

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



BOOK CLUB

**DISCUSSION
GUIDE**

MAY 2016 BOOK

THE AFTERLIFE OF STARS

BY JOSEPH KERTES

RECOMMENDED BY GUEST READER TERRY FALLIS



**TAKE ACTION
FOR THOSE FLEEING
VIOLENCE IN SUDAN
PAGE 9**



“Stalin lay toppled behind
his high stone bastion.
He was entangled in ropes and
chains, like a colossus
hoisted from the sea”
—Joseph Kertes,
The Afterlife of Stars



A first-hand experience

The Amnesty International Book Club is thrilled to welcome guest reader Terry Fallis and his selection for our May 2016 featured novel: *The Afterlife of Stars* by Joseph Kertes.

In the waning months of 1956, while Russian tanks roll into the public squares of Budapest to crush the Hungarian Revolution, brothers Robert and Attila Beck flee with their family to Paris. As they travel through minefields both real and imagined, Robert and Attila grapple with sibling rivalry, family secrets and incalculable loss to arrive at a place they thought they'd lost forever: home.

Reading this novel, you cannot help but gain a deep sense of both struggle and wonder through Kertes' storytelling. As a young boy, Joseph Kertes himself was amongst those who escaped Hungary in 1956.

“Joseph Kertes strikes so many authentic chords in this beautiful and compelling novel. The scenes in Budapest during the uprising and shortly before the Russian invasion have the feel of first-hand experience. They ring true with a melange of foreboding, malevolence, and love that stays with you long after you turn the final page,” says Terry Fallis in his Amnesty Book Club reflection. (Page 4)

Unfortunately the story of fleeing one's country does not end with our featured novel. Hundreds of thousands of people from communities in South Kordofan Sudan have been forced to flee their homes or face horrors. Join us in calling upon the Sudanese government to stop targeting civilians in the ongoing conflict. Find the action on page 9.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, we'd love to hear from you. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

—The Book Club Team

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.



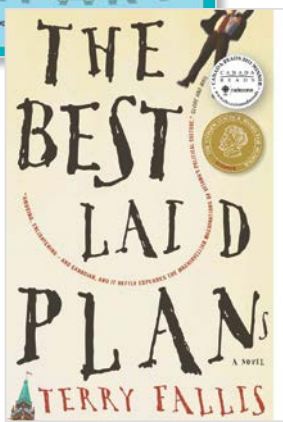
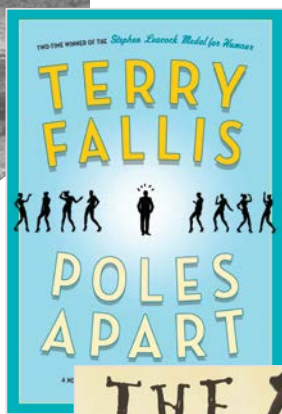
About this month's guest reader, **Terry Fallis**

Terry Fallis is the award-winning author of five national bestsellers, including his most recent, *Poles Apart*, all published by McClelland & Stewart (M&S). His debut novel, *The Best Laid Plans*, won the 2008 Stephen

Leacock Medal for Humour and was crowned the 2011 winner of CBC Canada Reads as the “essential Canadian novel of the decade.” In January 2014, CBC aired a six-part television miniseries based on *The Best Laid Plans*, earning very positive reviews.

The High Road was published in September 2010 and was a finalist for the 2011 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour. Terry's third novel, *Up and Down*, was released in September 2012. It debuted on the Globe and Mail bestsellers list, was a finalist for the 2013 Leacock Medal, and won the 2013 Ontario Library Association Evergreen Award. In June 2013, the Canadian Booksellers Association presented Terry with the Libris Award for Author of the Year. Terry's fourth novel, *No Relation*, hit bookstores in May 2014, opened on the Globe and Mail bestsellers list, and won the 2015 Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour.

He blogs actively at www.terryfallis.com and his twitter handle is **@TerryFallis**.



