

Falling Night by Phil Clarke

Question & Answer sheet



1. **Why did I write the novel?** — The plot of *Falling Night* came to me after being an aid worker in Zaire / DR Congo during the 1996-1997 war, when I realised I had a unique story to tell from having lived through a hidden genocide that my colleagues were unwilling to acknowledge. Writing the novel was equally a tool for me to deal with the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that was brought about by personal exposure to suffering and war.

I also wrote the novel to share experiences and insights from some of Africa's other war zones, and to relate various observations on Africa's lesser-known wildlife that I had gained during many years' work as a tropical forest biologist.

2. **What is the novel is about?** — *Falling Night* follows unlikely protagonist Alan Swales' efforts as an aid worker to survive the dangers and horrors of an anarchic civil war in Africa, in which he encounters warlords, child-soldiers, and a brutal military dictatorship that is secretly exterminating its opponents. As the situation deteriorates, Alan must wrestle with the ethical dilemmas on whether and how to respond, while trying to cope with his deteriorating personal relationships. Readers thus join him on his dangerous and lonely quest to discover what an ordinary, apparently powerless, human should do in response to genocidal evil.

Decisions are a key theme in the novel — to act or be passive in the face of evil, whether or not to take risks, and the choice to be honest with oneself and recognise one's own faults and wrongs.

3. **What makes the novel unique?** — *Falling Night* is one of the first full-length novels about aid work in Africa that is written by a former humanitarian, and one of the very few ever written about aid work.

It is surprising so few aid work novels exist, given that this context provides an excellent platform for drama, with a situation that is similar to soap operas where a diverse group of people live and work together. As foreigners in a hostile environment, aid workers become family to each other with the usual jealousies, intrigues, and romances. Added to that are the regular set 'scenes' of aid work that provide a good foundation for theatre, such as the dinner table banter between the expatriate team, an individual aid worker's private conversations with local drivers in their vehicles, and the confrontations at check points when the aid workers encounter the 'baddies'.

4. **How long did it take to write and publish the novel?** — *Falling Night* took twenty-five years to produce from start to finish, although most of the text was written during four intensive years from 2014-2018. In all, I estimate the whole process took about

7,000 hours of work. That may seem excessive, but it was important for me to give readers a high quality and realistic experience, with attention to relevant details such as the unique emotions that arise when you are an aid worker — what is it like to meet child soldiers? To hold a starving child in your arms? To feast in the midst of a famine? To sense genocide is happening that everybody, including your colleagues, are denying?

5. **How did the novel get published?** — The novel was finished in October 2018 after receiving comments from 12 beta readers. I then wrote to 23 book agents and publishers, but there was little response, so I realised there was a problem with the manuscript. I therefore paid a professional editor to go through the text in January 2020; she removed 11% of the content, and corrected a recurring style error. I then wrote to six UK publishers; two asked me to contact them again after half a year. The most positive response felt wrong when the publishing house was taken over by a larger company. So the only real option was Ambassador International that had started in Belfast but later moved to South Carolina, USA. It therefore felt like choice of publisher was made for me, and we signed a contract in August 2021; after further editing, cover design etc., the novel was finally published in June 2023.
6. **What was the most difficult thing about writing the novel?** — Describing scenes, situations, and even emotions that most readers will never have encountered. Many novels draw on people's own experiences to fill the gaps in the writing, thus allowing people to reflect or fantasise based on their own lives, but in *Falling Night* I am describing a whole new environment to most readers. The novel is not a cosy and predictable fairy tale; but is set in a dystopia full of twists, surprises, and gritty reality.
7. **Which authors have influenced my writing?** — Graham Greene for his easy writing style, interesting characters, and exotic locations, plus his skill in weaving Christian existentialist themes into his novels, e.g. in *The Heart of the Matter* and *A Burnt-out Case* that is set in the Congo. Joseph Conrad for his ability to write *Heart of Darkness*, also set in the Congo, based on his traumatic experience there. And William Boyd for his storytelling craft that brings Africa to life in *A Good Man in Africa*, *An Ice Cream War*, and especially in *Brazzaville Beach* for combining a wildlife theme with war.
8. **Is Kugombwala a pseudonym for a real country?** — No. It mixes Somalia, Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. But the vegetation is mostly rainforest, with more open agricultural land in the highlands. The capital city, Ndombazu, is on the coast.
9. **How much of *Falling Night* is based on reality?** — The main plot is broadly my own story of the first two wars I worked in, but at least 30% of the details and subplots are from colleagues. Hardly any of the story is made up, as I don't have a good imagination.
10. **Is Alan Swales me?** — No, he is more selfish and nasty. But there are other similarities...

For more information, go to <https://fallingnight.clarke.dk>