



Black Rock White City

A.S. Patric

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Black Rock White City is a novel about the damages of war, the limits of choice, and the hope of love.

During a hot Melbourne summer Jovan's cleaning work at a bayside hospital is disrupted by acts of graffiti and violence becoming increasingly malevolent. For Jovan the mysterious words that must be cleaned away dislodge the poetry of the past. He and his wife Suzana were forced to flee Sarajevo and the death of their children.

Intensely human, yet majestic in its moral vision, Black Rock White City is an essential story of Australia's suburbs now, of displacement and immediate threat, and the unexpected responses of two refugees as they try to reclaim their dreams. It is a breathtaking roar of energy that explores the immigrant experience with ferocity, beauty and humour.

Black Rock White City Details

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Author : A.S. Patric

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From Reader Review *Black Rock White City* for online ebook

Jennifer (JC-S) says

‘Strange how little his body shows the evidence of his life.’

Jovan and Suzana have escaped the horrors of Sarajevo by seeking refuge in Australia. For them, life in Melbourne is nothing like their old lives in pre-war Sarajevo: once academics, they are now both cleaners. Jovan cleans at a bayside hospital in Melbourne and Suzana cleans houses. The death of their two children in Sarajevo causes them both, in different ways, great pain.

During a hot Melbourne summer, Jovan finds his cleaning work disrupted by acts of graffiti in various places around the hospital. The cryptic and disturbing graffiti has an impact on Jovan, it reminds him of aspects of the past that he is trying to come to terms with. He cleans up, time after time, knowing that the graffitist (nicknamed Dr Graffito) is probably aware that Jovan is the cleaner. In the meantime, life moves along. Jovan keeps thinking he must replace the brake pads in his panel van before the brakes fail, and he feels considerable pain from toothache. Suzana cleans for people who seem to appreciate her services, but she knows there should be more to life. Jovan and Suzana are largely invisible to those around them, and many of their interactions (both with each other and with others) touch only on aspects of them as people. Their lives are not satisfying, and they long to recover what was important to them in the past.

‘The two worlds appear far apart. Sarajevo is across the seas, and as time goes by, the separating waters seem ever broader to Jovan and Suzana, yet the box, which they cannot open, and cannot close contains their Sarajevo lives.’

How can you make a new life in another country when your old life carries such pain? Is it possible to reclaim what is good and find peace from what is painful? Gradually we learn more about Jovan and Susana, about their lives and aspirations in Sarajevo, about their dreams for starting again in Australia. We see the scars of the past, and how they are (inadvertently or otherwise) rubbed raw by the unthinking actions of those around them. As if, somehow, the fact of being given refuge should nullify or neutralize the past.

‘A world of diminished men labouring without end, for no good reason, and a woman’s job thrown in there after them, somehow, however she might fit the shoes provided, broken crystal slipper or otherwise.’

I found this novel profoundly moving, as well as a reminder that human experiences are complex and layered. It reminded me as well as some uncomfortable aspects of Australia: assumptions about refugees and not taking the time to learn how to pronounce names. All part of a subconscious, or sometimes unconscious, process of differentiation. Jovan and Suzana are two people profoundly affected by war, but not (yet) destroyed by their experiences.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Elaine says

I picked this up initially because it is short listed for the Miles Franklin award and I was curious. I'm not

really sure what to make of it and I don't think I really enjoyed it. Mostly it was a depressing read. I suppose it couldn't help but be that. Jovan and Suzana have fled war torn Bosnia after the death of their two children. In Australia as refugees they have menial lives, both working as cleaners, barely existing. Both had taught at the university in Sarajevo now it seemed their lives were diminished. Perhaps there is some redemption and hope here. I know there has been praise for this book and perhaps deservedly so. There were some moving and profound moments but mostly I felt that it lacked a bit of emotion but maybe this subtlety of emotion was the point. For me it just left me feeling a little flat.