About this month's featured author, **Joseph Kertes**

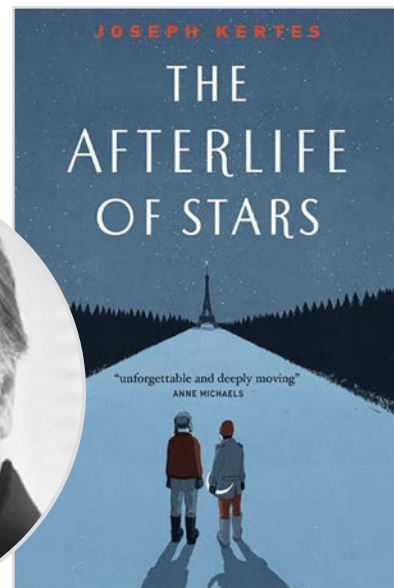
Joseph Kertes was born in Hungary but escaped with his family to Canada after the revolution of 1956. He studied English at York University and the University of Toronto, where he was encouraged in his writing by Irving Layton and Marshall McLuhan.

Kertes founded Humber College's distinguished creative writing and comedy programs. He is currently Humber's Dean of Creative and Performing Arts and is a recipient of numerous awards for teaching and innovation. His first novel, *Winter Tulips*, won the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour. *Boardwalk*, his second novel, and two children's books, *The Gift* and *The Red Corduroy Shirt*, were met with critical acclaim.

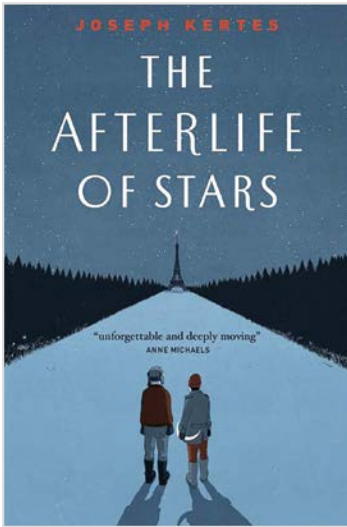
His novel, *Gratitude*, won a Canadian National Jewish Book Award and the U.S. National Jewish Book Award for Fiction. Kertes has also been a finalist for a National Magazine Award and the CBC Literary Award.

His latest novel, *The Afterlife of Stars*, has been described by Anne Michaels as “unforgettable and deeply moving,” and by Richard Bausch as “brilliant, radiant.”

His website is www.josephkertes.com



Terry Fallis on *The Afterlife of Stars*



I loved The Afterlife of Stars the first time I read it. I was lost in the story, lost in the tension, and lost in that special space between humour and pathos. I loved the novel even more the second time I read it, but this time gained even more respect and admiration for Joseph Kertes as a writer. I already knew Joe as a wonderful writer and a winner of the Stephen

Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour. But I appreciated his storytelling prowess even more on second reading of this great novel. That's a compliment. I was consumed with the story the first time around and just let myself be swept along. That's what writers' want when readers pick up their books. But on re-reading it, I marveled at the wonderful voices the author created and how they drive the story.

The narrator is a young boy, Robert, 9.8 years old, in his words—he likes decimals. It's hard to write in the voice of a 10 year old. The author is not 9.8 years old. And it's even harder to sustain it for an entire novel. But Joe Kertes captures Robert's voice beautifully along with the innocence and curiosity that come with it. Robert's brother, Attila, 13.7 years old, is the other compelling figure in the drama, guiding Robert and sometimes tormenting him, as older brothers do. Set in Budapest against the backdrop of the Hungarian uprising and the subsequent Russian military occupation, Robert's family flees first to Austria and eventually to Paris. A family backstory involving a mysterious cousin who worked with Raoul Wallenberg is slowly revealed and young Attila becomes obsessed with it, ultimately to his peril.

Robert and Attila are the heart and soul of this story. When they are on screen, I found myself completely

absorbed by their perfectly rendered rapport. Beyond his mastery of the boys' distinct voices, Joe Kertes perfectly balances the serious and dangerous straits in which the family finds itself with the hijinks and humour that inevitably accompany any story driven by two young brothers. Their pitch-perfect dialogue, their adventures—including a memorable erotic encounter with a young Parisian housemaid—and their tragic foray into the sewers of Paris keep readers quite happily travelling on a knife-edge right to the end of this powerful story. Not many writers can successfully carry off the humour-pathos gambit—John Irving comes to mind—but count Joe Kertes among them.

