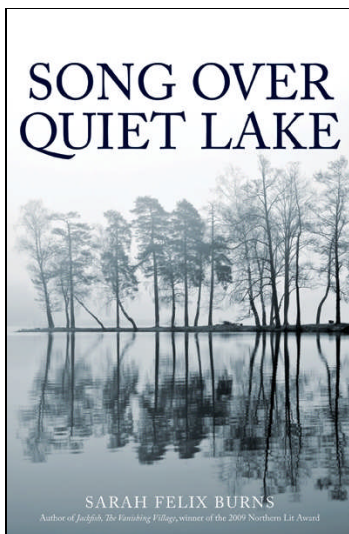


## ***Song Over Quiet Lake***

by Sarah Felix Burns



### **From the author, Sarah Felix Burns:**

When I was asked to write a Reader's Guide for *Song Over Quiet Lake*, I have to admit that I groaned internally... maybe even out loud. My experience, and perhaps yours as well, is that reader's guides are either a little on the boring side or dense, academic and just not very much fun. So I thought I would do something a bit different to keep you – the reader – entertained and engaged.

I learned from the publication of my first novel, *Jackfish: The Vanishing Village*, that readers grasp onto very different elements of the book, and no two readers have even close to the same reading experience of the same book. With that in mind, I am NOT going to give you third person, textbook “think and discuss” questions, because I do not want to steer your thoughts in any particular direction. Rather, I am going to answer some of *your* burning questions directly in my own voice. Haven't you always wanted to ask the author some tough questions about her/his book but never had the chance?

All of the questions below come from actual readers of my book.

*(Warning – some spoilers in here)*

#### **Q: Is it true that you wrote *Song Over Quiet Lake* from your dreams?**

Yes, actually, that is mostly true. I dreamed up the initial concept for the book, and Lydie's character from a dream I had a couple of years ago. However, Lydie is based on a real person so I believe she came to me in the dream and prompted me to write this book. I was outlining a totally different book at the time, and I put it aside to write this one. In addition, all of the dream scenes in the novel are dreams I actually had while writing the book. I absolutely love mining my dreams for use in my writing. In fact, it is sometimes difficult to discern my dreams from my fiction, my subconscious from my real life. Our subconscious minds are so rich with weird and disturbing things – perfect for fiction writing.

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***Q: How did you choose the locations in your novel? And why were some of your characters so hard on places like Vancouver and Medicine Hat?***

The novel is mainly set in Vancouver during the mid 1990's because I just happened to live in Vancouver for four years during the 1990's. It was a really exciting time to live on the West Coast with all the environmental and social/political movements in full swing. I wanted to try to capture some of that by using Vancouver as a setting. I chose Medicine Hat to be Sylvia's hometown almost at random. I have been through Medicine Hat and even stayed overnight there and I have known a couple of people from there, but it is not my hometown. Sylvia sort of disses Medicine Hat in the novel, but I personally have nothing against the town. It's all part of her aversion to her past and her roots that she eventually comes to terms with (much like my feelings toward my own hometown – Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario).

***Q: Are the characters based on real people?***

Yes they are, for the most part. Many authors will not publically admit to this, but I'll be honest with you. As I mentioned above, Lydie is based on an elderly Native woman from the Yukon whom I tutored while I was a student at the University of British Columbia. Sylvia, Miriam, The Priest and Jonah are composites of people I have known over the years with elements of myself mixed into each character as well. Boxcar Huey is indeed based largely on a real person (a friend's mother took in a homeless alcoholic man when I was a teenager – I never could understand why). And the sister character – Jesse – is very similar to my real-life sister Allison. When I wrote this book, Allison was studying forensic anthropology at the University of Toronto. Why do I base my characters on real people? I just find that the people around me are so darn fascinating; real life has so many goodies.

***Q: Do you hate any of your characters?***

No, not in this book. Most of the characters amuse and intrigue me. But I did have a really hard time writing the Pierre chapter (Sylvia's estranged father). That's why it is written in the third person whereas the rest of the characters are all written from a first person perspective. I just

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couldn't get into his mindset and I am not fluent in French so perhaps there was a language barrier there too – since Pierre's thoughts would have been in French.

***Q: What character do you see yourself in the most? Which is the most autobiographical?***

I see a lot of my younger self in Sylvia... and surprisingly, some of me in Jonah as well. I can't really explain that - I just felt a great deal of empathy for him and I found his thought process worked much like my own.

***Q: How many of the events in the book are true?***

All of the historical events I wrote about are true and researched for accuracy. Many of the contemporary happenings in the book are also based on things I have experienced in my life or stories told to me by friends, family and acquaintances. Of course, it is all manipulated and interwoven in a fictional way to make a unified and dramatic storyline.

A couple of people pointed out that in Lydie's first chapter, the description of a three-year-old helping to deliver a baby would was just too implausible. But this was actually a true story told to me by a Native woman from the Yukon. (I also have to mention that my three-year-old son almost had to help me deliver my second baby when I barely made it to the hospital!)

***Q: Being a white woman, was it hard to write first person accounts from an elderly lady, a Native male, etc.?***

Yes and no. In a lot of ways, the book sort of wrote itself and the characters took on their own voices and I had little difficulty recording them on paper. On the other hand, I agonized (and still do) over the issue of voice and privilege; e.g. what gives me to right to tell the story of a Native person who survived a residential school? In my mind, the book is about race relations and I didn't want it to be from one sole perspective. Did I get it right? Readers can decide for themselves and I welcome any feedback.