Roger Brunyate says

The Pain of Words

That's "Patric" with an accent over the c, pronounced something like "Patrich." I assume that the author, like the characters in his debut novel, winner of Australia's Miles Franklin Award, is an immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, or at least the son of one. The title links "Black Rock," an area of Melbourne, to "White City," which is apparently the literal translation of Belgrade. Patric's protagonist, Jovan Brakochevich, works as a janitor in a Melbourne hospital; his wife Suzana cleans for a private family. Both have come down in the world; both were literature professors at the university; Suzana was writing a novel, and Jovan was a poet. He has not written anything since coming to Australia; he hasn't even bothered to learn more than basic English which he speaks with an almost impenetrable accent. But words, the germs of poetry, keep returning to Jovan in his thoughts:

He leans over the top of his first Australian car, feeling the heat of the roof radiating through his palms, and drifts into poetry.

The air that breathes me, the air that moves my life, that evaporates my soul, the air that kisses me and kisses me, the air breathing in the bliss of my longest exhalation ...

He doesn't own this tranquility. Moments like these are rare gifts that come his way accidentally, wrapped and intended for others. He can hold them, briefly as he does now, pausing beside his rust-spotted white Ford panel van. Soon he'll have to surrender them.

But words come back to haunt Jovan in the most sinister ways. His hospital has been plagued by a spate of graffiti that Jovan must clean up, ranging from a simple slogan, "The Trojan Flea," painted on a wall, to more complex messages ("I am so full of your death I can now only breathe your rot") etched into glass or carved into the flesh of a cadaver. There is intelligence at work here, certainly, and skill, and persistence. Suppositions as to the identity of "Dr. Graffito" range from a doctor at the hospital to Jovan himself—even though, as the one to clean them up, he feels personally targeted by them. But as the series goes on, it becomes more than an irritating prank; one person commits suicide, another is gruesomely murdered. Graffiti as a deadly weapon.

The loss of words, the pain of words: the two are connected through what happened to Jovan and Suzana in Sarajevo before they fled. We will learn about it in the middle section of the book, which is extremely painful and tells of unimaginable loss and suffering. It has left Jovan and Suzana with a clearly dysfunctional marriage, though there is enough need there, and just enough love, to hold the shreds of it together. I did find the thread of the story beginning to fray a bit; this has not quite got the relentless intensity of Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* which it narrowly beat out for the prize. But, as the committee stated, it offers a "powerful and raw" account of the migrant experience in Australia. And it does offer at least a

glimmer of hope at the end, where words-as-life come head to head with words-as-death, and Patric pulls the various threads together into a finale that, though rather abrupt, is nonetheless satisfying.

Natalie says

Holy Shit! Bravo Australian emerging writers! First novel? How can *Girl At War* be so acclaimed when this book exists?

Give him all the Australian Awards and get the Americans and Europeans onto him ASAP!

Wayward Fancy says

To be honest I'm still recovering from finishing this book. It sucked me in and churned me up then spat me out. I felt I had to scrape myself off the floor and piece myself together again. It really is an extraordinary novel by an extremely talented writer.

Patric uses images and characters like intricate building blocks to build a monument to human experience and then uses words like a wrecking ball. He constructs and devastates in equal measure. Blisters you then heals you then scrapes off the scab.

Patric gathers various elements together - the extraordinary cinematic works of graffiti by the mysterious Dr Graffito, the suburban setting, persistent surfacing of poetry, and the cast of characters that include a foolish psychologist Dickens, a broken wife Suzana, a monster-like dog and a ruthless femme fatale lover Tammie - and then layers them like transparent x-ray films, merging to create a kind of 3 D optical illusion, shimmering and bold and jumping out at you.

Emotional hyperbole is absent here. Patric eschews pulling your heart strings with the past – instead he punches you in the face Jovan and Suzana's flailing marriage, their menial existence in Melbourne after escaping the trauma of the Bosnian war. A mop and bucket of dirty water wielded by Jovan in his job as cleaner in the hospital can be used by Patric to convey the nihilistic post traumatic mindset of protagonist more powerfully than any long winded description of war.

Patric uses the power of present tense writing which untethers the reader and allows you to experience the story, moment by moment. This gives a noir-like flavour to the strange mystery but also allows the weight of the past to be like a shadow cast behind Jovan and Suzanna and as we progress through the narrative, the shadow gets longer and longer.