Without giving too much away, there are cracks in the family's foundation exposed by the trauma of the occupation and the escape from Hungary one step ahead of the Russian tanks. Tense and turbulent times can either blow a troubled family apart or bring them together. In the end, in the face of tragedy, Robert and his family gain strength from one another, and survive.

Joseph Kertes strikes so many authentic chords in this beautiful and compelling novel. Perhaps that's at least partly because he escaped Hungary with his family back in 1956 when he was but five years old. The scenes in Budapest during the uprising and shortly before the Russian invasion have the feel of first-hand experience, though the author was just a child at the time. They ring true with a mélange of foreboding, malevolence, and love that stays with you long after you turn the final page.

I'm excited that through Amnesty International, this important book about the innocence of youth and the strength of family will reach an even wider audience. It deserves to be savoured and passed on.

—Terry Fallis



Discussion questions for *The Afterlife of Stars*

- 1 Would you recommend *The Afterlife of Stars* to a friend? What did you like and dislike about the novel?
- 2 In an Amnesty Book Club live webcast, Lawrence Hill discussed *The Illegal* by suggesting that readers are not seeking a list of facts but rather an immersive and imaginative experience. When it comes to exploring the revolution of Hungary in 1956, how do you feel the storytelling adds to your understanding of that time?
- 3 Why do you think *The Afterlife of Stars* is told through the eyes of 9.8 year old Robert, and by extension his brother Attila? What does a child's perspective bring to this story of fleeing Hungary?
- 4 Robert and Attila are very different not only in age, but in temperament and understanding. Who can you relate to more? Did you like them?
- 5 Attila has a wild and challenging persona, whereas his father—also challenging—has learned to better control his reactions. As we age, do we become more wise and tempered with our passions, or simply more guarded?
- 6 “*Today we’re hanging the sky and the clouds. Tomorrow we’ll hang the sun and the moon.*” Attila repeatedly points out the rewriting of history; how one can be a hero today, and deemed a traitor tomorrow. Is it really true that the winners write the history books? What about heroes such as Raoul Wallenberg, who even after being disappeared maintain an important legacy?
- 7 What does the statue graveyard symbolize to you—a place of suppressed ideas, hope waiting for restoration, or something else?
- 8 Music plays an important role in this story of fleeing one's homeland. There are poignant moments such as the nuns performing in the convent, or Hermina singing for the German family after being tortured. What songs remain clear in your own life-defining memories, and to what do they relate?
- 9 In an almost episodic nature, Robert and Attila meet many different kinds of people in their journey, from heavenly nuns to perfume connoisseurs, to hateful anti-Semites and more. Which characters and lessons from this novel have stayed with you most?
- 10 Robert and Attila are told to gather what they can carry when leaving their apartment in Hungary. If you had to flee your home, never to return, what items would you carry on your journey?
- 11 The Beck's home is lost within days: taken away by Russians invading Budapest, then further traded away (the key to their apartment and possessions) for tickets to Austria, and finally completely abandoned as they cross the minefield out of Hungary. How integral is home to one's identity? When it is ripped away, what remains?
- 12 Many people today are forced to flee their homes. Were you aware of the situation in South Kordofan? Does reading about the need to flee Hungary during the 1956 revolution somehow help you understand the crisis in Sudan today? How does learning one reality connect you to another?



Thousands of people across Europe took action to say “Refugees Welcome”, urging EU leaders to give safe passage and protection to people fleeing bombs and persecution.

BACKGROUND

Facing the implausible

The Afterlife of Stars depicts the chaos and confusion surrounding people who are caught in the middle of conflict. Throughout the story we experience the desperation the characters feel as they cling to that which is familiar and resist change even as their world collapses around them.

While the story is set in the early days of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, the themes and experiences explored in this book remain very real today. For many around the world today, escape is the only way to survive. One moment they have a home, the next, they have nothing. Much as it was for the Beck family in *The Afterlife of Stars*:

“We have until three o’clock,” our father said to us, “and then we have to be gone.”

“For how long?” I asked him.

“We don’t know,” my grandmother said gently.

“For about two centuries,” Atilla said, “before we check back in with them again.”

