



Reading Group Notes

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Reading Group Discussion Notes for The Inconvenient Child

Author Information

Sharyn Killens' love of music and her driving ambition to become a singer-entertainer enabled her to fulfill her dream of singing on stages and luxury cruise ships around the world, under the name of Sharyn Crystal. Sharyn has also been nominated for a prestigious Australian Entertainment MO Award for her performance.

She has also worked as a publicist assistant and entertainment booking agent and manager. More recently, she has been a talent quest judge, taught stage presentation and has produced children's theatre shows.

Lindsay Lewis began her business career in a major record company before running her own businesses.

In 1992, after many years working in key Sydney advertising agencies, she moved into publicity before beginning her own successful textile design and manufacturing company with her husband where she was Designer and Creative Director. She has an Internet marketing business and has now co-written and published *The Inconvenient Child*.

Lindsay also spent many years as a professional singer and entertainer.

On Writing *The Inconvenient Child*

Sharyn and Lindsay have been close friends for more than twenty years. They met during their days as entertainers when they collaborated to help their friend, Freddie Paris. Lindsay was singing with Freddie in his shows and Freddie and Sharyn had a long standing friendship.

As friends do, over glasses of wine, Sharyn and Lindsay spent evenings talking, particularly about Sharyn's life and the fact she had just discovered her American father's name and was searching for him.

Then one night, Sharyn shared with Lindsay the full story - those parts of her life very few people knew. They laughed and cried, then the friends agreed that one day, they would like to tell Sharyn's story. Finally in January 2007, the time seemed right.

Sharyn had spent many years documenting her life and Lindsay used Sharyn's document as the outline for the story. But there was much research to do; Sharyn met with people she had known, and talked about their experiences together and Lindsay researched the places, the buildings, the fashion and the music of the times.

The two women then began the emotional journey of revisiting the places of Sharyn's miserable childhood, especially the shameful institutions of Parramatta Girls' Home and Hay Institution for Girls. Many tears were shed, particularly during the days they talked for hours as Sharyn looked deep inside the dark places she'd hidden so many experiences and emotions, then entrusted the information to Lindsay.

But there were many times of fun and laughter, including the day they re-visited Kings Cross and found the remains of the club where Sharyn had worked in the 1970s as Georgia, the exotic black stripper.

And there were the ships. Lindsay understood the entertainment industry and had sung many times on Oriana and Fairstar. But there was also Sharyn's father's ship. They wanted to find out everything they could about Thaddeus Killens, specially his early life in Fairmont, North Carolina. From the information Sharyn had gleaned from her Aunt Decie, Lindsay began extensive research, tracing the family and following the history of Thaddeus' parents, then his grandparents. The day they discovered Sharyn was the great granddaughter of an African American slave was highly emotional.

The writing journey of *The Inconvenient Child* was a wonderful experience for the two women; a journey which heightened their friendship and they believe, taught them so much more about life.

They are proud of *The Inconvenient Child* and hope it has somehow touched your life, as it certainly has, theirs.

About The Book

The story begins in 1948, in post World War II Sydney, Australia. Grace is the youngest daughter of Adele Samuels, a widow who has raised fourteen children and several grandchildren. Grace is a pretty, blonde, well-mannered young lady from the suburbs who enjoys the social life at Sydney's famous Trocadero Nightclub, dancing with the visiting American servicemen. Grace's life changes dramatically when she and her two friends discover a new nightclub established solely for the visiting 'colored' American servicemen. Here she meets two colourful West Indian women who introduce her to a handsome black American however Grace soon discovers she is pregnant after her lover has sailed away.

This is the story of what happens to this young woman and her illegitimate black daughter at a time in Australia when there was no financial support or compassion for unmarried mothers. A time when the White Australia Policy was in place and racism was prevalent within the child's family and within society.

A Selection of Questions to Get Your Group Talking

1. When Grace confides in her mother about her pregnancy, her mother says, 'Abort it. Adopt it. Drown it. Just get rid of it! That evil child is never coming into my home ... A good and decent man will come along one day and want to marry you. But that will never happen if you keep this devil child ... And besides, what will the neighbors think?'

What does this tell you about Adele Samuels? Is she right to say those things to her daughter? Consider the impact of the attitude of the times in which they lived; would a mother like Adele today give different advice? Why do you think Adele did not want this child in her home?

2. What other choices could Grace have made, considering she had no financial support and no husband? How would the racist attitudes of the time, have affected her options?

3. Why did Grace keep returning to the child if only sporadically? Why did Sharyn love this mother who abandoned her? Discuss the impact of Grace's choices on Sharyn's life and on her relationship with Grace.

4. Were Ellie and Dorrie parenting Sharyn well in their 'party house'? How does it compare with the care she received at St Martha's orphanage?

5. Why were nuns so strict? Is a pious religion good for children? Why do you think Sister Lucifer treated Sharyn so?

6. Sharyn and her stepfather Lars had a complex relationship. Was he a good role model for the troubled teenager? Why do you suppose he kept her existence a secret from his family? How do you think Lars' and Grace's attitude to Sharyn, affected her relationship with her young brother?

On page 255, during Sharyn's conversation with Lars, why do you suppose he would not look at her after she tells him of her treatment in the institutions?

7. Was the Magistrate right to commit Sharyn to yet another institution after her breach of probation? What else could the authorities have done? Do you consider she was uncontrollable and in moral danger? Discuss the Child Welfare system of the day and how today's system differs? Did the consequences of this decision fit the behavior? (Consider, for example, Sharyn's treatment in Parramatta Girls' Home and Hay Institution for Girls.)

8. With regard to Hay Institution for Girls, should the Hay townspeople have responded differently when they heard the girls screaming? What would you have done under the same circumstances?

9. Was Grace pleased to see Sharyn return home, on release from Parramatta? Why do you think Grace would not discuss Parramatta and Hay with her daughter? Discuss why Grace consistently told Sharyn to forget the past and think only of the future.

10. Do you consider Sharyn was a good mother, even when she took drugs and worked as a stripper in Kings Cross? What would the children have thought of their life surrounded by musicians, music and drugs?

11. Would Sharyn have become a singer, even without the encouragement from her work colleague? Would you have accepted the part in Let My People Come?

12. Having read the whole story, what do you think of Sharyn's appearance on Midday with Kerri Anne and The Gordon Elliott Show? Have you watched the video footage of each show?

If not, you can view them at:

www.TheInconvenientChild-Midday.com and www.TheInconvenientChild-Gordon.com

13. Consider the different personalities of Sharyn's American brother and sisters and discuss their reaction to Sharyn. What would your reaction be to a long-lost sister you had never known existed?

14. The book is ultimately about Sharyn's search for Thaddeus Killens. What did you discover about him as a person? Do you think that he knew Sharyn existed? What do you think he would have done, had he known he had a daughter? Donna and Debra have some ideas...

15. What do you imagine Thaddeus Killens' reaction would be to this book? What do you think Grace's reaction would be?

16. Sharyn Killens eventually found out who she is. What difference has this made to her life? Now that Sharyn is no longer the inconvenient child, who do you think she is?

17. Do children have the right to know their parents, regardless of who they are? In what circumstance should children not know who their mother or father is? Do parents have the right to stop a child from seeing or having knowledge of a parent? Why did Grace refuse to tell Sharyn her father's name?

18. What do you think of Sharyn's heritage as the great-granddaughter of an African-American slave? Does her story reflect the past on her mother's or her father's side in any way? How does Sharyn feel about her Aunt Decie? And her grandmother Adele Samuels? Why?

19. Now that you have read this story, has it in any way impacted on your life or attitudes?