Reflected through Dr Graffito's elaborate art-installation-like vandalism at the hospital is all the heartache, poetry and grief that Jovan wears like his work overalls. Patric employs, words, events, setting and characters to form a prism reflecting the inner life of Jovan and Suzanna without the need for any clumsy exposition or sentimentality. The result is an intense intimacy with these characters. Suburbia becomes surreal, nihilist, hopeful, macabre frightening and beautiful. The novel hinges on the poignant brilliance of the idea that the obliteration of the graffiti by Jovan in his menial work somehow squeezes the poetry from

his past life to erupt in his mind like pus from a pimple. The erasing of one poem revealing another.

For me, overall, this book was a love story; about difficult long term love that shares unimaginable heartbreak and grief but carries on. A resilience that can be by turns perverse and admirable. It's about how language and words in many contexts can affect our lives in the most vital of ways. About repression of grief and desire that simmers under the surface of seemingly everyday lives. About what happens when lives are built up, destroyed and try to rebuild themselves again. Which is what A.S. Patric does to us, the reader, within each paragraph, just to show you the truth, so you can experience it too; being built up and destroyed by words.

Vicki says

I like delving into a literary read, and this book did have moments of beautiful writing. But it was mainly self indulgent, navel gazing attempts at creative prose. A good literary book still needs a story that grabs you, and progresses forward, and has a point. It's a pity this book doesn't succeed, because the refugee story needs to be told.

Helen King says

This is one of the most powerful books I've read. It's set in a framework which is somewhat exaggerated (at least I hope so) regarding horrific events in a suburban hospital in Melbourne. Although this part is a little over the top, it provides a structure for the more interesting, and wrenching, aspects of the book. The story of a couple who come to Australia escaping from Sarajevo, including their back story which is slowly revealed, and the unsettling aspects of trying to make a new life here, wearing the physical and emotional scars of their past, and continuing to receive more along the way. The secondary characters shine a light on inbuilt prejudice, fear of other, challenges that other people have and how they are inevitably contrasted to Jovan and Suzana's situation. It's a book which will sit with me for a long time.

Quotes I might come back to -

He brushes his teeth, gingerly around the painful area in his jaw. Feels the fear building somewhere in the open space of his ribcage. Doesn't have a thought or a reason attached to it. It comes and tears at his heart and lungs. He continues to brush. Spits out a little blood with his foam. Stands up and wipes his mouth with a hand towel. Can't see it in his own face. When it fills his chest with a hundred crows, scrambling with their claws and beaks through black feathers for immediate release, even then, he can't see it. It's as though the past never writes itself into his features and expressions. Only that which ghosts behind the face can summon white terror specters and black dread phantoms; the dead and living writhing in the muddy grave of his mind.

Jovan is an articulate man and he wants to speak to his wife. What stops him time and again isn't the pain, it's a feeling that talking makes it trivial. Not that it makes it real – it makes it small. The reality is clear from when they open their eyes to when they close them, perforating even that boundary almost every night. The death of their two children isn't the erasure of two beings. It is the loss of God and the skies, it is the loss of

the past and the future, of all their small-voiced words and their hearts. The only possible response is suicide. To survive they have found a way to live without response.

Hands on the wheel. Looking at the street lights on Chapman Street that shine out for no good reason. No one around here goes out for walks. Dogs barking from every barricaded backyard. Children ensconced before their glowing screens behind the walls. Family cars left out on the street make her think of discarded bits of clothing, forgotten shows to be picked up when needed the next day for school or work. All of it done tiredly, against the will, with an obligation that works on them like a disease. People around here collapse into bed at the end of the day. They rise every morning with their cheap suburban alarms forcing them out again. ... No, she knows this isn't objective. This isn't the life around her as much as the poisoned life within her. She's seeing reflections.

"You want to go back to Greece?" Jovan says, you say this sometimes. Freedom there, even if your parents run from their islands, give everything away to make it to over here. Doesn't make much sense to me. Things get worse in Greece. Not better, since your parents leave

(Bill disagrees) .. . "They know how to live over there, man. We waste all our time working her. They know what Life is over there. You know what I'm saying? We have to plan to fit it in. Save up for years, and then go over there for a few weeks. Call it a holiday ... what do we call the rest of this fucking life here?" ... Jovan doesn't know where he gets this idea of life. A holiday that never ends is the daydream of a spoilt child.

