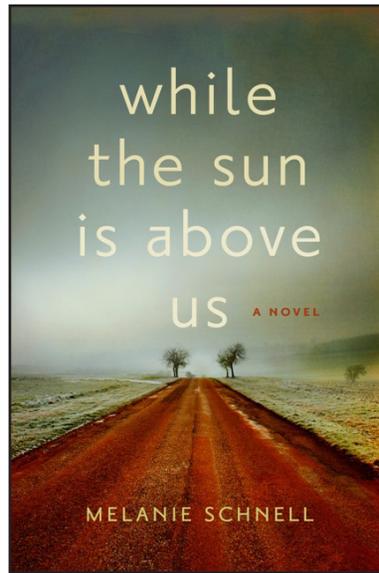




READING GUIDE

with glossary



While The Sun Is Above Us Melanie Schnell

About the book:

It is too difficult to release this war from our blood, when it long ago shaped who we are, how we live, how we move, how we breathe. Blood has filled this earth up; it has made God angry. We must be forgiven or nothing will change.

While The Sun Is Above Us takes readers deep into the extraordinary world of Sudan through the intertwined narratives of two women. In the midst of a bloody civil war, Adut is brutally captured and held as a slave for eight years. Sandra, fleeing her life in Canada, travels to South Sudan as an aid worker but soon finds herself unwittingly embroiled in a violent local conflict. When chance brings Adut and Sandra together in a brief but profound moment, their lives change forever.

In captivating prose, Melanie Schnell offers imaginative insight into the lives of innocents in a land at war, rendering horrific experiences with exquisite clarity. *While The Sun Is Above Us* explores the immense power of the imagination, the human desire for connection, and the endurance of hope.

“Schnell’s prose is transparent and true, and her voice is haunting, full of emotional clout. Hers are characters made of flesh and blood—they are brave, vulnerable, strong and, ultimately, alive with hope.”—Lisa Moore

About the author:

Melanie Schnell grew up on a farm in southeastern Saskatchewan and has lived in Regina, Vancouver, Toronto, Boston, Colombia, Thailand, Kenya and Sudan. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and has written for television, magazines and journals across Canada. *While The Sun Is Above Us* is her first novel. Visit her at www.melanieschnell.com.



Photo: Graham Powell

A Conversation with Melanie Schnell

1. Your novel is a work of literary fiction, but it is set against a very real political backdrop. What kind of research did you do for the novel?

I read whatever I could get my hands on about the history and the culture, and, inevitably, the war. When Adut first came waltzing into my head in 2000, I knew virtually nothing of Sudan. I scoured the library for books on Sudan, and I took the bus to London several times (from where I was living at the time in Toronto) to interview Jane Roy and Glen Pearson, who ran CASS (Canadian Aid for South Sudan). They had been to Sudan many times. Jane and Glen were incredibly helpful, and often pointed me to books to read, as well as other people to talk to. When I finally went to Sudan, in 2003, I interviewed scads of people. I also stayed with a Dinka family in Turalei for a few weeks. I couldn't communicate very well with the women, but I observed and participated in their lives as best I could, using the rudimentary bits of Dinka I had learned. It was very clear to me from the beginning that this was going to be a book not only about slavery, but about the lives of the

women; so although most of the southern women I met couldn't speak English, and they were busy working morning to night, I tried to spend as much time with them as I could. I wrote a lot while I was there—I wrote my observations about the culture and the things I saw and experienced, but mostly, I wrote down what was told to me in interviews. It all just grew from there, and I ended up befriending many southern Sudanese, who I am still in touch with. All my Sudanese friends, both in Sudan and here in Canada, have helped in their own way with the writing of this book.

2. *While The Sun Is Above Us* features two strong female characters—Adut, a Dinka woman from South Sudan, and Sandra, a Canadian aid worker. This differentiates your novel from a number of other books and movies about Sudan which focus on the “lost boys” or other male experiences—I’m thinking specifically of Dave Egger’s *What is the What*, *The Devil Came on Horseback*, and *God Grew Tired of Us*. Why did you decide to explore and foreground the female experience of captivity, slavery, and international aid work in Sudan?

