



# The choke

By Sofie Laguna

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## Genre & subject

Australian fiction

Domestic fiction

Dysfunctional families

Fathers and daughters

## Synopsis

'I never had words to ask anybody the questions, so I never had the answers.' Abandoned by her mother as a toddler and only occasionally visited by her volatile father who keeps dangerous secrets, Justine is raised solely by her Pop, an old 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 they can almost touch - a place of staggering natural beauty that is both a source of peace and danger. Although Justine doesn't know it, her father is a menacing criminal and the world she is exposed to is one of great peril to her. She has to make sense of it on her own - and when she eventually does, she knows what she has to do. A brilliant, haunting novel about a child navigating an often dark and uncaring world of male power, guns and violence, in which grown-ups can't be trusted and comfort can only be found in nature, *The Choke* is a compassionate and claustrophobic vision of a child in danger and a society in deep trouble.

## Author biography

Sofie Laguna (born 1968 in Sydney) 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 – both for children and adults.

Sofie's second novel for adults, 'The Eye of the Sheep' – shortlisted for the Stella Prize – won the 2015 Miles Franklin Award. It has been optioned for both film and theatre. 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 shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award. Screen rights have been optioned and Sofie has completed the screenplay.

Sofie's many books for young people have been published in the US, the UK and in translation throughout Europe and Asia. She has been shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Award, and her books have been named Honour Books and Notable Books by the Children's Book Council of Australia.

Sofie has just released her third novel for adults, 'The Choke', to wide acclaim.

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

## Discussion 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 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?
- 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?

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