

BETWEEN WATER AND THE NIGHT SKY

SIMONE LAZAROO

ABOUT THE BOOK

This is the hauntingly beautiful story of Elspeth, a Western Australian girl from a small wheatbelt town, and Francis, a young Singaporean who arrives in Perth with his Box Brownie camera and his Great Wall of China suitcase, determined to make something of his life in a place that prefers white skin to brown skin.

Told by their only child, Eva, this is a novel about falling in love, and falling apart – the beautiful, sad story of a shared history that never ends.

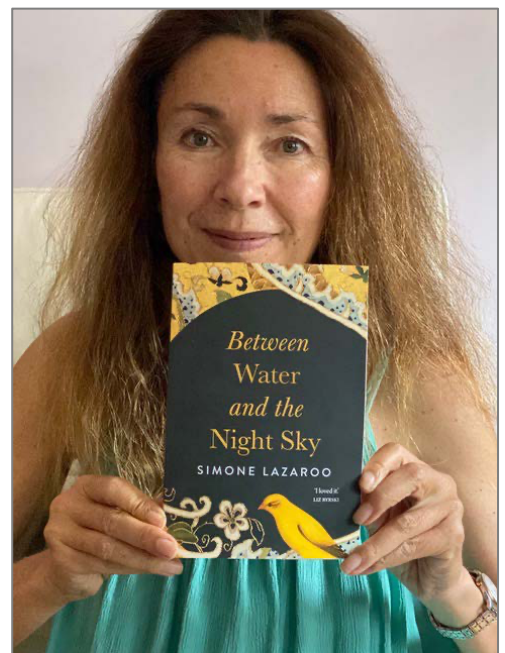
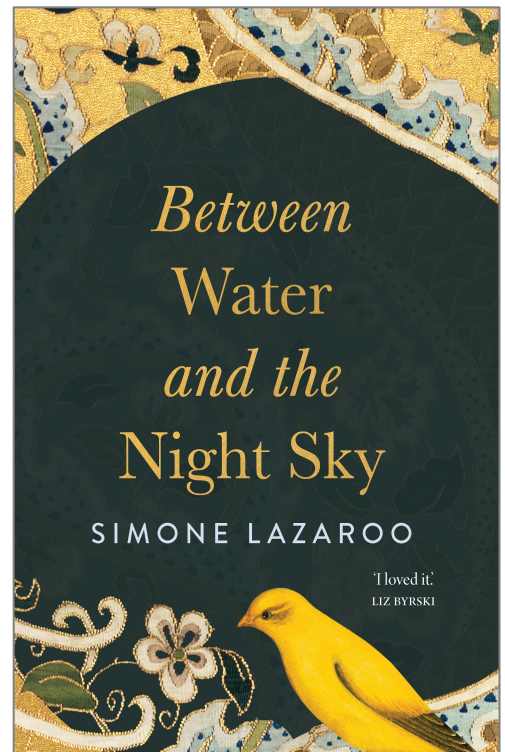
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simone Lazaroo was born in Singapore and migrated to Australia as a child. She wrote novels and short stories before completing her PhD in 2004 and teaching creative writing for several years at Murdoch University, where she is now an honorary research fellow. She mentors emerging writers and is in a Spanish-funded research group, writing about aspects of migrant experience, cosmopolitanism and cross-culturality.

Her five previous novels and short stories have been published in Australia, Spain, England, USA, Portugal and Cuba. Several of her novels have won or been shortlisted for Australian and international awards. Her novel *The Australian Fiancé* is optioned for film, and she is currently writing two new works, one set in a coastal community in Western Australia and the other in Mediterranean Europe.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is the book called *Between the Water and the Night Sky*?
2. How does autofiction differ from memoir and autobiography?
3. Why do you think the author chose not to have written a straight memoir about the life of her parents but chose to write a novel instead?
4. What role does music play in Elspeth's and Francis's lives?
5. How has the life of Francis been shaped by his own father's wartime experiences?
6. How does the ghost-demon Hantu Maligang manifest variously for Elspeth, Eva and Francis?
7. What kinds of racism does Eva's family encounter? Does it change over time?
8. The author often mentions the brand names of certain foods and products – why do you think she felt these were important to include?
9. What is the significance of the garden plants cared for by Elspeth, such as the herbs and the lemon tree in the Shanghai pot?
10. Why does Eva decide to take up photography, and what is the role of photographs in this story?
11. How is Elspeth's life affected by the defining event of her childhood? How does this event affect her roles as a mother and a wife?
12. Who do you think is responsible for the disintegration of the marriage?
13. In what ways are Francis and Elspeth still connected, despite everything?
14. In what ways does Eva's telling of this story honour the life of Elspeth in all its complexity? How would you describe Elspeth's life?



