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The craft of words **The Miles Franklin winner: a dark, sorrowful story with moments of light and tenderness**

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And we have a winner. Black Rock White City, AS Patric's dark, sorrowful story has impressed the judges sufficiently for them to award it first prize. I too was captured by the world of the novel, and by the central characters: Jovan, who "had been a poet in Yugoslavia when that was still a country", and who is now a cleaner at a Melbourne hospital; and Suzana, his wife, who works as a cleaner in Melbourne's Black Rock, and who comes from White City ("the literal translation of Belgrade").

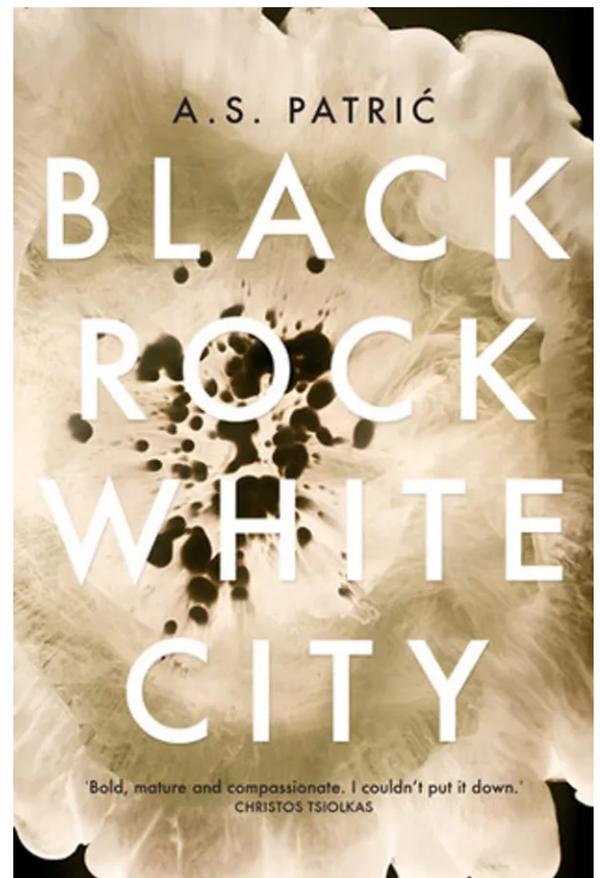
Suzana and Jovan are survivors of the Bosnian conflict, and have made their way to Melbourne where they are eking out a small spare life. Their story is told through a series of analepses and prolepses — fleeting glimpses of their life before Australia, more fully sketched accounts of their lives in the here and now. Both were academics before the war, living with their two small children a comfortable European life. This came to an end, when hate turned

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Black Rock White City (2015) by AS Patric. Transit Lounge Australia

into fire, free-floating and exploding throughout a city, and then materialising again into a blistered red monster more real than any creature children imagine in night-time terrors.

Though Suzana and Jovan escaped the fire and the hate by escaping Sarajevo, it has not let them go. They lost everything: their home, careers, and identity; their children, who died after eating poisoned meat; their dream of a future; even their sexual lives. Suzana has been unable to make love with Jovan since their children's death, so he is having an impersonal affair with Tammie, a dentist: for her, he is "a tool for her sexual fantasies"; for him, she is mere physical release.

The story is animated by the graffiti artist who is haunting the hospital where Jovan works. Known to the hospital community as Dr Graffito, this shadowy person daubs obscene, obscure, and often darkly funny texts on the hospital walls and windows, the plates in its cafeteria, even cutting it into the flesh of cadavers. Jovan, whose job it is to clean up the mess, finds in the messages strange resonances with his own history: a strange connection with this *bête noire*.

Suicides and other deaths follow the pattern of Dr Graffito's project, and this is a mystery that remains unresolved, a topic of conversation among the workers, a sharp point of anxiety. This mystery weaves through the gradually shifting lives of Jovan and Suzana as they begin to move out of mere survival into a kind of living, a kind of loving.

I couldn't help but read this novel, in some ways, as an analogy for the contemporary tragedy that is the forced, mass movement of people across the globe. Australian government policy performs a double act: erecting powerful barriers to anyone seeking asylum, and locking away, out of sight and out of story, those who have managed to reach Australian territory.

This novel is a reminder that every refugee, every asylum seeker, is a person, an individual, someone struggling to return to the world of light after the disaster. And it is a reminder too that it can happen to anyone. "When you think refugee, you think black, brown or Asian," says Bill, Jovan's co-worker, but Europeans, academics, poets, lawyers: anyone can fall into that pit, and become a Jovan or a Suzana, a human being desperately trying to accommodate the trauma that has upended their lives, that has clamped itself to them.

Yes, this is grim stuff. It is harrowing, densely tragic, almost devoid of hope. Almost, but not entirely. Jovan and Suzana, after all, have retained dignity, if nothing else; she is beginning to creep back toward life by learning to become a novelist; he is beginning to recover memories of the poetry he wrote in his former life as a result of the absurd, obscure, obscene writing with which Dr Graffito desecrates the walls and windows and cadavers of the hospital.

It's not all darkness: there are moments of great tenderness scattered throughout the narrative and, like any good *chiaroscuro*, there is always a bit of light in the shadow.

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