

Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009  
Longlist

***One Foot Wrong***  
**Sophie Laguna**  
Allen & Unwin

Reading Group Notes

**About the book**

A child is imprisoned in a house by her reclusive religious parents. Hester has never seen the outside world; her companions are Cat, Spoon, Door, Handle, Broom, and they all speak to her. Her imagination is informed by one book, an illustrated child's bible, and its imagery forms the sole basis for her capacity to make poetic connection.

One day Hester takes a brave Alice in Wonderland trip into the forbidden outside (at the behest of Handle - 'turn me turn me'), and this overwhelming encounter with light and sky and sunshine is a marvel to her. From this moment on, Hester learns the concept of the secret, and not telling, and the world becomes something that fills her with feeling as if she is a vessel, empty and bottomless for need of it.

The story told by Hester in *One Foot Wrong* is often dark and terrible, but the sheer blazing brilliance of her language and the imagery that illuminates the pages make this novel an exhilarating, enlightening and joyous act of faith. The stars shine brightest out of the deepest dark.

**Sofie Laguna on writing *One Foot Wrong***

I wrote *One Foot Wrong* over a period of seven years. In early drafts I interwove the voices of other characters around Hester's – I didn't trust that Hester's voice alone could carry the story. That possibility felt too 'easy', too simple. I now know that it wasn't because it was too easy, it was because writing the whole story in Hester's voice was the natural and right way for the book to work, and at that point I didn't trust it. The good thing about writing those other drafts was that I met some characters along the way that I love and I am sure they will eventually find their way into books of their own.

The character of Hester Wakefield spoke and thought in a way that was utterly her own. Her voice gave me freedom. I didn't stop to consider the requirements of 'perfect sentences', I just inhabited the voice and the sentences took care of themselves. Maybe it was the actor in me. The process felt like it bypassed my own intellect – I just had to relax and let Hester push the pen across the page. Having said this I did find I could only work on the book for short periods. Very short. Sometimes fifteen minutes in a day felt like a lot. Generally I have pretty good stamina for sitting at the desk and writing, so it was different for me. Perhaps it was the distressing nature of the content in *One Foot*

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*Wrong*. Even though I was never blocked while writing the story, I had this feeling after a short time of working that I had to get away from the desk and clean the house at all costs. I remember wriggling in my chair a lot and feeling guilty for not being able to stick at it longer, but somehow, in fifteen minutes spurts (sometimes many in a day), the book got written.

While making this book I didn't think about it being published too much. All of my energy went into making the right music with the words. It was a challenge to imagine that writing something so uncompromising, so uniquely mine could actually be allowed. Not all of my ideas ask to be completed but this one never let go. I had some negative criticism about it along the way but, in the end, it didn't stop me. That's because I wanted to write in Hester's voice – it always felt like an act of rebellion and release. I had the desire. And now the book is here, published. It feels miraculous – wonderful beyond my wildest dreams.

For many years I worked as an actor. I was certain that acting was my path, no matter how much pain it caused me, so it is an ongoing surprise to me that I write books and that writing turned out to be what was best for me. An ongoing and very delightful surprise, I should say. Writing has put me where I belong – with the people who make books and the people who read them. I am really happy about it.

### **Suggested Discussion Points for *One Foot Wrong***

- How do you think the style of narration affects the overall impact of the work?
- Do you think that Laguna accurately captures the voice of a child?
- What effect do the names Boot and Sack have on your interpretation of them as characters?
- What do you think Hester's outburst at school says about her state of mind?
- Discuss the portrayal of adults, from Teacher to Nurse Clegg to Norma K
- Do you admire or are you repelled by Hester's actions?
- Did you find this book ultimately uplifting or depressing? Do you find this an optimistic or pessimistic view on human-nature?
- Do you think there is future for Hester?
- Discuss the proverb which concludes the book, what do you think it signifies?

### **Suggested Reading**

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* Ken Kesey  
*Tender Morsels* Margo Lanagan  
*We Need to Talk About Kevin* Lionel Schriver