Bill says, "No Bosnia postcards, that's for sure. Fucking Muslims, fucking up their own shit and then they come around fucking up everyone else's. Acting as though not eating pork is gonna mean shit to God or the Devil." Bill leaves the change room thinking he's offered Jovan a pat on the back, as though to share a hate is to share a love. Tossing Molotov words with his eyes closed. The type of thing you lob around a football ground during a rival match. A flare and nothing more. Not something that could set the air alight – a kind of napalm that would keep burning for generations.....

Bill doesn't know a lot about hate, and not a lot more about love. He thinks he hates a boss or a politician or someone at his local pub but he hasn't seen hate turn into fire, free-floating and exploding through a city, and then materialising again into a blistered red monster more real than any creature children imagine in night-time terrors. Moving from city to city, and village to village, blazing across a whole country, uncontrollable and annihilating. Breathing fire around Jovan, and murdering before his eyes, raping and maiming all with a dying grin never quite dead.

The war didn't start everywhere at the same time in Bosnia. It was part of the civil wars of Yugoslavia, yet when it petered out quickly in other parts of that federation of states, in Bosnia it grew into something far worse and protracted. It was fought from village to village, town to town, and in cities, street to street and building to building. It was resisted for long periods in some quarters of the state as it raged for gore in others ... in short, it was fought by loose groupings of people organized by no grand plan, leader or movement.

Muslims vowed to Serbian neighbours that atrocities committed in another town wouldn't be perpetrated here. Yet they were. Of course, that was also true the other way around. Serbs made promises of decency that they didn't keep. Promises are part of a currency, and as long as there is an idea of social economy, then these notes can be traded on. A society can become bankrupt through various causes and all parts of the world have witnessed these collapses of a moral economy.

Suzana leans forward. Attentive. There is no confidante for Jelka other than Suzana. Back in what was once Yugoslavia both of them would have had extended circles of friends. For all occasions and all modes of

companionship. Here in Australia, where everyone is locked into their suburban backyards and the biannual BBQ, Suzana and Jelka have to assume all of the kinds of friendship they still need. ... Suzana knows she's offended her only friend, yet Suzana suspects that Jelka loves being talked about in this manner. Being the subject of serious contemplation thrills her. To be cast as someone worthy of consideration, even harshly, makes her feel real. What Jelka yearns for more than anything is some kind of proof of existence no one wants to give her.

Caroline Barron_Author says

I'm off to Melbourne to catch up with My-Friend-Jarrold next month and what better way to ready myself than to indulge in new Melbourne fiction. And my goodness. What fiction this is. Five, oh five, oh five glorious and shining stars, Mr. Poetic-Patric.

He can't speak to any of it because it isn't about words anymore. It's about another existence. Neither of them is sure about the present but this is some kind of afterlife (17).

On the surface the book is about Serbian immigrants, Jovan and Suzana and their life in Melbourne. In Serbia he was a Professor of Literature. In Melbourne he cleans the evil scrawl of Dr. Graffito off hospital walls. Beneath the story Patric investigates the relationship between a husband and wife who have experienced unfathomable trauma through their children's death. He investigates infidelity and whether, sometimes, it might be okay. All of this is couched beneath an arc that questions our xenophobia. In an interview in Good Reading (April 2015) Patric says "Literature can return us to our humanity." Many Australians (and New Zealanders) who encounter Serbian (or other) refugees or immigrants may not be able to detect or understand the suffering behind smiling eyes. *Black Rock White City* humanizes the Serbian War and allows us to understand the life-altering terror and displacement it forced on many.

. . . the old world can be packed into a box, and left to gather dust, and be rarely seen. More and more rarely as the years pass. The two worlds drift further and further apart. Of course, the box doesn't disappear. It will always be exactly where it always was—in the centre of their lives. It is made of the thinnest sheets of porous material, the most fragile membrane, leaking without warning at any point (136-137).

As I writer I am interested in the points of view (several) and the section of story Patric has chosen to tell. He could have written a rip-roaring present-action book encompassing the Serbian war and the unbearable deaths of Ana and Dejan. But he didn't. He chose to begin in media res, in Jovan and Suzana's make-do Melbourne life. This is not a story about the Serbian war. This is a story about real life in the Melbourne suburbs.

