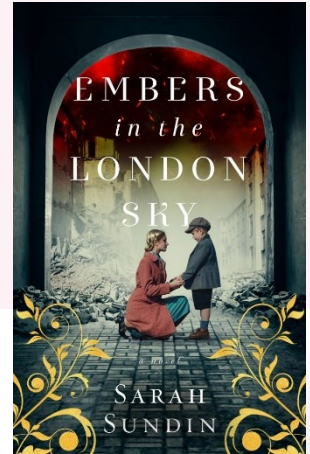




LEADER'S GUIDE

EMBERS IN THE LONDON SKY BY SARAH SUNDIN



"Who gets to decide what is worthy of news? The reporter? The editor? The paper or radio network? The government? Or the public? And if we agree it's the public, who speaks for the public?"

LOUISA JONES

THEMES

Courage

Resilience

Censorship

Propaganda

Romance

A Mothers Love

Truth

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

War (London Blitz)

Murder

Death of a Child

Domestic Violence

Prejudice

OCD

CHARACTERS

Aleida van der Zee Martens feels utterly trapped in her abusive marriage to Bas. Her three-year-old son Theo, who was born with a disability, is her world and despite the risks, she plans on fleeing with Theo to England to bravely start a new life together. Aleida is a woman of numbers, order and control, yet her best efforts at protecting her son aren't enough, and she must embark on a journey of self-discovery and surrender. Who is she without her son? What is truly in her power to control and what does she need to surrender to God? How can she ever experience peace in such a dreadful world where so little is outside of her control? While the burden of losing her son threatens to crush her, Aleida finds comfort in her work with the Health Ministry, and new friend Hugh's easy-going ways. She discovers that her total opposite personality in Hugh might be what she needs to help balance her out, so long as she can learn to trust him.

Hugh Collingwood (Collie) is a BBC correspondent who thrives from reporting live in war zones and compassionately sharing stories of the English and allied peoples. Hugh's people-pleasing and chronic asthma remain hidden beneath his easygoing, compassionate and charming personality, and while he strives to serve England in a meaningful way, he often feels like a failure and struggles to know his place in the world. When Hugh falls in love with Aleida, her confidence and trust in him builds him up and encourages him to share his private struggles which demonstrates to him that people don't just see him as

an invalid with asthma, but as a brave man who continues to be brave despite a chronic health concern. Most importantly, Hugh learns that it's only one opinion that truly matters, and that's the opinion of his God.

Theodoor (Theo) is Aleida's son. He is a beautiful, quiet, and sweet child who has been prevented from living a full life because of his father's cruel attitude towards his deformed hand.

Sebastiaan van der Zee Martins (Bas) is Aleida's deceased husband. He was a cruel and abusive man, who was ashamed of Theodore's hand deformity.

Elliot Hastings (Uncle Elliot) is Hugh's uncle and an MP. He is an outspoken, reckless, generous, compassionate, brilliant and selfish man whose rash and uncensored on-air radio report with Francois Jouveau results in the bombing of a ship and the deaths of over 400 allied civilians. This monumental mess-up results in death threats and leads to his eventual murder.

Francois Jouveau is Hugh's friend and fellow reporter and correspondent. Francois disappears during Elliot's murder investigation and is soon discovered dead himself. Being a French man, the prejudice against him hinders the police investigation and his character is slandered as some accuse him of taking information back to France.

Norman Fletcher is Hugh's editor at the BBC. He is unimpressed with Hugh's Uncle Elliot and other MPs who are trying to report "both sides" of the war efforts and fight for the rights of foreigners. While it may not come from personal prejudice against truth and people groups, he does tend to censor Hugh's work to keep his job.

Albert Ridley works for the Ministry of Information and has an intense dislike towards foreigners. He continually tries to censor BBC reporting. Ridley is aggressive and quick to throw accusations of treachery around and physically harms an elderly man. Ridley is also an unfaithful husband and has an affair with Beatrice Granville.

Beatrice Granville works for the Ministry of Health relocating children to the countryside for safety and also oversees the volunteers at the Air Raid Precautions post. While Beatrice presents herself as a fine English woman, she's incredibly prejudiced against foreigners, cares little for the mistreatment of relocated children, and takes the law into her own hands where she sees fit.

Guy Gilbert (Gil) is one of Hugh's colleagues. While Hugh does not perceive him as a rival, Gil sets himself up against Hugh and tries to damage Hugh's reputation and career. When it truly matters and all is at stake, Gil puts aside his petty jealousy of Hugh and works together with him to help put the final pieces of the murder mystery together.

Nilima Sharma is Aleida's colleague at the Health Ministry and also volunteers at the ARP. Nilima is discovered murdered after an evening of bombings, however being a foreigner, her case is not taken seriously and her mother pleads to Aleida to help solve the crime.

