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BOOK CLUB AUTHOR Q&A  
SEEK THE SINGING FISH BY  
ROMA WELLS



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Please see detailed below some questions and answers provided by the author in relation to their book.

## 1. How would you (a) summarise the book and (b) your motivations for writing it?

(A) This is fundamentally a story about hope in the heart of darkness, a modern day odyssey charting how a young girl finds refuge in the natural world amidst the brutality of war and displacement. At the core, I wanted to show the immense beauty and power of the natural world in direct contrast to human cruelty, demonstrating how it can provide a sanctuary when the human spirit is pushed to the absolute extreme.

(B) As I came to learn of the sectarian conflicts that ravaged both the beautiful islands of my heritage, Sri Lanka and Ireland, I became fixated on the juxtaposition of breathtaking nature and barbaric violence. How could blood soak the same ground that majestic elephant feet roamed? How could corpses swing from branches where purple faced macaques grazed? How could beauty and cruelty coincide so closely? I wanted to explore this clash; the way barbarism and beauty, chaos and curiosity can overlap and enhance each other's pigments. I craved to understand how Lanka could be labelled as both the pearl and teardrop of the Indian Ocean, how so much splendour could converge with so much pain.

In my professional life, working in press offices to raise the public awareness of refugee crises, modern slavery, migrant abuse and homelessness, I've also been surrounded by the human struggle for safety. When life pushes us to extremes and our sense of security is jeopardised, we become literally defined by the search for shelter, the term refugee originating from the French réfugié ; 'gone in search of refuge'. In the context of warfare, which ravages lives and wreaks the most brutal trauma imaginable, the contrasting sanctuary of the natural world heightens. With Lanka's luscious tapestry as a backdrop, I wanted to illuminate the dialectical shades of brutality and hope, through the starkness of a story carved in warfare and wildlife, told through the eyes of a girl nurtured by nature and torn by the claws of conflict.

## 2. What is the significance of the title?

The Singing Fish are a wild mystery that lingers beneath the moonlit lagoons

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of Batticaloa (where the protagonist Mila grows up). No one knows what creates the entrancing hum which rises from the water but it provides a source of immense fascination amidst other darker mysteries that are brewing on the island. The Singing Fish symbolise the importance of curiosity as a coping mechanism; wanting to know is more important than the knowledge itself as this thirst is what keeps humans going. The Singing Fish are tied to the central message from Mila's father; 'the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled' (Plutarch).

### **3. What are the main themes of the book? What do these themes mean to you as the author?**

The wonder of the natural world, the power of a curious mind, the salvation of literature, the senseless violence of warfare and the immortalisation of war through PTSD.

As a nature adoring, deeply curious booklover, I wanted to highlight the profound power that nature, curiosity and books can have on a mind in turmoil. I believe one of the most wonderful moments you can share with another human being is seeing their eyes light up when they talk about something they're passionate about. This glow you see emanating from them feels like poetic proof of our ancient elemental origins from the stars. So, I wanted to cultivate this glow in Mila and use it as a beacon of hope for the reader as we traverse the untold horrors of her story.

With my background, academic studies and career working across sectarian conflict, I was also very keen to combat the compassion fatigue we often feel when war is discussed. Through a visceral, perturbing and raw presentation of the shades of warfare, I wanted its horrors to stick with the reader in ways that cannot be shaken off. Crucially, I wanted the PTSD which plagues so many war victims to be a central thematic focus. The battlefield continues long after the ceasefires/peace accords and this ongoing brutality in the psyche deserves more attention.

### **4. Did you decide on a specific style of writing for this book, and if so, why? What are you trying to convey through your style?**

I chose a descriptive and sensory rich style of writing for this story, which, written in the first person, conveys the deeply engrained love of language Mila has developed from spending her childhood nestled in her father's library. The

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language itself forms a kind of coping mechanism as she grapples with the disorientating world around her. Ultimately, I wanted to viscerally describe both the horrors of war and the beauty of nature to enhance the power of both, plunging and immersing the reader's senses into the narrative.

## **5. Was the structure and layout of the book an important consideration? If so, why?**

The scene where Mila and her father rush out laughing into the monsoon downpour is a pivotal moment of freedom and elemental catharsis amidst the restrictive shackles of war. It reveals the capacity to feel multiple emotions at once, how both joy and fear, beauty and brutality can coincide at once.