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***Q: There is a lot of overt racism in this book – why did you do that?***

There is a lot of racism (overt and insidious) in our society so I wanted that to be reflected as realistically as possible in the book. The characters tend to encapsulate different types of racism – Jonah & Mitchell: internalized racism, The Priest: institutional racism, Sylvia: white guilt, River: paternalism, the old English lady on the bus: well, she was pretty blatant – but again, based on a real person/real situation.

***Q: What is the significance of the priest? Are we supposed to feel sorry for him or hate him?***

The priest is an ambivalent character throughout most of the novel. He doesn't take a whole lot of personal responsibility for the events that go on around him so it is easy to be mad at him. But I hope we can see some of ourselves in him as well and understand how he came to be the "passive bystander".

A side note: I had a great uncle who was a Jesuit Priest - he worked at a residential school for Native boys in Ontario. Father Albert Burns was a jolly old guy who loved to teach hockey and theatre... he had a giddy sense of humour and a huge crush on Julie Andrews. He died a few years ago.

***Q: Why do so many scenes take place on the bus?***

If you live in a big city, you know that you spend a lot of time on the bus. Or subway. Or street car. It tends to feel like you spend most of your life in transit. When you are alone in your car, it is really a waste of time unless you have a good radio station. But when you are on public transit with masses of other people, you can learn a lot about individuals and humanity. I am a people watcher and I have seen the most bizarre and or heartwarming things while riding the bus. It is great fodder for a writer. Now that I own a car, the only thing I notice is commuter road rage and people weaving while texting.

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***Q: Was it difficult to write the sexually violent scenes? Was it really necessary to include such graphic scenes in the novel?***

I have had a lot of feedback from readers who do not like to read about violence, especially sexual violence. And I have thought about editing those scenes out of the text. But, I always end up leaving them in because I would rather have the authentic truth presented than an overly sanitized version of events. It is not easy to write, nor is it easy to read. But these things have actually happened to people and I believe (as fellow humans) we need to bear witness to their struggles and survival.

***Q: Isn't it a little too coincidental or even convenient that the priest randomly comes across so many of the other characters throughout his life?***

Sure, some readers will view it that way. But on the other hand, I have had a couple of weird coincidental "it's a small world" moments like that in my short lifetime. The point is, we don't live in isolation of each other, we live in a very interconnected world. Our actions (or inactions) affect people in ways we may never even know.

***Q: How did you write the details of living in a residential school, reform school or prison when you have not experienced any of these things?***

My goal is to get the emotion behind each scenario as real and as raw as possible so I only write about things that I can in some way relate to. I have personally known people who have lived through such things and they were generous enough to share their painful stories with me. I really take that stuff inside of me – very deeply – and feel the agony of the experiences. I wrote those scenes from first person accounts. Prison and residential schools are issues that come up frequently in my writing, and I don't plan it that way. I suppose these things are like dark holes in society and in history and I am trying to make sense of them through my writing. Again, bearing witness is so important.

Reader's Guide

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***Q: How old were you when you wrote this book?***

I was thirty years old when I wrote this novel.

***Q: Why did you have to go and kill off Lydie when we all loved her character so much?***

Yes, I get a lot of flack about this and another character from my last book who died. And it is upsetting to develop a relationship - fictional - but nonetheless we grow to love these characters, and to root for these characters and then, poof, they are gone. The Coen Brothers (filmmakers) have got this down to a science. Getting back to Lydie... she was an old lady and old people do occasionally die in their sleep of old age. It was her time. It made sense; Lydie had come full circle in her life and she was at peace with her family and her history. Lydie had given her song and so much more to us all. Her work was done. And her children and grandchildren are carried on into the next generation. In that sense, Lydie lives on.

***Q: What does the dedication at the beginning of the book mean?***

I dedicated *Song Over Quiet Lake* to all those people I have known throughout my life who have lost a child – and there are many. What can one say to them besides the obligatory “I’m so sorry” ... knowing full well that the pain and agony they are experiencing will haunt and devastate them the rest of their lives? I am always at a loss for words so I did literally think about this over a period of years, and also how there are so many broken shells of people who were lost and abused themselves as children. My heart just aches for them and in some way, I had to work that out of me to help me make sense of things, and hopefully to help others as well.

When I write a dedication, I really truly dedicate that book to the people indicated. This book was written for those people. In my mind, they (you perhaps) are my ultimate audience. And I hope you accept my most humble efforts.

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Reader's Guide

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***Q: Do you like being a writer?***

Absolutely. Being a writer is the neatest thing that could have ever happened to me – besides giving birth to my children. Actually, when you create books, it is like having a child. That's how soul stirring the whole experience can be. Some writers say they like being a writer because they get to play God. In a sense, that is true – you move your characters lives around as though you were playing a game of chess. Other authors believe that the characters create themselves – even sit beside you while you type and tell you what they would say. But I like the way that Stephen King described writing in his autobiographical book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. He suggests that writing is a form of ESP – for example, I am recording these thoughts on October 5, 2009 and you will perhaps many years later be able to read my exact thoughts even though I may be nowhere around, maybe even dead. But you can still experience my voice and my soul through my writing. It really is like magic.

If you have any other questions you would like to ask the author, please contact me via my publisher, Second Story Press.

-SFB

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