

READING GROUP GUIDE

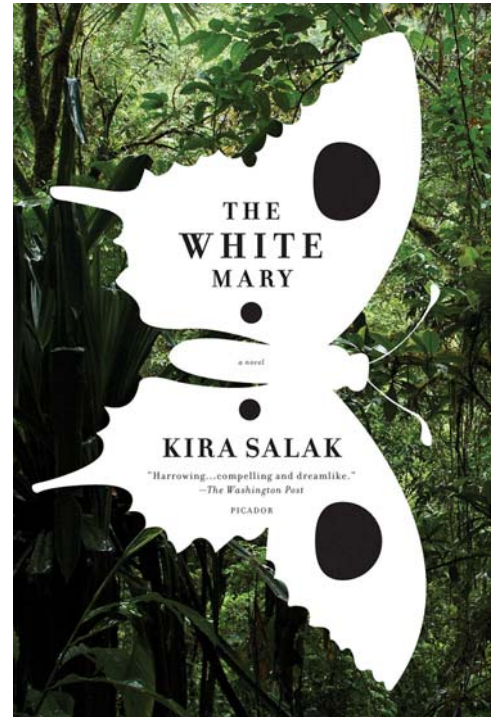
The White Mary

A Novel

by Kira Salak

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The White Mary* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The White Mary*.

About the Book

Marika Vecera, an accomplished war reporter, has dedicated her life to helping the world's oppressed and forgotten. When not on one of her dangerous assignments, she lives in Boston, exploring a new relationship with Seb, a psychologist who offers her glimpses of a better world.

Returning from a harrowing assignment in the Congo where she was kidnapped by rebel soldiers, Marika learns that a man she has always admired from afar, Pulitzer-winning war correspondent Robert Lewis, has committed suicide. Stunned, she abandons her magazine work to write Lewis's biography, settling down with Seb as their intimacy grows. But when Marika

finds a curious letter from a missionary claiming to have seen Lewis in the remote jungle of Papua New Guinea, she has to wonder, *What if Lewis isn't dead?*

Marika soon leaves Seb to embark on her ultimate journey in one of the world's most exotic and unknown lands. Through her eyes we experience the harsh realities of jungle travel, embrace the mythology of native tribes, and receive the special wisdom of Tobo, a witch doctor and sage, as we follow her extraordinary quest to learn the truth about Lewis—and about herself, along the way.

About the Author

Kira Salak has won the PEN award for journalism and appeared five times in *Best American Travel Writing*. She is a contributing editor for *National Geographic Adventure* magazine and was the first woman to traverse Papua New Guinea; her nonfiction account of that trip, *Four Corners*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2001. Her fiction has appeared in *Best New American Voices* and other publications.

Discussion Questions

1. At many points in the novel Marika doubts that Robert Lewis is still alive, yet she presses on with her journey into the jungle. What do you think motivates her to risk her life in Papua New Guinea?
2. How do the novel's main characters differ in their attitude about suffering and its effect on our lives? How do the events in the story change their perspectives on suffering?
3. Is it irresponsible or selfish of Marika to live the way she does, to consistently put herself in mortal danger?
4. How does Tobo's way of seeing the world differ from that of the white people in the novel? Do you think he sees the world more or less clearly than they do?
5. What does Marika mean when she tells Seb, on page 102, "Nowhere's safe...Nowhere in the world."?
6. Does Marika believe in spirits and magic by the end of the novel? Do you think the author meant to suggest that they do exist in the world of the novel, or that they are merely a superstition?
7. Why is Marika unable to see Seb when she returns from Congo?
8. What is the significance of the book's epigraph?

9. What happens to Marika in the cave? How does she change while hiding out there from the villagers with Lewis? What is the “lightness” she feels there, “as if she lost a weighty part of her” (p. 323)?

10. What role does sex play in the novel? How do Marika’s motives and her experience differ in her experiences with Seb, Sanders, and Lewis?

11. Look at Lewis’s lecture to Marika about the difference between the people in Walwasi and those in America (p. 328.) Do you think there’s any truth to what he’s saying? Are there lessons to be drawn from the way of life in places like Walwasi that can be applied to life in the developed world?

12. In the end, Is Marika better off for having traveled to Papua New Guinea?

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