It is tempting to dwell on the implausible in *The Afterlife of Stars*; what parent would seek safety by taking their child across a mine field? But we know today that in the face of conflict, the implausible becomes necessary. Who among us would seek safety by taking their child across the Mediterranean Sea at night in a rubber boat?

We would all do it, if we had no other options.



Millions flee their homes

The need to flee for one's life is an ongoing reality for too many. Apart from the ongoing conflict in Syria, there are many other tragedies ranging from Myanmar to Afghanistan, Iraq and Sudan which escape the media attention.

The people of oil rich South Kordofan province in Sudan wonder if the world has forgotten them and whether they matter. They have been living in fear in South Kordofan since the Government of Sudan began to attack them in an attempt to stem support for the armed rebel movement—the Sudanese People's Liberation Army—North (SPLA-N).

Background to conflict

Sudan has endured decades of civil war. In 2005, a peace agreement was signed (the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA) which ended the conflict between the Sudan Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and split Sudan into two countries, Sudan in the north and South Sudan.

Most of the South Kordofan population are from nomadic Misseriya and Hawazma Arab tribes and agriculturalist African Nuba communities. Having faced years of marginalisation by governments of Sudan, many support South Sudan and some fought alongside the SPLA during the civil war.

The SPLA-N is an armed opposition group operating in Sudan's South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. The SPLA-N has captured and maintains control of a substantial part of South Kordofan.

One of the triggers of the current conflict was failure to fully implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Under the CPA, the people of South Kordofan should have been consulted on what they wanted for the future of the state.

In its efforts to defeat the armed rebel movement, at any cost, the Sudanese military are waging an unrelenting campaign of aerial and ground attacks against people living in rebel controlled areas.

Conclusive evidence of war crimes in South Kordofan

People in South Kordofan are experiencing widespread human rights abuses and systematic violations including the rights to life, healthcare, education, food, safe water and adequate housing. With bombs landing in schools and hospitals the people of South Kordofan cannot get education for their children or access to adequate health care.

Between January and April 2015, the Sudanese Air Force dropped more than 374 bombs on 60 locations across South Kordofan under the control of the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N). The aerial bombardments and ground shelling over this period resulted in the deaths of at least 35 civilians, injured 70 more, and damaged civilian buildings including schools.

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, 26 health facilities (hospitals, clinics and health units) have been bombed in SPLM-N controlled areas, some of which were clearly identified with flags and crosses on their roofs. Only two out of four hospitals in SPLA-N controlled areas are still functioning.

Alfadil Khalifa Mohamed described to Amnesty International how an Antonov aircraft bombing raid killed his pregnant wife and unborn child in an IDP camp where they sought refuge in Dalami county on 6 February. *"The bomb fell, only about ten meters from where she was standing. I ran to where she was, but she was already dead. Our baby was still alive. But there was no medical treatment available to save the baby's life."*

The bombing campaign has left many afraid to work in their fields with devastating consequences for food security. The intensification of bombings during harvest time and the planting season raises concerns that this might be part of a deliberate strategy by the Sudanese government to hinder people's ability to cultivate their crops.

Salha, an internally displaced person in Kimli IDP site, told Amnesty International researchers: *"We haven't planted anything for the past two years. We couldn't because we had to run away. We are too afraid to work in our fields. And we spend so much time getting in and out of foxholes that there is no time to cultivate any crops."*

The Sudanese government has refused to allow humanitarian relief into areas controlled by the SPLA-N exacerbating a protracted humanitarian crisis and leaving the population without access to vaccinations and essential medicines. Children in SPLA-N controlled areas in South Kordofan are excluded from a recent UNICEF/WHO immunization campaign against measles in Sudan. Between May 2014 and January 2015 an outbreak of measles claimed the lives of at least 30 of these children in one hospital alone.

Massive displacement

Since the start of the conflict, Alfadil Khalifa Mohamed told Amnesty International: *"We have been telling the world for four years about what is happening to us. The facts are well known. But nothing changes."*

Amnesty International is calling on the UN Security Council and the African Union Peace and Security Council, to put pressure on the Government of Sudan and

the SPLM-N to allow for unfettered humanitarian access in South Kordofan.