STORYLINE

Aleida Martins is caught up in the major exodus of France in 1940, as she flees from the Netherlands to England with her son Theo. While most are escaping the German occupation, Aleida is desperately seeking refuge from her abusive and cruel husband, Bas. Amid the chaos, she is separated from Theo and her husband's pride becomes his downfall. Aleida enters London as a widow and a mother of a missing child, but her mother's heart will not let Theo go without a fight.

Hugh Collingwood is a BBC radio correspondent bringing truth-filled and courageous stories of hope to the English and allied countries. Hugh struggles to walk the delicate line between truth and censorship, and while his heart desperately desires to do something that matters, his asthma and his parent's displeasure over his career decisions hold him back.

As Aleida and Hugh's lives collide, they begin to work together to find Theo and investigate a string of murders which, because of prejudice and censorship, are being overlooked. As bombs rain down in London, Hugh and Aleida must learn to surrender their loved ones, health, hopes and dreams to the God who holds all the chaos in His tender and intentional hands.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Aleida is a strong, brilliant, and meticulously minded woman. How do these traits serve her well when faced with her greatest hardship of losing her son? How do they affect her negatively?

TALKING POINTS

Aleida's deep love for her son, in conjunction with her thorough planning and organisation skills, see her in the best possible position she could be in to find her son:

- Aleida gets a position at the Health Ministry with access to records of relocated and missing children
- Her bravery and boldness in sharing her story helped her get connected with the BBC and MPs who have the power to help her.
- Her organisation, meticulous planning, and note-taking mean that no stone is unturned and every lead is explored without a fault.

While many of Aleida's personality traits are admirable and helpful when she finds herself in a situation where she can't control things, her counting rituals become excessive, and she compulsively and habitually rubs her hands raw, taps, and counts from anxiety and fear. These days, we would call her condition OCD. She no longer experiences comfort from a ritual of smoothing a page, counting or tapping, and instead, peace evades her.

- Aleida learns that no amount of bravery, strength or planning can control her situation; almost anything worthy of our anxiety or worry is usually outside of our control.

2

Q. Hugh lives with a crippling fear that his chronic asthma will prevent him from being accepted or doing something truly worthwhile with his life and at the beginning of the novel, he is told on the battlefield, "You don't belong here" (p 25). How does Hugh grow throughout the story?

TALKING POINTS

At the beginning of the story, Hugh is longing for his parent's acceptance and hiding his illness due to fear that others will think less of him. To make matters worse, after his Uncle's murder, Hugh is also left wondering whether journalists reporting on the war do more harm than good.

Some key moments of growth for Hugh are:

- When Aleida supports him during an asthma attack, and afterwards he boldly shares his health struggles with his BBC friends.
- When Hugh decides that he'll seek God's approval over the approval of his parents.
- When Hugh realises how important it is to tell people stories and to reject censorship in favour of truth.

3

Q. Q. Censorship is a major theme throughout the novel. Discuss the quote, "Who gets to decide what is worthy of news? The reporter? The editor? The paper or radio network? The government? Or the public?". What are the negative impacts associated with censorship? Are there any positives?

TALKING POINTS

A crucial plot point of the story is the murder of Elliot Hastings after an uncensored on-air radio report gave away information that resulted in the bombing of a ship and the deaths of hundreds of innocent people. In a heated conversation at the pub, Gil takes the stance that sensitive information might be better protected and less likely to fall into enemy hands if reporters at the BBC were censored and that reports should share truthfully and with detail the victories they win but refrain from discussing defeat so not as to cause the people to lose heart. Jouveau says, "We should hold the same standards in defeat as in victory" (p145), and believes that truthful reporting – whatever the outcome - is what's best for the good of the nation.

4

Q. Storytelling is an effective way to cultivate empathy, as well as create a new narrative around belief systems or circumstances. How do Hugh and Aleida strive to tell important stories? What prejudice do they need to overcome?

TALKING POINTS

Aleida experiences prejudice because she is a foreigner, while Hugh is ostracised in certain circumstances because of his health.

- On page 244, Hugh rejects the idea that his job is "meaningless" and embraces how important it is to shed light on the heroic acts of servicemen.
- Throughout the novel, Aleida collects information on housing conditions and treatment of children, particularly forging children – and compiles a thorough and important report to share with MPs and the Health Ministry in hopes of initiating change. Despite being mistreated and disregarded by her boss, Aleida continues her data and story collection and is given a platform to help the change along.

5

Q. "If one wishes not to live in a state of despair, one must train one's mind toward the good..." (p32). How do the characters in this story fight despair? How can we?

TALKING POINTS

At his lowest point, Hugh runs straight into a dangerous mission in an attempt to prove himself worthy and capable; "That explains why Collie took the assignment. Typical heartbroken man flinging himself into danger" (p234). While running away is not often a good coping strategy, in Hugh's case he finds contentment and peace knowing that when everything he thought he needed was stripped away, he still had God and God could still use him in powerful ways. By putting his hope and trust in God, he chose to actively fight despair.

Aleida could have become overcome with despair when she lost her son, but instead, she held onto hope and trained her mind to focus on all of the opportunities she had to find her son.

Philippians 4:8 (NIV) reminds us, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

*If anyone in your book club is experiencing despair without hope, please refer them to professional support and continue to pray for them.

6

Q. *Rechtdoorzee* is a Dutch word that means “straight through the sea”, and in the context of personality, means that a person is straightforward or outspoken. Can you think of a time when Hugh or Aleida were outspoken for the good of others?

TALKING POINTS

Hugh stands up for his belief in honest and authentic broadcasting, as well as in his relationship with Aelida. When she desperately needs to hear the truth spoken over her concerning her OCD and giving in to her fears about her son. On page 122, Hugh asks Aleida to “list her fears” and boldly speaks truth in love to her.

Aleida fights against the prejudice aimed towards foreign children, as well as advocating for children being harmed in the country relocation program. While Aleida fears speaking in front of others and presenting her report findings at the important fundraiser, she is also capable of being incredibly brave when she needs to be outspoken for the sake of others.

7

Q. “Having someone to comfort can serve as the best comfort of all” (p113). How is this true in the novel? Has this been true in your life?

TALKING POINTS

When Aleida accompanies Hugh to his Uncle Elliot's funeral, Hugh mentions that he has brought Aleida along so that his grieving mother has someone to comfort which will help her endure a hard day. Sometimes helping others, and taking our focus off ourselves and our pain, can be a healing and helpful experience.

- God is the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3)
- The Bible says that God comforts us in all our afflictions so that we might comfort others with the same comfort given us (2 Corinthians 1:4).

8

Q. Aleida struggles to trust Hugh and to trust herself. Why is this? How does she overcome her fear of betrayal and learn to trust again? What are some of the warning signs that a person is not safe?

TALKING POINTS

Aleida is a survivor of domestic abuse and the trauma from her experiences affects the way she interacts and views others, as well as herself:

- Louisa says to Aleida on page 234, “I think you’re sensitive because you’re wounded. Cruel men do that to us. They mess with our minds, then blame us for the mess. That doesn’t go away overnight.”

The National Domestic Violence Hotline lists the following as ‘red flags’ for domestic violence:

- Embarrassing or putting you down
- Looking at you or acting in ways that scare you
- Controlling who you see, where you go, or what you do
- Preventing you or discouraging you from seeing your friends or families
- Taking your money or refusing to give you money for expenses
- Preventing you from making your own decisions
- Telling you that you are a bad parent or threatening to harm or take away your children
- Preventing you from working or attending school

- Blaming you for the abuse, or acting like it's not really happening
- Destroying your property or threatening to hurt or kill your pets
- Intimidating you with guns, knives, or other weapons
- Shoving, slapping, choking, or hitting you
- Attempting to stop you from pressing charges
- Threatening to commit suicide because of something you've done
- Threatening to hurt or kill you
- Pressuring you to have sex when you don't want to or do things sexually you're not comfortable with
- Pressuring you to use drugs or alcohol
(<https://www.thehotline.org/resources/know-the-red-flags-of-abuse/> accessed on 24/04/24)

*If anyone in your book club is experiencing domestic violence or you are concerned about their safety and well-being, please seek professional support and continue to pray for them.

9

Q. On page 262, Aleida does the unthinkable task of a loving mother and surrenders her boy Theo to Mr and Mrs Martens. Discuss her journey of surrender and how God comforted her. Do you think you could have made that decision?

TALKING POINTS

After months and months of painstaking research and searching, Aleida finds her son only to be told that she has no proof of being his mother. Initially, Aleida begins to plot and follow Mr Martens, but with no success. Soon after, the OCD she experiences becomes uncontrollable and significantly detrimental to her health and having pushed those who care about her away, she finds herself alone and hopeless.

It takes her friendship with Louisa, and God's supernatural peace to help her regain herself. It's not until Aleida surrenders all control over Theo and her dreams of being his mother that she finally experiences true peace and comfort in the arms of God.

10

Q. Who did you suspect as the murderer, and what was the biggest point of tension in the story for you?

TALKING POINTS

Ridley is the prime suspect throughout the novel, but it's not until the evening of the charity banquet that all the pieces begin to come together and the true murderer – Beatrice Granville is revealed.



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