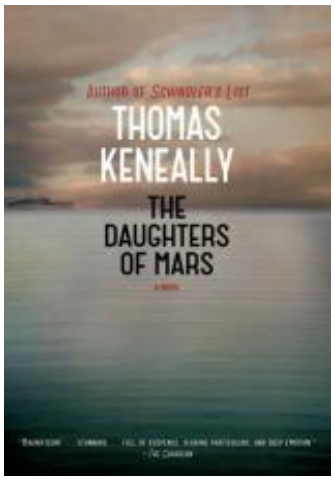
The Daughters of Mars

by Thomas Keneally



About the Book

From the acclaimed author of *Schindler?s List,* the epic, unforgettable story of two sisters from Australia, both trained nurses, whose lives are transformed by the cataclysm of the first World War.

In 1915, two spirited Australian sisters join the war effort as nurses, escaping the confines of their father?s farm and carrying a guilty secret with them. Used to tending the sick as they are, nothing could have prepared them for what they confront, first near Gallipoli, then on the Western Front.

Yet amid the carnage, Naomi and Sally Durance become the friends they never were at home and find themselves courageous in the face of extreme danger, as well as the hostility they encounter from some on their own side. There is great bravery, humor, and compassion, too, and the inspiring example of the remarkable women they serve alongside. In France, where Naomi nurses in a hospital set up by the eccentric Lady Tarlton while Sally works in a casualty clearing

Discussion Guide

1. In writing THE DAUGHTERS OF MARS, Thomas Keneally drew inspiration from actual wartime diaries, historical hospitals, and real hospital ships. How does the novel reflect the author?s diligent research? Which scenes and characters feel especially life-like?

2. Consider the differences between Naomi and Sally Durance at the beginning of the novel. Why has Naomi left home, and why has Sally stayed? What feelings does each sister seem to have for the other? What causes their relationship to strengthen?

3. Consider the impact of their mother?s death on the Durance sisters. How do they express their grief differently? Were you surprised when Naomi contradicted Sally?s version of their mother?s death at the end of the novel? Why or why

not?

4. THE DAUGHTERS OF MARS focuses on Naomi and Sally?s experiences, but it also features colorful secondary characters, including brash benefactors, stern hospital matrons, thoughtful doctors, rude orderlies, and nurses of all dispositions. Who was your favorite character of the novel, excluding Sally and Naomi, and why?

5. Revisit the nurses? first experience of battle: treating soldiers from Gallipoli on the *Archimedes*. How do Sally, Naomi, Freud, Honora, and Elsie react to the first rush of patients? Which of the nurses seems energized by their nursing duties, and which are overwhelmed?

6. Consider the traumas of battle that the Durance sisters experience, from hearing the bombings of the Dardanelles at a distance to aerial attacks in the French countryside. Which of these scenes conveys the sights, sounds, and feelings of war most effectively? Explain your answer.

7. Aboard the *Archimedes*, Ian Kiernan comments on Naomi?s last name, Durance: ?I think that?s a pretty fine name, he said. I mean, if you put an ?en? in front of it, you have one of the most flattering of words? (88). Consider the signs of endurance in Naomi. What traumas can she endure, and when does her strength falter? Why does Kiernan admire her enduring spirit?

8. Naomi tells Sally, ?Our cold hearts are what we inherited. That?s not to blame Mama and Papa? (122). Why do Naomi and Sally believe they have ?cold hearts?? When does each sister begin to realize that she has another warmer and more vulnerable side after all?

9. As Naomi takes charge of the rescue raft after the sinking of the *Archimedes*, Sally observes, ?Naomi was in the water but superior to it?. It was a grateful wonder. It was a light shining through ice? (151). Revisit Naomi?s heroism during the disastrous events in the Aegean Sea. Which of her actions, gestures, and attitudes helped the soldiers, doctors, and nurses of the raft survive?

10. Consider the challenges that the nurses face on the island of Lemnos, after the *Archimedes* sinks. Why does the hospital administration treat the shipwrecked nurses differently? Which nurses suffer the most during their stay on the island? How do Naomi and Sally react to the persecution of their companions?

11. As they are leaving Lemnos, Naomi and Sally take stock of their strengths in the war?Sally notes Naomi?s courage, while Naomi praises Sally?s ?calmness and valour? (218-219). What evidence of these characteristics has each sister displayed? What weaknesses go hand-in-hand with their strength?

12. Consider the character of Lady Tarlton, who single-handedly founds the Australian voluntary hospital in Boulogne. In what ways is she a victim of her social station? How do gossip and convention hinder her?

13. Naomi remarks that the war has acted as ?a machine to make us true sisters? (331). Consider how Naomi and Sally?s relationship evolves during the long years of the war. When do they seem closest? What keeps them apart? When can they finally be considered ?true sisters??

14. THE DAUGHTERS OF MARS has an unconventional double ending, narrating Charlie Condon?s art opening from

two perspectives: with Sally as a survivor of the flu epidemic, then with Naomi. What does this dual ending add to the novel? How do the Durance sisters remain connected, even in death?

Author Bio

Thomas Keneally began his writing career in 1964 and has published 35 novels since, most recently THE DICKENS BOY, THE BOOK OF SCIENCE AND ANTIQUITIES, CRIMES OF THE FATHER, NAPOLEON'S LAST ISLAND, SHAME AND THE CAPTIVES and the *New York Times* bestselling THE DAUGHTERS OF MARS. His novels include SCHINDLER'S LIST, which won the Booker Prize in 1982, THE CHANT OF JIMMIE BLACKSMITH, GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST and CONFEDERATES, all of which were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He has also written several works of nonfiction, including his boyhood memoir HOMEBUSH BOY, THE COMMONWEALTH OF THIEVES and SEARCHING FOR SCHINDLER. He is married with two daughters and lives in Sydney, Australia.

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