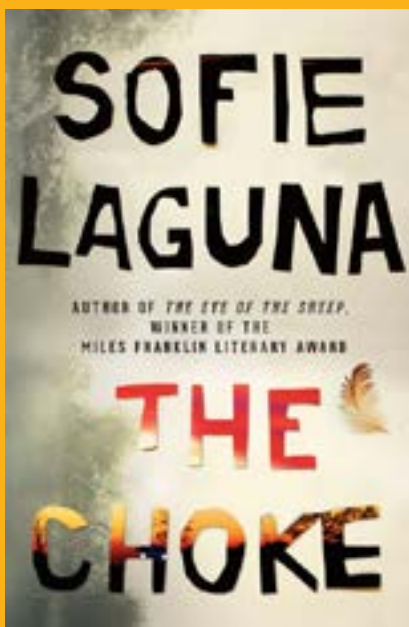




ALLEN & UNWIN'S
Book Group Guide
Conversation Starters



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Recreate the feeling of 1970s Australia to set the scene for your book club. While Justine and Pop's diet was predominately based on fried eggs, you can create a more appealing but quintessentially era-relevant dish with miniature quiches. Stuff celery or skewer cabanossi, gherkins, cocktail onions, cheese, pineapple and mini frankfurts on a toothpick. Or go all-out with a BBQ. Don't forget the beer! Indulge in some craft beers or enjoy a glass of Riesling or fruit punch popular at the time. Mini-skirts, platform shoes, wide lapels and flared trousers could also make an appearance.

About the Book

I never had words to ask anybody the questions, so I never had the answers.

Abandoned by her mother and only occasionally visited by her secretive father, Justine is raised by her pop, a man tormented by visions of the Burma Railway. Justine finds sanctuary in Pop's chooks and The Choke, where the banks of the Murray River are so narrow it seems they might touch—a place of staggering natural beauty. But the river can't protect Justine from danger. Her father is a criminal, and the world he exposes her to can be lethal.

Justine is overlooked and underestimated, a shy and often silent observer of her chaotic world. She learns that she has to make sense of it on her own. She has to find ways to survive so much neglect. She must hang on to friendship when it comes, she must hide when she has to, and ultimately she must fight back.

The Choke is a brilliant, haunting novel about a child navigating an often dark and uncaring world of male power and violence, in which grown-ups can't be trusted and comfort can only be found in nature. This compassionate and claustrophobic vision of a child in danger and a society in trouble celebrates above all the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

Sofie Laguna, winner of the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award for *The Eye of the Sheep*, once again shows she is a writer of rare empathy, originality and blazing talent.

Conversation Starters ...

- As the story's narrator, Justine refers to her father interchangeably as Dad and Ray. How does this reflect their relationship?
- What is the significance of the Choke to Justine both as a landscape and as a concept?
- Aunt Rita tells her niece '*Friends can really make the difference.*' (p. 110) Is this true for Justine?

- ☞ Michael's physical disability means that his mental abilities are not recognised at school. Why do you think Justine is able to relate to him more than the other students?
- ☞ What is the appeal of John Wayne and the characters he plays as an actor to Pop? To Justine?
- ☞ Many figures in Justine's life abandon her in one way or another—except for Pop. Do you think he is trying his best to care for her? Does Justine abandon him?
- ☞ What role does Pop play in both keeping the family together, and tearing them apart?
- ☞ Justine states, *'I didn't know things, but I did know them'* (p. 294) and *'As if, at the same time as knowing, I didn't know.'* (p. 314)
Do you think Justine is naïve or perceptive?
- ☞ *'Stacey Worlley asked for it a thousand times, then the one time she didn't.'* (p.232)
Do you believe Pop thinks Stacey is partly responsible for Ray's assault? Is this indicative of the world of masculine power in which Justine lives?
- ☞ Why do you think Pop and Ray react so strongly to Rita's sexuality?
- ☞ *'It was as if Pop only belonged to the Three, and not to the world outside, and trying to join it made him sweat and shake.'* (p. 300)
Why doesn't Pop belong anywhere else? Does Justine?
- ☞ *'It was as if the room had left the hospital and was just a room on its own, not part of Yolamundi or Geelong, not belonging to anywhere, just a room with me inside it in a battle.'* (p. 319)
How does Justine's experience of giving birth reflect her life experience? Do you think Justine is alone in the world?
- ☞ Pop's chickens provided a sense of comfort, calm and certainty to Justine. Why do you think she ends their lives so violently?
- ☞ *'Why did everybody else choose what was possible for me?'* (p.331)
To what extent has Justine ever had any control over her life?
- ☞ *The Choke* presents us with a disadvantaged child enduring often terrible circumstances, but ends on a note of optimism. How important do you think this optimism is to the success of the story?
- ☞ *'I never had words to ask anybody the questions, so I never had the answers.'*
Do you think Justine finds her voice by the end of the novel?



