

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE 7½ DEATHS OF EVELYN HARDCASTLE
STUART TURTON

"COMPULSIVELY READABLE."
—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW



THE
DEVIL
AND THE
DARK
WATER

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Governor General Jan Haan refuses to heed the leper's warning, and later, he refuses to return to Batavia. Do you think his actions are the result of disbelief or pride?
2. Most of the characterization of Samuel Pippis comes from Arent's memories and opinions of him. How would the story be different if Sammy's perspective was in play more often? Do you think your opinion of him would change?
3. Who has power throughout the book? Does all power look the same?
4. What is the source of Arent's loyalty to Sammy? Is it solely because of the work they've done together? What else might be at play?
5. Sammy's advice is to "hold on to what you know until you know what it means." How does this shape Arent's investigation? Could it have benefited him to be more candid, or would that have increased the danger?
6. How do superstition and fear shape the action of the story? Does a superstition have power even if it isn't "true"?

7. What did you think of Captain Crauwels's change of allegiance? What was his real motivation?

8. If you were in Sara's position at the end of the book, what would you decide?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was the starting point for this book?

Back in 2003, I was in Australia by accident. This used to happen to me more than I'd like to admit. I'd missed my connecting flight into Singapore and was stuck in Perth, working out whether to stay in Australia for a bit or carry on to Asia as I'd planned. The west coast of Australia has this amazing history of shipwrecks, and it seemed daft not to visit the maritime museum while I was there. Inside, I came across wreckage from a ship called the *Batavia*. It was a merchant vessel that was wrecked on a tiny coral island in the 1600s. One of the officers took control of the survivors and committed a litany of atrocities, before everybody was rescued. It's a horrific story, but within it are all these other amazing stories. One of the soldiers on board led this heroic resistance. The captain navigated a rescue boat across thousands of leagues of unmapped ocean to bring back help. The story stuck with me, and when I started thinking about what I'd write after *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, I realized it had to be this, but it couldn't only be this. Other folks have done that already. I wanted the shipwreck, certainly. The heroism, definitely. I also wanted a big mystery. I wanted a prickly Sherlock Holmes figure and a Watson who wasn't just asking daft questions. I wanted the occult, and superstition, because they were such parts of the period. I wanted dread and

adventure and the sense of being swept along on an epic journey. Like *7½ Deaths*, I wanted a lot. And like *7½ Deaths*, I drove myself a little mad delivering it.

When you write, do you begin with the truth and build secrets and puzzles around it or start with the mystery and carve your way inward?

I start with the dead, usually. Once I know who's dying, I can figure out who wants them dead. That's a powerful thing, and the motivation has to make sense. Once I have my motivation, I build a character from it, then the surrounding characters. Because this is a mystery novel, everybody has to have a secret, so I try to work out how those secrets have created the characters I'm writing, and how that affects their actions in the novel. Through that, I begin to tie all the plots together, laying a trail my protagonists can follow to the truth, with plenty of red herrings along the way. I then write a bad book out of it, throw it away, write a slightly less bad one, throw it away, and keep doing that until I have something I like. I hope other people like it, as well.

The setting of this book is quite the departure from *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*. How did you reorient yourself?

I was a journalist for years, so putting down a piece of work, then starting something entirely new is second nature to me. This just felt like being given a new assignment, only it took years rather than weeks to complete it. I also ceremonially burned every piece of research I did for *7½ Deaths* in a huge fire when the book was published, which was strangely liberating. And slightly dangerous.

Your books present very complicated puzzles. Do you work on puzzles in your free time? What kind?

Oh god no! I spend so much of my life hunched over a keyboard that when I get a free minute, I immediately hurl myself at the

nearest field, forest, river, or random bit of countryside. The only puzzle I'm trying to figure out is what my two-year-old means when she points at the sky and says, "We way."

Which character(s) do you admire most? Why?

Sara, isn't it? Has to be. She's brilliant. When I first started writing this book, it was Arent and Sammy's story, then Sara started shouting at me. She was the character who got most into my head, and who I became the most interested in. I love how she's held on to the core of herself despite this entire society telling her she should be something else. I love her bravery and her dry wit. I love the way she ends up leading this investigation. I love her relationship to Lia and Creesjie and how her feelings develop toward Arent. Basically, she's great.

Does Old Tom have any basis in real-world mythology? Where did his story come from?

He's based on a demon called Astaroth, who tempts the lazy and doubtful with pseudoscience, effectively. I read many reports of possession and witchfinding. With a modern eye, it's impossible to believe that anybody believed this stuff, so I ended up researching superstition instead and how we collectively begin to believe untruths. Given what's happening with our politics these days, that was an eerie path to follow. Truthfully, I always saw the Company as the real big bad of the novel. It cares only about profit, tempts people to do terrible things for it, and destroys those who serve it.

Fear is a big motivator throughout the book. What are you afraid of?

Not doing this for a living. Telling stories is what I've wanted to do since I was little. In my forty years, I've done every other job under the sun, always hoping they'd deliver me here eventually.

Now that I'm doing my dream job, I can enjoy the daily terror of trying not to screw it up.

It seems like most, if not all, of the passengers and crew on the *Saardam* fall prey to their own greed in some way. Do you think people are inherently selfish or corrupt?

I'm a bit worried that between this book and *7½ Deaths* people will start thinking I've got a dim view of the human race. I'm actually more positive about people than my books suggest, but I think our worst characteristics tend to show themselves when it's not easy to be kind, or civil. As my books always make life as difficult as possible for my characters, we tend to see them at their very worst. The flip side of this is that we get to see great courage, kindness, empathy, and intelligence from the heroes. That's a really nice thing to write.