevant, after a while. At times I felt as though I was writing an important novel about the changed world. Most of the time I felt as though I was writing a specific boy's story, and perhaps it was inevitable that all the things I was immersed in would become part of his story.

The process was a wild ride. Dhurgham came to me in the night in early 2002. By next morning I was in what for me is the best phase of all—the intense, compelling rip through a first rough draft of key scenes. I had been unable to write fiction since the Tampa, S11, changes to the Migration Act, children overboard, SievX, election sequence of the last four months of 2001.

Dhurgham is a completely fictional character. He was born whole. I simply followed him. The first scene I wrote is the opening scene of the novel. The second scene I wrote is the interview with Mr Johns in New Zealand. Sometime in the first week I wrote the ending.

2002 was a painful year for me as a writer. I had what had been my ideal job: a tenured lectureship in English. But my workload was huge, and developing Dhurgham's story was very hard to do. At the end of 2002 I resigned my lectureship. I was for a while aghast that I resigned for a novel. But at the time I felt as though I had reached a crossroads, and that I had to be able to resign for a novel if I was to be a writer at all. 2003 and 2004 were wonderful. I had no idea how much I could write with the time to do it. At the end of 2003 I got one of the major Australia Council grants, we employed a nanny, and I wrote in a very disciplined way throughout 2004.

In August 2003 I went (with Rafael) to Lebanon and Syria for research, and met the writer and artist Nuha al-Radi, who had a huge influence on this book. We corresponded until shortly before her death in August 2004. This book seems to mark endings in a number of ways.

In March and April 2004 I went to New Zealand (with Rafael) to finalise the NZ sections of the book. By early 2005 I was in the final stages of editing and pre-publication. It was my quickest book in some ways, my slowest in others.

To me *The Marsh Birds* is about what it means to be loved. There is something in human beings that makes us demonise and abuse those we perceive as unloved or unlovable. It is somehow a given that orphans or abandoned children will be abused, no matter the wealth of the country or the legislation protecting them. Writing *The Marsh Birds* was a way of exploring this for me. It seems to me that love and belonging are very close. And citizenship is a form of abstract assumption that one is loved, that one has worth. This seems at the moment to be my big book. I hope readers get some of the raw grief, joy, surprise, discovery, connection that I got from writing it.

Reviews







Australian Bookseller & Publisher—Jo Case

Vogel winner, author of four novels, holder of a PhD and an MA in literature, and a prolific refugee activist, Eva Sallis is an impressive figure. And when she's writing about her favourite topics: migration, dislocation, and the interaction between Arabic and Australian cultures, she is a force to be reckoned with. *The Marsh Birds* is that rare creature: a political novel that successfully treads the fine line between storytelling and polemic. Twelve-year-old Dhurgham al-Samarra'i flees Baghdad with his family, but after a confusing incident in the middle of the night, he somehow loses track of them and arrives in their destination (Syria) alone.

From there he encounters a shady benefactor/conman, who shelters him for a couple of years before despatching him via people smugglers to Indonesia and then Australia for a new life. Sadly, his new life takes place within the walls of a 'fictional' detention camp in the desert. Sallis expertly charts the decline of Dhurgham's sanity and sense of self, drawing on recent historical events and her own extensive experience working with refugees and their advocates to paint a hauntingly authentic portrait of one young man's experience as a refugee and the brutal effect of our system of dealing with people like him. A stunning achievement.

More reviews to come.

Some suggested points for discussion

-  Eva Sallis says that *The Marsh Birds* is 'about what it means to be loved'. Do you agree or do you feel it was about much more?
-  Do you feel that this is an overtly political novel? Does the political subtext add to or detract from your reading of the novel?
-  Have your opinions of Australia's treatment of refugees and detention centres changed after reading this novel? If so, how?
-  How do you think Dhurgham's early experiences—after losing his family and his abuse at the hands of Mr Hosni—influenced and affected him?
-  What do you think of the author's comment that: 'Novelists who become activists are seen as defective artists'?
-  Discuss the way in which birds appear throughout the novel. What do you understand from this?

Further reading

In the Skin of a Lion by Michael Ondaatje

Hiam by Eva Sallis

Mahjar by Eva Sallis

Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories, edited by Sonja Dechian, Heather Millar, Eva Sallis

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini