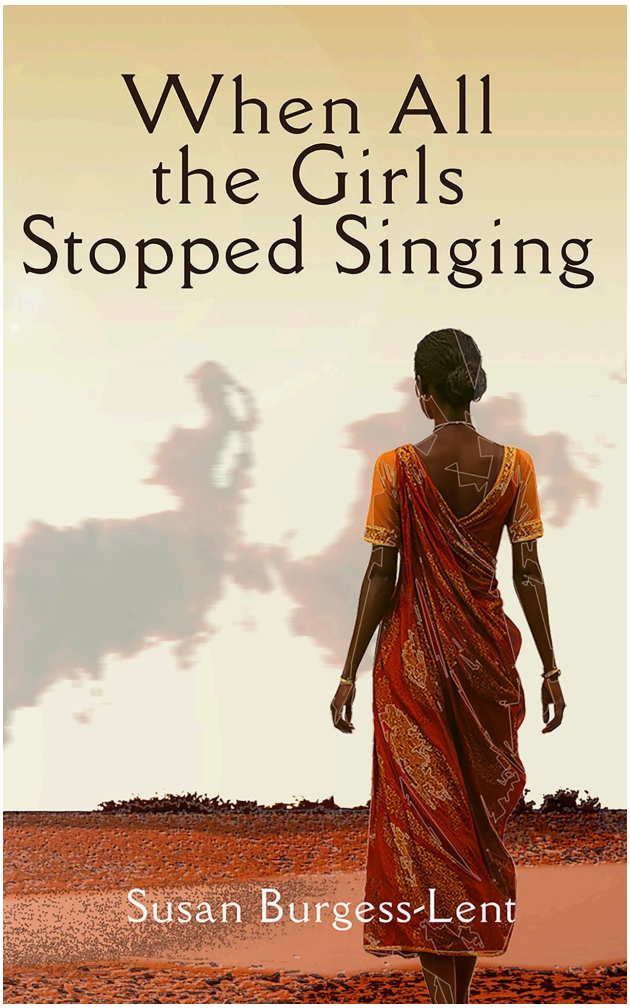
CURRENT WORDS PUBLISHING

BOOK CLUB & READING GROUP GUIDE

WHEN ALL THE GIRLS STOPPED SINGING

Susan Burgess-Lent



“Thoroughly compelling.”

— Midwest Book Review

Every family inherits stories. Some are passed down openly. Others survive in fragments, photographs, and unanswered questions.

Welcome to Readers

When All the Girls Stopped Singing begins with a death, but its central movement is toward discovery. After her mother dies, Zora Monro, a Washington, DC human rights advocate, learns that the story of her own life is incomplete. The documents left behind point toward a hidden adoption, a family history rooted in Sudan, and truths that can no longer remain distant or theoretical.

What begins as a search for personal identity expands into a confrontation with violence, displacement, loyalty, and responsibility. As Zora moves from advocacy at a distance to direct involvement in the lives of people connected to her past, the novel asks what happens when knowledge changes the obligations we believe we have toward others.

This guide is intended for book clubs, libraries, classrooms, and community reading groups. Its purpose is not to test comprehension, but to help readers explore the novel's characters, ethical questions, symbolism, and emotional consequences. Readers may move through the sections in order or select the questions most relevant to their discussion.

About the Author



Susan Burgess-Lent is a fiction writer, essayist, Emmy Award-winning editor, and veteran international aid worker. She served with the American Red Cross International Services during the Rwanda genocide and worked with a Darfuri-led organization during the first Darfur genocide. Those experiences informed the novel's emotional landscape, historical context, and ethical concerns.

She is also the founder of Women's Centers International, a nonprofit supporting women displaced by conflict and poverty. Susan lives in Oakland, California, and is available for in-person book club events in the San Francisco Bay Area and virtual visits via Zoom.

Themes for Discussion

Hidden Histories: Ella’s files, photographs, and notebooks preserve truths that were withheld in conversation. The novel asks who controls family narratives and what later generations owe to stories they inherit.

Family, Identity, and Inheritance: Zora must reconcile biological connection with the relationships that formed her. Identity emerges not as a fixed fact, but as an ongoing negotiation among memory, discovery, love, and responsibility.

Witness Versus Action: Zora begins as a sincere advocate whose work is largely intellectual and professional. Once suffering acquires names, faces, and personal ties, the separation between caring and acting becomes harder to maintain.

Women, Survival, and Resilience: Ella preserves history, Zora pursues truth, and Abuk survives circumstances meant to break her. Their strength is expressed through endurance, care, memory, and moral conviction rather than conventional power.

Singing and Silence: Song represents community, identity, joy, and cultural continuity. Silence may protect, conceal, preserve survival, or perpetuate harm. The title gathers all of those meanings into one haunting image.

Character Studies

Zora Monro

Zora begins the novel believing she understands both herself and the world around her. The discovery of her adoption destabilizes that certainty. Her journey from Washington, DC, to Sudan mirrors a deeper movement from confidence to complexity, and from professional advocacy to personal responsibility. At first, she approaches truth as something that can be located and verified. Gradually, she learns that truth also carries emotional and ethical consequences. By the end, finding the truth is no longer enough; she must decide what to do with it and whom she is willing to become.

Ella Monro

Although Ella dies near the beginning, her influence extends through every chapter. She is mother, protector, historian, and gatekeeper. The evidence she leaves behind allows Zora to uncover the truth, but Ella also controlled when that truth could be known. Her care took the form of preservation as well as concealment. Readers may admire the foresight that saved the documents while questioning the decision to deny Zora the opportunity to ask questions during Ella's lifetime. Her choices invite readers to consider whether silence can be loving and harmful at the same time.

Abuk

Abuk is the emotional center of the novel. Her experiences force Zora, and the reader, to confront the human consequences of violence, displacement, and loss. She is never merely a symbol of suffering; she has agency, fear, humor, strength, and contradiction. Trust between Abuk and Zora cannot be assumed simply because they are connected by family. It must develop across cultural differences, grief, uncertainty, and the uneven power between an adult offering care and a young person whose choices have repeatedly been taken away. Her presence transforms Zora's search for the past into a responsibility toward the future.

Luk

Luk serves as a bridge between personal history and collective memory. Through him, Zora gains access to knowledge that cannot be recovered from documents alone. His testimony complicates the idea that history is a stable record waiting to be found; it is also memory carried by people, shaped by survival, and vulnerable to disappearance. He reminds readers that historical events are not abstractions but lived realities carried by individuals long after public attention moves elsewhere.

Connections Among the Characters

The novel's central relationships are shaped by incomplete knowledge. Ella knows what Zora does not. Luk carries memories that written records cannot contain. Abuk has endured experiences Zora can neither fully understand nor repair. The story asks whether genuine family connection requires complete understanding, or whether it can begin with humility, patience, and a willingness to accept responsibility without possessing every answer.

Questions That Have No Correct Answers

1. Was Ella justified in keeping the truth from Zora for so many years?
2. Does a parent ever have the right to withhold information about a child's origins?
3. Is family defined primarily by biology, love, shared history, or responsibility?
4. Does learning the truth about her past liberate Zora, burden her, or both?
5. At what point does witnessing suffering create an obligation to act?
6. Can a person meaningfully belong to a culture or history discovered later in life?
7. Is silence more often an act of protection or an act of harm in this novel?
8. Does good intent excuse difficult choices?
9. What do we owe future generations when preserving stories about the past?
10. What responsibility do we have toward stories that were not originally our own?
11. Can care become another form of control, even when it is well intentioned?
12. Which character has the greatest freedom to choose, and which has the least?
13. Can preserving evidence compensate for withholding a conversation?
14. What must Zora learn before she can become a trustworthy caregiver?
15. Does the novel present hope as a feeling, a decision, or a form of work?

Book Club Discussion Questions

Story and Character

1. How does Zora's understanding of herself change over the course of the novel?
2. What motivates Zora most strongly: grief, curiosity, obligation, or something else?
3. How does Abuk change Zora's understanding of family?
4. Which relationship in the novel felt most complicated or most convincing?
5. What does Luk provide that documents and photographs cannot?

Family, Memory, and Identity

6. How do family secrets shape more than one generation?
7. Does discovering her origins strengthen Zora's identity or make it less certain?
8. How does the novel distinguish between inherited identity and chosen identity?
9. What forms of memory carry the greatest authority in the novel: records, testimony, photographs, or personal experience?
10. Which stories do the characters preserve, and which remain at risk of disappearing?

Responsibility, Conflict, and Moral Choice

11. How does Zora's understanding of advocacy change once the conflict becomes personal?
12. What risks, if any, are individuals obligated to accept on behalf of others?
13. How does the novel portray the limits of good intentions?
14. Where do you see the consequences of action and inaction most clearly?
15. Does the novel suggest that responsibility is chosen, inherited, imposed, or all three?

Symbolism, Place, and the Ending

16. What does singing symbolize at different points in the novel?
17. What different kinds of silence appear, and which are most damaging?
18. How does Sudan function as more than a backdrop to the plot?
19. Did the ending feel hopeful, unresolved, or both?
20. What question or image remained with you after the final page?
21. How does the novel balance suspense with social and psychological reflection?
22. Where does the story resist a simple division between rescuers and victims?
23. How do physical distance and emotional distance echo one another?
24. What does the novel suggest about the stories outsiders tell about conflict?
25. Which unresolved element of the ending felt most important?

Possible Discussion Pathways

For a character-centered group: Begin with Zora's transformation, then compare Ella's protective silence with Abuk's need for agency. End by asking what each woman understands about family that the others do not.

For a socially engaged group: Focus on the movement from witnessing to action, the limits of humanitarian intention, and the difference between helping people and assuming authority over their choices.

For a craft-centered group: Consider the alternating perspectives, the use of documents and testimony, the suspense structure, and the way recurring images of song and silence deepen the novel's themes.

For a personal-reflection group: Invite readers to think about inherited family stories, unanswered questions, and the responsibilities that arise when a long-hidden truth is finally revealed.

Suggested closing question: What responsibility, if any, do we have toward stories that are not originally our own?

Behind the Book

Susan Burgess-Lent's humanitarian work profoundly influenced When All the Girls Stopped Singing. Her experiences in Rwanda and Sudan exposed her to stories of displacement, survival, courage, and loss that rarely enter public conversation. Rather than reproduce particular events, she drew on the emotional truths of that work to create fictional characters whose lives are shaped by conflict and by the difficult choices that follow.

The novel is also concerned with what happens after the moment of crisis. How do people rebuild? How do families survive separation? How are histories preserved when communities are disrupted? How do individuals continue to care when meaningful change seems slow or impossible? These questions shape the book from beginning to end.

Place matters deeply in the story. Sudan is not a passive setting but a force that shapes movement, risk, relationship, and possibility. The novel holds beauty and hardship together, allowing moments of connection, generosity, and hope to exist beside danger and uncertainty.

Critical Reception

Possible Discussion Pathways

For a character-centered group: Begin with Zora's transformation, then compare Ella's protective silence with Abuk's need for agency. End by asking what each woman understands about family that the others do not.

For a socially engaged group: Focus on the movement from witnessing to action, the limits of humanitarian intention, and the difference between helping people and assuming authority over their choices.

For a craft-centered group: Consider the alternating perspectives, the use of documents and testimony, the suspense structure, and the way recurring images of song and silence deepen the novel's themes.

For a personal-reflection group: Invite readers to think about inherited family stories, unanswered questions, and the responsibilities that arise when a long-hidden truth is finally revealed.

Midwest Book Review called the novel "thoroughly compelling" and observed that calling it only a thriller or suspense story would do it an injustice. The review describes the book as "a social and psychological commentary on surviving violence, change, and trauma."

Questions for an Author Visit

- What first image, scene, or idea led to this novel?
- How did your humanitarian work influence the characters and setting?
- How did you balance lived experience, research, and imagination?
- Which character surprised you most during the writing process?
- Why was the tension between silence and disclosure important to explore?
- What conversation do you most hope readers continue after finishing the book?

For Discussion Leaders

A 60- to 90-minute meeting works well. Begin with first impressions, then move toward character and family questions before turning to the novel's humanitarian themes. Invite readers to support observations with specific passages, but allow room for differing interpretations. The book's richest questions are not designed to produce consensus.

Invite Susan to Your Group

Susan Burgess-Lent is available for in-person conversations with book clubs, libraries, universities, and community organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and for virtual visits via Zoom. To inquire about an author visit, contact Current Words Publishing through currentwords.com or visit susanburgesslent.com.

Continue the Conversation

Readers may wish to explore Sudan and South Sudan, displacement and refugee resettlement, women's experiences during armed conflict, humanitarian aid, oral history, and cultural memory. If the book moved you, an honest review on Amazon, Goodreads, StoryGraph, or your preferred bookselling platform can help other readers discover it.