Mila's discovery of Peri by her lagoon and Ash in the market offer a key moment of hope after the horrific grief she's been grappling with. These simple bonding moments reveal the capacity for a wounded heart to open again and the nourishment which new connections can bring. Similarly Mila's confrontation of the local bullies as they attack a dog is a pivotal demonstration of her bravery and the compassion which drives her forward against poor odds.

Darker scenes of her mother's rape, Rosh's betrayal, her plight on the trafficking boat and her domestic enslavement in the London basement also offer key benchmarks for her progressive pain. These moments are meant to stab at the reader's heart strings and lodge deeply as the sympathy for Mila swells to new heights.

On the more hopeful side, Mila's ability to find natural world beauty while homeless on the streets of London offers a sense of personal homecoming. Her comfort under an oak tree in the park is pivotal in showing us just how much of a comfort and refuge nature can provide, even when she's thousands of miles from home.

The realisation her brother doesn't recognise her is another vital scene. We learn with Mila how devastating the effects of PTSD can be and how sometimes we never get to know the full story, no matter how much we crave it.

Lastly, the final scene by the lagoon where Mila and Ravi connect over the Singing Fish, is the clearest symbol of hope in the entire story. Despite all the uncertainty and agony endured, the glimpse of recognition on Ravi's face offers a simple but powerful gesture of hope amidst the chaos. It is here we

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are reminded that hope and darkness are not mutually exclusive but rather inextricably bound.

## **6. How important was the time period or the setting to the story? What were you looking to evoke through this?**

The setting of Sri Lanka, both a natural world paradise and an island torn by a 30 year conflict, was vital for bringing out the core juxtaposition in this story; the horror of warfare and the beauty of nature. By exploring the excruciating violence alongside the luscious tropical landscapes, I wanted to enhance both the senseless cruelty of warfare alongside the alleviative wonder of the natural world. Bringing the story to London, and exploring my home town through the eyes of a disorientated stranger, was also important for illuminating the isolating plight of refugees. Given the small moments of nature serenity Mila manages to find in grey London, it was also a way to encourage the reader to appreciate the myriad of small wild wonders all around them, even in a damp and bustling cityscape. are reminded that hope and darkness are not mutually exclusive but rather inextricably bound.

## **7. Which location in the book would you most like to visit and why?**

I would love to visit the oaky cocoon of Cas's bookshop, which I created as a vital sanctuary for Mila on her traumatic odyssey. This sensory rich refuge offers the comfort and anchoring she needs to rediscover herself so I'd love to have a cup of tea and a cheese toastie in the 'forest of reworked trees'. Camden Market was the location of my very first job at age 13 and there was an abandoned shop in the lower stables I always liked to imagine led to a universe just like Cas's bookshop.

## **8. What emotions are you hoping to evoke in the reader?**

Shock and disgust at the visceral excavation of sectarian conflict, displacement and modern slavery. Empathy and respect for Mila's endurance and also intrigue, wonder and a humbling sense of awe at just how spectacular and majestic our natural world is.



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**9. As an author you are very close to your characters. Reflecting back on the book, which of your characters would you like to meet in real life and why?**

It's hard to pick as they all feel so real to me that they deserve their own passports!

I would love to meet Mila's father and Cas to immerse in their colourful metaphors and philosophical insights amidst the backcloth of their literary sanctuaries. I would love to meet Ash and Joe Chops for some grounding humour and raw insights into their resilience amidst the plight of homelessness. And last but certainly not least, I would love to meet Mila. She fuses components of me, my mum and my grandpa's personalities so I'd love to nerd out with her over some wildlife curiosities.

**10. Any questions readers should ask themselves about your book?**

- How much did you learn from this book? Given the animal fact frenzy Mila frames her journey with, would you say this book is both a non-fiction and fictional experience simultaneously?
- Did you ever want to put it down because things got too graphic and brutal? If so, was this a wider pattern of compassion fatigue you feel in general?
- What made you pick the book back up and push through the unease?
- How much natural world beauty do you think you overlook on a day to day basis?
- Who is the bravest character?

Challenge: Go on a walk and try to see the world through Mila's eyes. How many natural world wonders can you pick up on?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Roma Wells is a Sri Lankan and Irish writer with a family heritage entwined with wild animals and sectarian conflict.

Roma studied International Relations at Cambridge University and has worked in journalism, foreign affairs and international development. She is happiest scribbling under trees and at home you will find her bonding with an array of local wildlife.