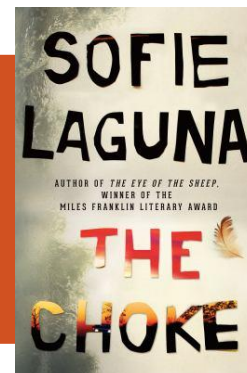




# The Choke

Sofie Laguna



## Author Background

Sofie Laguna originally studied to be a lawyer, but after deciding law was not for her, she moved to Melbourne to train as an actor. Sofie worked for many years as an actor before she began to write books.

Sofie's second novel for adults, *The Eye of the Sheep* won the 2015 Miles Franklin Award. It was also longlisted for the IMPAC Dublin International Book Award and shortlisted for the Stella Prize. Sofie's first novel for adults, *One Foot Wrong*, published throughout Europe, the US and the UK, was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and short-listed for the Prime Minister's Literary Award. Sofie's third adult novel, *The Choke*, won the 2018 Indie Award in the Best Novel category, and was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier Literary Awards, the Australian Book Industry Awards, the Voss Award, the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal, and longlisted for the Stella Award, the Kibble Award, the Colin Roderick Literary Award and the IMPAC Dublin International Book Award. Sofie's most recent novel for adults, *Infinite Splendours*, won the 2021 Margaret and Colin Roderick Literary Award and the HT Priestley Medal, and was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, the Indie Award and the Australian Book Industry Awards.

## Book Summary

"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 must make sense of it on her own. She must 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.

## Discussion Questions

- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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 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 Worley 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?
- ❖ '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?
- ❖ 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?

## References and further reading

- ❖ Author website: <http://sofielaguna.com/>
- ❖ Allen & Unwin: <https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/fiction/The-Choke-Sofie-Laguna-9781760529949>
- ❖ Sydney Review of Books: <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/in-the-breech-sofie-lagunas-the-choke/>