About the Author

Sofie Laguna originally studied to be a lawyer, but after deciding law was not for her, she trained as an actor. Sofie is now an author, actor and playwright. Her books for young people have been named Honour Books and Notable Books in the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards and have been shortlisted in the Queensland Premier’s Awards. She has been published in the US and the UK, and in translation in Europe and Asia.

Sofie’s first novel for adults, *One Foot Wrong*, published throughout Europe, the US and the UK, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Literary Award and shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Literary Award.

Sofie Laguna’s second novel for adults, *The Eye of the Sheep*—shortlisted for the Stella Prize—won the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award and was longlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

Sofie lives in Melbourne with her husband, illustrator Marc McBride, and their two sons.



- Listen to Sofie read from *The Choke* at:
<https://soundcloud.com/allenandunwin/sofie-laguna-reads-from-the-choke>
- Listen to Sofie discuss her writing on *The Garret* at:
<https://omny.fm/shows/the-garret/sofie-laguna>
- Gain insight into Sofie’s creative process through her *Sydney Review of Books* interview ‘*There Is No Reader In The Room*’ at:
<http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/sofie-laguna-interview/>

A Note from the Author

How did the idea originate?

The idea came to me after watching a documentary about Aileen Wuornos—a woman executed in 2002 after taking the lives of seven men. Aileen’s childhood was unfair beyond my comprehension. I felt compelled to write a story with a different ending. Maybe I wanted an imaginary justice for her, maybe I wanted to make things fairer. But I couldn’t write Aileen’s life—it was too much against her, too much for me to handle in any form but documentary. I could write a different story though, a more hopeful one, where my central character had a chance at survival, and at love. As is often the case, once the novel began, once the first seed of its telling was planted, it took me in a number of unexpected directions. I left its original impulse further and further behind me.

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

The first idea came to me in 2009, but I didn’t begin writing until the beginning of 2016. I stayed in Echuca, visiting the surrounding towns a number of times. I walked along the Murray River and looked at the trees and felt myself drift back in time, to the world of my novel. I could imagine all of my characters living their lives close to the river. I felt haunted by the experience, as if the ghosts of my characters were hanging around me. I could feel the pain of the losses they suffered. I had a sense of the darkness that surrounded them. I felt hope, too, for Justine’s ultimate victory.

Praise for *The Choke*

‘Emotionally intense, deeply engaging and quietly haunting.’

***Books + Publishing* - 5 starred review (top-rated book for the quarter)**

‘It is quite a feat to write characters with such nuance . . . in harnessing her storytelling facility to expose the flaws in the system with what is becoming trademark empathy, Laguna is an author proving the novel is a crucial document of the times.’

Louise Swinn, *The Australian*

‘Sofie Laguna is a writer who can wrench beauty even from the horror of a child caught up in the toxic world of bastardised masculinity. Fearsome, vivid and raw, her third novel for adults chronicles a young girl’s reckoning with this violent world in early 1970s Australia . . . Laguna, who won the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award for *The Eye of the Sheep*, masterfully denies a resolution for Justine’s problems, leaving the reader lingering in her experience.’

Simon McDonald, Potts Point Bookshop

‘Sofie Laguna’s third novel for adults gave me that sweet reading moment we all pine for—when you realise that your lived world is colliding with that of the page. Reading becomes the sole purpose of the day. You cannot put the book down because you are immersed, completely and utterly, until the story finishes. Laguna was awarded the 2015 Miles Franklin Literary Award for her creation of Jimmy Flick in *The Eye of the Sheep*. It is possible that this novel will give her even more, deserved, acclaim.’

Chris Gordon, *Readings*

If you liked this book...

More books by the author:

- *The Eye of the Sheep*
- *One Foot Wrong*

May we also suggest the following?

- *The Way Back* by Kylie Ladd
- *The Natural Way of Things* by Charlotte Wood
- *To Become a Whale* by Ben Hobson
- *Jasper Jones* by Craig Silvey
- *The Slap* by Christos Tsiolkas