"This conflict has settled into a vicious deadlock and international bodies must urgently re-engage in order to end these grave human rights violations and war crimes and to ensure the perpetrators are brought to justice," said Amnesty International researcher Michelle Kagari.

"War crimes cannot be allowed to be committed with impunity and a population facing a protracted humanitarian crisis can no longer be ignored by the world."

It's hard to imagine the pathway to peace. It's hard to imagine there is a way for the lion and lamb to lie down together. *The Afterlife of Stars* tells us if this were to take place it *"would all be quiet and serene...we'd be in a place that would not require a redeemer... we would never need another flood to wash away the filth and degradation."* p. 67

It is an idyllic hope, and perhaps one reason why the novel needs to be read through the eyes of the young Beck brothers. Hope is important, and the idea of peace, essential.

There remains a deep need to stand up and say 'no' to injustice and cruelty. It is not enough to keep one's head down, carry on, and wait for the storm to pass. It is not



enough to pretend that because our lives may appear safe, the suffering of others does not matter.

This month Amnesty International is calling on the Government of Sudan to stop targeting civilians in the ongoing conflict.

Tell the Government of Sudan that South Kordofan people matter. Tell President Omar Al Bashir to immediately end all attacks directed at the public and nonmilitary objects, as well as all indiscriminate aerial bombardment and other attacks in South Kordofan.

Civilian holding
the remnant of
a weapon



TAKE ACTION: Protect civilians from sectarian violence

Add your voice to our call. Tell President Bashir to stop killing his people in South Kordofan:

>> Sign the petition at <http://bit.ly/SouthKordofan>

Should you find this Amnesty Action has expired, we have many others petitions that need your support. Visit our Online Actions page at <http://bit.ly/OnlineActions>

Dear President Omar Al Bashir,

As the conflict in South Kordofan enters its fifth year, the intensive aerial bombardment campaign by your government and the subsequent suffering imposed on the people of South Kordofan continues. Last year, you pledged your commitment to ensure humanitarian access to opposition controlled areas of South Kordofan.

We have seen a continued humanitarian crisis in these areas. Further, efforts by the international community to get your government to stop aerial bombardments allow unfettered humanitarian access and to investigate allegations of grave human rights violations and abuses in South Kordofan have been slow and inadequate. Attempts to facilitate dialogue between your government and the SPLA-N to help find a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the crisis have so far failed.

I therefore urge you and your government to:

- Allow unrestricted, independent humanitarian access to all areas of South Kordofan to provide food, health services, support to the education system and other humanitarian assistance to civilians affected by the conflict including life-saving vaccinations and essential medicines for all children;
- Launch prompt, independent, impartial and effective investigations into all violations of international human rights and humanitarian law to bring those suspected of criminal responsibility before civilian courts in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty.
- People in South Kordofan are Sudanese too. They matter. Time to end their suffering is now, please make the choice to end it.

Yours sincerely,

For further reading

- Amnesty International 2015 Mission to South Sudan: <http://www.amnesty.ca/research/human-rights-missions/mission-to-south-sudan-2015>
- Sudan: Attacks in South Kordofan 'constitute war crimes' <http://bit.ly/1VynYks>
- Joseph Kertes' website www.josephkertes.com
- Terry Fallis' blog <http://terryfallis.com>

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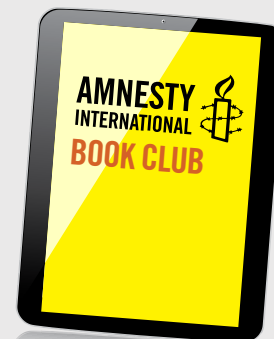
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- And join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**



COMING UP IN JUNE 2016

Lives of Girls and Women by Alice Munro

Recommended by guest reader Anne Giardini

Lives of Girls and Women is the intensely readable, touching, and very funny story of Del Jordan, a young woman who journeys from the carelessness of childhood through an uneasy adolescence in search of love and sexual experience.

As Del dreams of becoming famous, suffers embarrassment about her mother, endures the humiliation of her body's insistent desires, and tries desperately to fall in love, she grapples with the crises that mark the passage to womanhood.

The discussion guide will be sent out in early June

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

