

All Good Things From Paris to Tahiti: Life and Longing

by Sarah Turnbull



About the Book

Sarah Turnbull was about to depart on the adventure of a lifetime. Again.

A decade prior, Australian native Sarah Turnbull had found a new life (and love) in Paris, a story chronicled in her bestselling memoir *ALMOST FRENCH*. So when her husband, Frédéric, is offered a position in tropical Tahiti, she is initially hesitant to leave her new Parisian life. But as the idea of life on a tropical island begins to fill her thoughts, she finds herself longing for her next big adventure.

When Sarah arrives on her new island home, she is a bit overwhelmed: "I was excited, definitely. But also awed and intimidated" (34). Her island life slowly begins to take shape, filled with swims in a teeming lagoon, visits with her new neighbors, trips out to explore the island and dives to explore the surrounding life-filled waters, and work on the novel she brought with her from France. Despite "visits" from petty burglars and a car crash and a confrontation that leaves her "unsettled," (104), Sarah settles in.

However, the lush island does not help Sarah produce a novel --- her stalled progress on which begins to mirror her troubles conceiving a child. In Paris, Sarah and Frédéric had tried IVF six times "all the way to the end," and "countless" times the process was started and then stopped when Sarah's body didn't respond to the hormones (108). Sarah had hoped that fertile Tahiti would help her ability to create: "Book and baby: I'd never dared speak them so boldly but my aims for the next two years were clear in my mind before we moved" (54).

It is Sarah's usually-reserved French therapist who is the catalyst for Sarah and Frédéric attempting IVF one last time: "It's not a crime to hope, you know?" (165). Inspired, Sarah and Frédéric travel to Australia to give IVF one last try. Even though the procedure seems unlikely to work, Sarah finally hears the words she had been waiting six years to hear: "You're pregnant?" (202).

Sarah and Frédéric return to Tahiti for the duration of Sarah's "grossesse précieuse" and to welcome their son. Not everything goes smoothly --- Sarah's early labor forces an emergency Caesarean section, Sarah's mother comes to help care for her newborn son but falls ill, and an accident leaves baby Oliver and Sarah with painful memories of Tahiti. When Frédéric's career changes have the family on the move again (296), Sarah realizes paradise may be exactly where she is.

Engrossing, candid and ultimately hopeful, *ALL GOOD THINGS* is the story of diving in to life --- and finding your own personal paradise.

Discussion Guide

1. Have you ever lived or vacationed abroad? How did your expectations compare with your experience?
2. While packing for Tahiti, Sarah and Frédéric go back and forth over what to bring, and their disagreements about "what to take and what to leave highlighted fundamental personality differences?" (25). If you were leaving on a trip like Sarah's, what would you insist on bringing with you?
3. At a dinner with fellow French émigrés, Sarah stirs up strong feelings among the guests about Paul Gauguin and Tahitian politics: "Unwittingly, I'd been provocative?" or perhaps not so unwittingly? (71). Why do you think Sarah was being purposefully provocative? Have you ever felt a similar desire to incite heated debate?
4. Sarah's day planner reveals the most consistent element of her day-to-day on the island: "Although it was regularly modified, the first line never changed: 7am SWIM?" (56). Why is Sarah's swim so important to her? Is there a part of your day that's equally important to you?
5. "Petty theft was an endemic across the islands, the intrusions so common that even the gendarme politely referred to them as *visites*?" (93). How would you have reacted to these "visits"? More like Sarah's subdued reaction when her bikini bottoms are taken, or more like her baseball bat-wielding reaction when she's home alone with Oliver (259)?
6. Sarah learns that the Tahitian word *fiu* means "fed up/ tried/ flat/ over it/ over everything?" (130). Have you experienced *fiu*? Do you agree with Nelly that it is an excuse to miss work, or otherwise shirk responsibilities?
7. Sarah remarks on the many ways Tahitian culture differs from French culture, from laid-back dinners to extended families remaining close together. What differences did you notice between Tahitian culture and American culture? Do you think you could live in Tahiti long-term?

8. "It was time to turn our backs on science and put our faith in Mother Nature" (111), says Sarah, when she and Frédéric decide to rely on Tahiti's natural fertility to become pregnant. Although it is in Sydney, not Tahiti, where Oliver is conceived. Do you think science has become more powerful than nature?

9. When parenthood seems impossible, Sarah and Frédéric sit down to list possible new hobbies to help fill the void (148). Do you think Sarah and Frédéric would have found contentment in hobbies or travel? When a goal seems unattainable, have you ever tried to refocus your attention like this?

10. "My dream of having a baby had come true but that other great goal, my "novel," amounted to a meager collection of scenes and characters that stubbornly refused to connect" (288). Is it possible for a person to actively pursue two different goals at once, or will one always fade into the background? Can someone "have it all"?

11. Frédéric's colorblindness (51) prevented him from seeing the colorful island as Sarah did, though his determination to care for an injured heron (139) shows that he shares Sarah's desire for children. How do you think Frédéric's experience differed from Sarah's? How was it the same? How would this memoir be different if it was written from his point of view?

12. Do you see Sarah's move back to Australia as a homecoming, or her next step forward? How might Sarah define "home"? Has your definition of what a home is changed after reading Sarah's story?

A Brief History of Tahiti

(Information from LONELY PLANET: TAHITI and the Polynesian Cultural Center)

Located halfway between South America and Australia, Tahiti is the largest of the 118 islands that comprise French Polynesia.

c. 150 BCE? Present-day French Polynesia populated through a migration from southeast Asia.

1521? Magellan's circumnavigation leads him past Tahiti.

1767? Captain Samuel Wallis and his crew, the first known Europeans to arrive on the island, claim Tahiti for Britain.

1768? Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and his crew arrive on Tahiti and claim the island for France. They bring back to France tales of uninhibited, exotic women.

1789? The *HMS Bounty* departs from Tahiti towards the Caribbean. The slaves onboard mutiny, and some return and settle in Tahiti.

1797? British missionaries establish (and heavily influence the governing decisions of) the Pomare dynasty.

1827? Queen Pomare IV ascends the throne.

1842? Rear Admiral Dupetit-Thouars overthrows Queen Pomare IV, takes control of Tahiti and Moorea for the French, and expels the British missionaries. Queen Pomare remains monarch, though is mostly a figurehead.

1880? King Pomare V abdicates, and the French government takes full control of the region.

1891? Paul Gauguin arrives in Papeete.

1946? Tahitians and all residents of French Polynesia are granted French citizenship.

1959? Tahiti's first international airport is constructed.

1966? The French government begins nuclear testing around the islands of Moruroa and Fangataufa.

1977? French Polynesia gain self-governing status.

1996? The French government stops all nuclear testing around French Polynesia.

2004? Oscar Temaru's pro-independence party wins a majority of seats in the Assembly of French Polynesia.

Author Bio

Sarah Turnbull is the author of the international bestseller ALMOST FRENCH. She now lives in Sydney with her husband, Frédéric.

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