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

You mention in the acknowledgements that this story is informed by your life and the lives of your parents – why did you choose to tell this story in the way that you have?

This book began initially as a couple of short stories memorialising aspects of my parents' lives, particularly my mother's, before she died. But there were fictional elements in those stories (including some of the plot, imagery and dialogue) for a few reasons: firstly, to make the stories more engaging, secondly, because I simply didn't know the details of some events, conversations and settings, and also because I wanted to keep some details of their lives private. Of course, it's not unusual for writers to draw from such sources to write fiction. A couple of years after my mother died, I had a strong sense I wanted to find some way of continuing to acknowledge the love and admiration I felt for her, and to memorialise her courage, creativity and quiet heroism, despite her outwardly unspectacular life and financial difficulties. I felt compelled to write something longer about her, but as I wrote, the emerging story took on a life of its own. I again fictionalised aspects of this new writing – this was partly because I didn't know all the details of parts of her life that I wanted to write about. For these, I had to resort to using my imagination. Also, in the case of my book, it felt appropriate for other reasons, too, to use fictional devices and imagination. Given my use of imagined details and other fictional aspects of this book, and in the interests of honesty to readers, it seems more appropriate to classify it as fiction or autofiction than narrative non-fiction. It seems that more autofiction has been published in Europe than Australia and so possibly more European readers are familiar with autofiction, though there are of course examples of autofiction published here in Australia.

Did writing this book lead to any unexpected revelations or new understandings about your relationship with your own parents?

I became even more aware of my mother's courage and of some of the reasons why day-to-day life was sometimes such a struggle for her. And I became aware of how the latter probably affected my parents' marriage. Also, their bi-cultural marriage was quite unusual for its times, in Australia at least, and affected my relationship with my parents in obvious and not so obvious ways. My parents courted and married in the late 1950s, when the White Australia policy was still being enforced, when whether or not to permit migration of Asians into Australia was being debated in parliament, and racist attitudes (which persisted through my siblings' and my childhood and young adulthood) were encountered by my family quite often. Writing this book confirmed for me that this latter point affected my father's relationship with us and with others.

Do you have any advice for authors who choose to write about those people close to them?

Whether you decide to write about people biographically, fictionally or as some kind of hybrid of the two – sometimes termed 'autofictional' writing – look for the ways in which they have been affected by their own pasts – their psychological, social and historical circumstances. (This might require you to do further research, whether through discussions with the individual or through relevant archival research.) And do it with empathy for those individuals. More often than not, apparently inexplicable behaviour in individuals has its causes in their childhoods or more recent pasts. Good writing – both fiction and narrative non-fiction – demonstrates this awareness. Good writers have empathy for the individuals they write about, and good writing often helps readers develop empathy for others.

What's next for Simone Lazaroo?

I'm currently engaged in a few projects. One is as script consultant and co-writer for a screenplay for my second novel, *The Australian Fiancé* (1999), which is currently optioned by film-maker Karen Borger for a film to be set partly in Broome and partly in Singapore. Obtaining funding to make a film is notoriously difficult, so I have all my fingers crossed that Western Australian bodies will help support Karen, who has wanted for years to make a film based on that novel. And I've always wanted to learn how to write a film script, something I never had time to do during my previous full-time job, teaching creative writing at university.

I'm about to begin writing a new novel partly set at a local metropolitan beach and partly in Mediterranean Europe. In between all that, I'm hoping to finish a draft of a novel set in Lisbon and near Fremantle that I began years ago. I've also recently been asked to be writer in residence at the University of Barcelona and address a conference in Mallorca in September of 2023, and to run some workshops for emerging writers.



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