



SOLARIS GENTILL

INTRODUCTION BY
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**RHYS
BOWEN**

FIRST IN SERIES

A Rowland Sinclair Mystery

A HOUSE DIVIDED

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Consider how the Great Depression affected different communities. Who suffered? Did anyone benefit?
2. Who are the “few right-thinking men”?
3. Do you think Rowland truly loves Edna, or is he only attracted to her because she won’t have him? Is she simply the first thing he’s ever been denied, or is there more to it?
4. Discuss Rowland’s friends—which did you like best?
5. Who is the hero of this story? Is it Rowland?
6. If Rowland declared his feelings for Edna, would there be any consequences? Discuss them.
7. What do you think of Herbert Poynton? Is he a traitor or a whistle-blower?
8. Is Rowland’s disinterest in politics a result of his wealth? What did you make of it?

9. Do you see any parallels between the politics of this story with today's?
10. How do you think Edna feels about Rowland? Is she denying her feelings, or does she not love him? Why do you think so?
11. This story is full of twists and turns—was there a moment that surprised you the most? Why?
12. Which way do you think Rowland would vote?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

This is the first book in the series. What inspired you to create Rowland Sinclair?

I'd decided to look at the events of the 1930s through the form of a mystery novel to consider the rising political tensions of the era not only in terms of what happened then, but also in terms of what we are repeating now. In order to do that, I needed the story to be told through the eyes of a protagonist who was of his or her time but who was also progressive enough to be relatable to, and trusted by, the contemporary reader. I wanted him to move freely in all strata of society but also to be a bit removed from that society, to be able to observe it with the objectivity of an outsider. But I was tired of the trope of the bitter, brooding detective who worked alone and spent his evenings with whisky and regret. I wanted to write about a different kind of man. One with a sense of humour and an eye for the absurd as well as a sense of justice.

So from these requirements and preferences emerged Rowland Sinclair, the Oxford-educated youngest son of a wealthy, landed family, born to the conservative establishment but who is drawn to the egalitarian, Bohemian sets of Sydney;

who is initially disinterested in politics until Fascist violence begins to impact directly on his life and those he loves. As an artist, Rowland is an excellent observer, he sees the world as compositions—foreground, background, focus, and perspective. He regards people not in terms of whether they are conventionally attractive, but by how interesting they would be to paint, where they fit into the picture. I surrounded him with louche but fiercely loyal friends because I didn't want to write a superhero, but a man who was both flawed and idealistic, who could by virtue of his wealth be oblivious but was never indifferent, and who needed and valued his friends. I wanted to write a man I could challenge with the moral dilemmas of the time... in addition to a few murders.

***A House Divided* explores some politically complex issues, namely people pushed to extreme action by desperate circumstances. What was it like writing this kind of conflict? Did you find yourself picking a side?**

I've always been interested in what makes people act or fail to act. Why does one person fall into step while another stands their ground? What makes one person turn their face away while another cries, "Look here! This is wrong."

There's always a story behind every choice. When personal lives are woven into larger social movements and conflicts, then the stories behind each choice become more complex and the choosing is more often emotional than rational. Even complicated political issues involving vast societal upheaval are comprised of thousands of individual choices motivated by human emotions we all understand—love, hate, fear, hurt, grief, loyalty—on both sides. Indeed political leaders have long risen and fallen on their ability to harness the emotions of their people.

I suppose that by interweaving the personal stories of Rowland and his compatriots into broader arcs of conflict, I try

to understand those social and political movements through the eyes of a flawed but decent man who is beholden to nothing but his own moral code.

I'm not sure I've *picked* a side—that implies too rational, intellectual, and cool a choice, and mine is as much about what I know in my heart is right, as what I know in my soul is wrong. And yes, I do find myself on a side. To be fair, however, I have the benefit of hindsight. I know where the political turmoil of the 1930s led; I know how it all turned out. Rationally or emotionally, it's hard to not take a side.

You've written a number of mysteries, but when you're reading for pleasure, do you find yourself gravitating towards other genres?

I read fairly eclectically. Biographies, historical novels, speculative fiction, a lot of non-fiction, and of course, mystery. What I most want from a book is to fall in love with characters, to care about them, to think about them after I've closed the book, and to have my outlook influenced by theirs. I'm not particularly fussy about whether those characters are trying to solve murders, save aristocrats from the guillotine, fight dragons, or simply survive in the modern world.

Australian history is not a common topic in fiction. Why did you choose Sydney in 1931 as your setting?

Writing is often conducted in glorious isolation. I spend a great deal of time in my own head, and whilst that's fine for me, it can be difficult for my husband, who has to fight the people I've made up for my attention. A great part of the challenge in being a writer is making your imaginary world work with the real world in which you actually live. I knew I was never going to stop writing, but I had no plans of getting rid of Michael (my

husband) either. I had to find some way to include that poor man—who, to be fair, had married a lawyer and then found himself, financially and otherwise, tied to someone who refused to do much else but write—in my magnificent obsession. And so I looked for an idea, a story to which my husband could relate, a way to bring him into my head so I wouldn't have to come out as often.

Michael's an historian, and his particular area of expertise is the extreme political movements of Australia in the 1930s, and so, conveniently, it is this context in which the Rowland Sinclair Mysteries are set. By basing my work in this period, I rather cleverly ensured that I would always have an historical expert to check my work—Michael cares far too much about the genuine history of the time to let me play with it unsupervised! Of course, once I started digging into the 1930s, I became fascinated with the era in my own right, intrigued and not a little terrified by parallels to contemporary tensions and divisions.

This book has a diverse, quirky set of characters—which one was your favorite to write?

Milton is huge fun to write. I love his passion, his streetwise humour, his unrepentant sense of style. I'm often laughing to myself as I write him. Even so, I think my favourite character to write might be Wilfred Sinclair. He's so different to Rowland, so stern and contained that when he and Rowland do have a rare moment of fraternal connection, it glows on the page, and I'm just observing two brothers struggling to find common ground.

What does your writing process look like?

I'm not sure you could call it a process. I am what Australians call a "pantser," in that I write by the seat of my pants with no plot of any sort. I begin with a situation, throw Rowland Sinclair into

it, and see what happens. I rarely have any idea of who exactly will die, let alone who did it. I do have a vague idea of the major historical events of that particular year, but I tend to research as I go rather than before I start.

So I suppose my process *looks* like a woman in pyjamas sitting in bed, writing directly into a laptop while the television blares in the background. As I said I'm not sure you could call it a process, but it does seem to work. To me, it feels very much like I simply follow Rowland around the 1930s, watching, eavesdropping, and writing down what I see and overhear.

Historical mystery is one of the most iconic and popular genres for readers—what do you hope you bring to the genre?

I try to write stories that are exciting and gripping, and characters that live in the reader's mind and heart, but it's also important to me that my books are about something more than the murder at their centre. Increasingly, I am alarmed by the similarities I see between the events of the 1930s and those of today. It seems the world is intent on repeating history. I hope that my readers will see that as much as I am setting my books in the past, I am writing about now. I hope my work will, through the 1930s, bring a little insight into this decade, that it will remind people that we have been here before and it didn't end well.