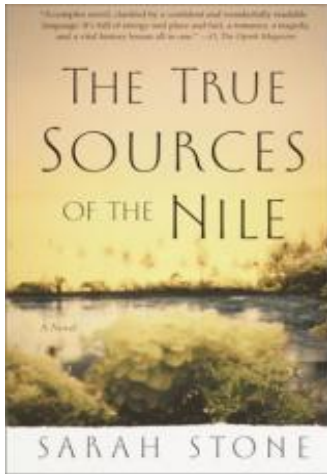


The True Sources of the Nile: A Novel

by Sarah Stone



About the Book

An erotic tale of love and betrayal that asks: What are the consequences of passion?

Anne, an American living in central Africa, finds her innate optimism challenged by the realities of her work for peace and democracy. Love is the furthest thing from her mind until she meets Jean-Pierre, a high-ranking, Paris-educated member of the Tutsi ruling class, and they begin an irresistibly intoxicating and blindingly intense affair. While her efforts to improve the conditions in Burundi are laborious and painstaking, the force of their love seems to have conquered the differences between them. For a time, it seems to be an enchanted romance full of burning desire and mutual fascination, until the intractable chaos of the outside world intervenes.

The first crack appears when Anne's mother is diagnosed with cancer, bringing the needs of her family to a fever pitch on the other side of the globe. On a trip to her mother's bedside in the United States, Anne makes shocking discoveries about her family. She returns to Burundi only to find a tense situation that ultimately leaves 100,000 dead in a horrifying outbreak of racial fighting, a crisis that devastates Jean-Pierre's family and reveals a past utterly unknown to her. As violence erupts around them and the divisions between them grow sharper, they wrestle with how to come to terms with their pasts and the possibility of a future together. Meanwhile, the acute demands of her family force Anne to search for her own answer to an unbearable question: What horrors and betrayals can be justified in the name of loyalty, duty, and love?

As much about passion and the power of love as it is about obligation and immutable ties to family, **The True Sources of the Nile** is a story of lovers from profoundly different worlds, and the terrible choices they must make.

Discussion Guide

1. If a central theme of this novel seems to be the ways people evade or accept their "duty," how does this appear in the ways the three sisters respond to their mother's illness? How does it appear in Anne's relationship to Burundi and to her

work there? How does this idea of duty relate to her final actions and decisions in the novel? What do you think of her decisions? What do you think of Jean-Pierre's relation to "duty," toward his family and toward Burundi?

2. Anne's mother turns to romances when she is undergoing chemotherapy. What does she get from them? How do the romances relate to the overall structure and themes of the novel as a whole? Is there a way in which the "quoted" passages from the romances change your reading of the love affair between Anne and Jean-Pierre?

3. How is Jean-Pierre's relationship to Christine and Francoise similar to or different from Anne's relations to her sisters? How is their love affair changed by the events involving their sisters? How is Anne's relation to her sisters changed by the events in Burundi? Does her view of her sisters seem accurate to you, based on their words and actions? What does the reader observe about them that Anne might not?

4. What do you think of Margaret's action in taking her mother's money? How do her actions relate to the larger themes of the book? Do her sisters respond appropriately? What does their handling of this situation say about ethics and family?

5. When Anne begins to hear Jean-Pierre's stories about his past, his revelations become entangled with their sex life. Why and how does this happen? How does this change the way Anne responds to his stories? How does this change the way you respond to his stories? If Anne had been in Jean-Pierre's position, what do you think she would have done? What do these scenes show us about the nature of warfare?

6. In what ways are Jean-Pierre's past actions shaped by his history and upbringing? To what extent is he responsible for these actions? What does Anne seem to think? Does this change during the course of the novel? What do you think Jean-Pierre's actions and beliefs show about the relationship of the individual human being to society?

7. In this novel, most of the characters have secrets. Do any of the secrets seem justified? If so, which ones? How is Anne changed by discovering the secrets? Does the novel seem to suggest that most people have secrets, or do these circumstances seem particular to the situations of the characters here?

8. Anne says, about her mother's cancer, "I secretly thought that we would be sad when we lost her, but that her death wouldn't *matter*. Not in comparison to tens of thousands of Burundian dead." What do you think of this idea? How do we respond to individual deaths in tragic times?

Author Bio

Sarah Stone lived in Bujumbura, Burundi, from 1991 to 1993, where she volunteered at the Jane Goodall Institute, taught English as a second language, and reported on human rights. She is on the faculty of the College Writing Programs at the University of California, Berkeley. She lives with her husband, writer Ron Nyren, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Critical Praise

"Sarah Stone has written a novel of civil and domestic war, of tribal and familial violence?all the more passionate because intermingled: love and death flailing at each other like the pair at the erotically charged center of **The True Sources of the Nile**. Whether she writes of San Francisco or Burundi, checkups or checkpoints, nightmares or dreams, she does so with authority and in prose honed machete-edged sharp: a vivid, heart-stopping tale."

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