

## SMALL STEPS

JULIE SPRIGG

### ABOUT THE BOOK

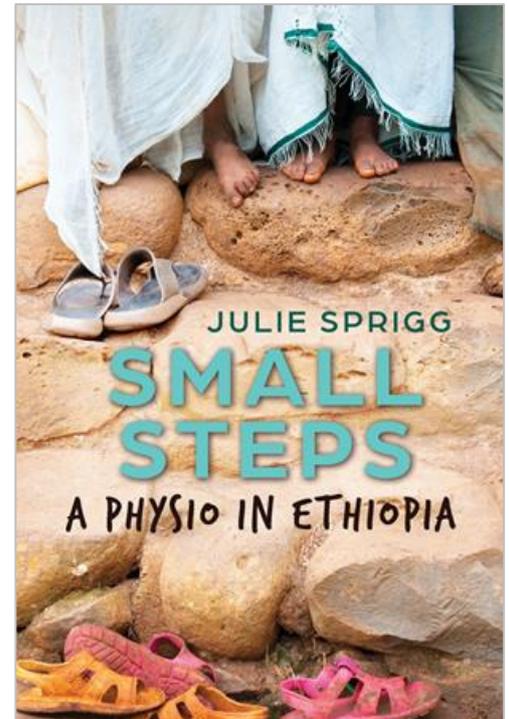
As a child, Julie dreams of living somewhere else, and of making a difference in the lives of others. In 2004 she gets the chance to go and live in a convent in Ethiopia and provide physiotherapy for the local children. But Julie finds that she has trouble sticking to convent rules and soon finds herself wondering how much difference a single physio can make anyway. After leaping at the chance to work alongside her new friend, the unflappable Sister Almaz, in a small town close to the Sudanese border, Julie is accepted for a teaching role at University of Gondar, training the very first cohort of physio undergraduates and continuing to work with paediatric patients in the teaching hospital. Just when she loses her heart to a handsome colleague, civil unrest reaches the university. Julie's students are forced to choose between their safety and their future, and Julie once more wrestles with the question of why, when it comes to being a part of change, all steps feel like small steps.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Sprigg worked as a physiotherapist for ten years before switching to a career in foreign aid with programs improving human rights of people with disabilities. After years of regular travel to China, India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Vanuatu and Ethiopia, Julie returned to Perth and now evaluates government programs to overcome social disadvantage. *Small Steps* was shortlisted for the 2018 City of Fremantle Hungerford Award.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What lessons in resilience does Julie take from her time in Ethiopia?
2. Does Julie reach any understanding about how her own smaller sufferings might sit against those of others who are enduring a life of poverty and struggle?
3. How does the story of Fiketu (chapter 4) operate as an example of how love and pragmatism may sometimes need to be weighed against each other when one lives at the extreme edge of poverty?
4. Which child's story stuck most in your mind?
5. What does Julie gain from her friendship with Sister Almaz and Tadesse?
6. What perceived shortcomings does the narrator share with us? What do you see as her strengths and qualities?
7. How does Julie's relationship with Tadesse deepen her understanding of his country?
8. How might Tadesse's aphorisms such as 'it happen actually' and 'don't give up' (*tesfa atkrete*) describe a possible state of mind for getting by in Ethiopia?
9. What impact does Ethiopian politics at the time of this story (i.e. 2004–2005) have in the lives of its citizens – at least viewed through the frame of Julie's experience at University of Gondar?
10. *Lately I felt weepy all the time. Seeing suffering and feeling powerless to alleviate it had made me so tired. Feeling it made me so tired.* (p. 313) How would you describe Julie's state of mind in chapters 23 and 24?
11. What difference does the inclusion of the epilogue make to our sense of Julie's story of her time in Ethiopia?



12. In what ways do you think the Julie of the end of the book is different to the Julie at the beginning? In what ways is she unchanged?
13. What kinds of sensitivities do you think a writer might have to keep in mind when writing a memoir set in a country and culture other than their own?
14. Based on this story (and perhaps on your own experience) what role do you think that physiotherapy can play in people's lives?
15. What is Julie's relationship to Catholicism at the beginning of the book? Does her relationship to her faith change over time?

## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

### ***Why and when did you decide to write a book about your experiences in Ethiopia? Did you draw on any notes you'd made from that time?***

I first had the idea of writing the book while I was in Ethiopia, but I didn't fully shape my journal entries into a manuscript until about two years after I returned to Australia. While I was away, I kept a travel journal, as I had on all my other travels. Initially I just wrote about my day, recording scenery and whom I'd met, but as my experiences got more complicated, I wrote much more about how I was feeling. Soon writing became a really important way for me to offload about my day and make sense of some often overwhelming situations. The shape of the book started to emerge when I read back over my notes and realised I kept returning to similar themes, and these seemed worth exploring. I had plenty of notes to draw from, as during my stay in Ethiopia I wrote most nights and before work most mornings. When collated, all of my computer journal entries came to about 250,000 words (double the final length of the book), plus ten exercise books of handwritten notes. That is partly why the manuscript took so long to complete, as I had a hard time deciding which content to leave out.

### ***Each chapter tells the story of a child and their physiotherapy treatment. How did you decide on this structure for the book?***

I always had a sense that I wanted the book to be about children. While I was working in Ethiopia I sent group emails to family and friends in Australia and the USA and so many of the replies were questions about the children I worked with. I started writing longer emails to answer people's questions and my email list got wider as friends of friends and friends of family asked to join. A few people suggested I collate the stories of the kids into a book, which I did, although in the early drafts I kept myself out of the story. However, some of my early readers gave feedback that they wanted to know more about my emotional responses, otherwise it seemed very impersonal. So while the book evolved into a memoir (and became way too personal!), I still wanted to keep the emphasis on the children who I had the privilege of meeting and treating.

### ***What were the challenges for you in writing this memoir?***

As I hadn't set out to write a memoir, one of my earliest challenges was laying open my vulnerabilities and failures for everyone to read. Among other things, writing about my faith struggles seemed very personal and not the sort of thing people in our increasingly secular society do. However, in the end it felt right to include it, because it's pivotal to why I found myself in Ethiopia, and the search for a sense of meaning in life is something that resonates with a lot of people. Another challenge was the weight of responsibility of telling other people's stories. I wrote about people with disabilities, living in poverty, while I am a white Australian, with a good job and without a disability. At times I questioned whether it was even appropriate for me to write about others' marginalisation when I have no experience of marginalisation myself. I was aware of the huge power imbalance with every word, and am so grateful to the amazing editorial team at Fremantle Press who were aware of it too. I hope the book reflects how much of a privilege I felt in telling other people's stories.

***What did you learn from your time in Ethiopia that you have carried forward with you in your professional life?***

One of the key things I have carried forward with me is the importance of spending time working out what a community needs before making donations or starting any charity works. One example among many is that while I was at University of Gondar, a donation of three of the same highly specialised medical equipment arrived, with a total worth of \$300,000. The university hadn't requested them, and didn't have the right technicians on the campus to install, operate or service the machines. The machines stayed in their cardboard boxes the whole time I was there, serving no purpose except for people to put their feet up on when relaxing with a coffee. That money could have gone a long way in the hospital if the donor had spent the time asking someone what they needed, instead of assuming. In my years of working in foreign aid programs, and now in my work for government, I always ask who designed the program. I check to see they have sat down with the intended recipients of this program and genuinely listened to what they asked for, and check what assumptions they've made about what a community needs.