I read an article in *Maclean's* magazine in 2000 about the slaves in South Sudan, mostly women and children, that were captured in the midst of this awful, long, war. One of the featured stories was about a woman who had just been freed. In fact, her photo inspired the photo that Sandra becomes obsessed with in the book. Even before I went to Sudan, my desire was to get to know the women, to understand their lives, their culture, their role within their families, their difficulties within the context of this long-standing conflict, and to somehow try to write that. Truthfully, when I went to Sudan, the women were the hardest to get to know, mainly due to the language barrier. In the rural areas I visited there were many men who had time to speak with me, and they could usually speak English as well. It was a priority for the men to learn English, above the women, who were needed at home. But the women seemed more hidden. Since the eighties, education had been somewhat non-existent, as their schools kept getting razed, and life became necessarily about survival. So most of the women I met or saw in these areas did not speak English, and besides, they worked morning to night, harvesting, cooking, caring for the children, repairing their tukals. They didn't have time for me. Finally, going against the strong advice of the non-profit I was stationed with (they were concerned I wouldn't be properly protected in the event of a raid), I stayed with a family for three weeks in their compound—five wives of a SPLA (Sudanese People's Liberation Army) Commander and their children. I couldn't really communicate very well with them, but we made it work. I had also hired a couple of male translators while I was there and went with them to the surrounding villages to interview returned slaves, displaced people, widows of war, child soldiers, etc. You couldn't throw a stone without hitting either a returned slave or someone whose family member had been taken. Regarding using the experience of international aid work in my novel, obviously I could write from my experience for Sandra's character, having worked at non-profits both times I was there. It was important for Sandra to be in Sudan, and she wouldn't have been able to get into the country in any other way at that time, other than through a non-profit, given her background. I have said that Adut waltzed into my head first, but Sandra followed quite closely behind; their desire to connect, much like my desire to connect with the women when I was there, was a huge part of writing this story for me. Sandra's and Adut's back-and-forth storytelling as a way for them to connect and move forward in their own lives was really the nexus of this book for me, and one of the reasons I needed to write it.

3. As you were writing this book, you became a mother yourself. Did this change your relationship with your character Adut, also a mother?

Even before I gave birth, it was sometimes difficult to sink down into a scene and write deeply from it, as I found it really painful. I would have to take breaks. After becoming a mother, I actively avoided writing and tweaking some scenes, such as the one where Adut loses Khajami in the raid. Of course, I couldn't avoid it for too long, thanks to deadlines, but the pain of that scene and other scenes with Adut's children dug just that little bit deeper into me.

4. You spent a total of seven months living in Sudan. Was there a specific moment, event, or person that inspired you to begin writing *While The Sun Is Above Us*?

I mentioned before about reading an article in Maclean's magazine about the slaves in Sudan that were captured as a part of the war. Soon after reading that article, Adut came along, a fully formed character with a strong voice and a story to tell. Because Adut's character had come to me before I went to Sudan, her voice was already really entrenched within me by the time I was able to travel to there, so I didn't go to Sudan looking for her representation; I went there to research her world to the best of my ability, so that I could write her story. However, there were people I met while I was there who later inspired other characters in the story. When I went there in 2003, I had brought with me a mapped-out draft of the novel. Many events occurred during this time which further shaped this draft; specifically, an accident I was involved in, which later informed one of the major turning points of the novel, inspiring the accident Sandra found herself involved in.

5. In *While The Sun Is Above Us*, Adut says “My grandmother told me that a story has the power to travel to distant lands and float into the ears of others, so they too can hear it, even if they cannot see the storyteller.” Indeed, storytelling emerges as a powerful force throughout the novel, helping both Adut and Sandra cope and survive in unbearable circumstances. Is storytelling really this powerful? What can storytelling accomplish?

Story is how we shape our lives, our world, ourselves. From what we know of the history of humanity, storytelling has been here since the beginning of time—our ancestors sitting around their fires used story to shape their politics, societies, identities—and we continue to do so today. The novel form, in particular, has been proven in recent studies to arouse certain parts of our brains, and in doing so, potentially changing us psychologically. By immersing yourself in a character through reading fiction, empathy, compassion, and awareness can grow and develop. We all know by our participation in today's world of facebook what awareness of an issue can do—it can create huge change within societies. Storytelling is that powerful. Sure, it doesn't deal directly with policy and the economy the way politics or activism can do, but a story can have, and often does have, activism and politics embedded within it. Story has the potential to reach down deeply into the currents of individuals and societies, thereby changing, informing and inspiring our world.



Glossary

A few readers commented that they'd love a glossary of some of the words used in While the Sun Is Above Us. Melanie Schnell graciously put this list together for us.

Abida – black slave

Cigaras – cigars

Dinars – currency in South Sudan

Durra – grain

Insha'Allah – God willing

Khawaja – white person or foreigner

Marissa – alcoholic drink from fermented sorghum

Murahaleen – northern tribe

Nhialic – God

Salam alaykom – “peace be upon you”; hello

Sharmuta – prostitute

Souk – market

Tukal – hut