The character of Suzana is pure genius. She has more layers than an onion. Patric uses a soft touch, gradually revealing the woman she is now, the woman she was in Serbia and the (surprising) woman she was before Jovan. Patric renders her 'love' (you'll see what I mean) for Jovan using a tender starkness that reflects a

lamp back to each of us and asks: who were you before now? Is that person still inside you? Can you ever change, completely? There was only one place in the book I was shunted out of the story—Jovan gets a bit preachy when talking with Suzana about Graffito on pages 240-241; minor criticism that doesn't alter my five-star opinion.

Written across the chalkboard-black streets is the mathematics of chaos. Everyone going off in a million directions, scrawling their intentions in Morse code flashes and dashes, behind glass hissing at each other in the lost languages of silence, sometimes colliding and crashing into each other, mostly passing untouched across the unalterable long black mark of destiny road through an anonymous fate (68—italics Patric's own)

Patric's imagery is stunningly memorable: Suzana's Janissary dying the forest; the television discarded on the lawn; Ms. Richards waiting for the train; Suzana in the swimming pool. Oh, bliss. These I will keep. For the briefest of moments she knows what it is to come apart in millions of different directions, none of them a release or relief (54).

As for the ending—how can anyone decry the ending? It is magnificent. I want to type it out in full and give you a slice of my chest so you can see how my breath gasped at its beauty. But that wouldn't be good manners. You'll have to read it yourself.

PS: 'White City' is the literal translation of Belgrade (19) and 'Black Rock' is a seaside suburb of Melbourne.

You can buy the book here:

Readings Books, Melbourne <http://www.readings.com.au/products/1...>

Amazon Kindle Edition <http://www.amazon.com/Black-Rock-Whit...>

New Zealand readers: I can't seem to find it at the independents, but have put a request in to Unity Books and Dear Reader (Grey Lynn, Auckland) to stock it.

This review also appears on my blog www.lovethebook.com

Mandy says

This is a really, really good book. The lone male on the Franklin Shortlist and I think, if anyone can better Charlotte Wood, Patric will be the one.

Refugees from Saravejo, academics Jovan and Suzana, are now settled in bayside Melbourne, both working as cleaners (coincidentally Jovan in the hospital where I had my tonsils out as a child). As they try to rebuild their lives their past trauma is quietly revealed as they are both dealing with new challenges. Don't want to give anything away but Patric writes in elegant, bleak, hopeful and beautiful prose, no fluff or padding and not a word is wasted or unnecessary.

Do not read this book when you are tired or wanting to relax, it deserves your full attention because it is wonderfully challenging and breathtaking.

26/7 I have just re-read my review, obviously got a bit carried away. Have now calmed and knocked off a star, still think it is a worthy rival for Charlotte Wood but the ending is a bit naff, whereas Wood's ending is a

ripper.

Jane says

This is not an easy book to read. It is both distressing, and elliptical. It brushes past moments of trauma and you expect the big reveal, and then it turns away and heads in another direction. There are moments of lyrical beauty, there is horror, there are awkward, angry, shattered, just-trying-to-live characters. Nothing is simple. Nothing is heartwarming. Your effort will be repaid.

Zora says

Deeply impressive book about trauma, war, migration and marriage that rewards close attention. There's a layer to the plot I am not quite sure was necessary but I might change my mind as the book settles and lingers - the author clearly knows what he is doing. Some sections - especially towards the end - were so powerful and cleverly done that I had to read them a few times to properly grasp what had just happened. I hope Oz Lit rises to the occasion and throws lots of prizes at this author and book.

Jillwilson says

This is a new Australian novel about a Serbian couple who have migrated after the Bosnian war. Jovan, former poet and academic now works as a cleaner at Sandringham hospital. Suzannah works as a carer. They are deeply damaged and dysfunctional as a result of the events of the war. The novel explores the extent to which people can 'recover' from tragedy and what happens to relationships in the process. This focus plays out against a storyline where an anonymous "graffiti artist" is playing havoc within the hospital where Jovan works. He repeatedly has to clean up after the person has defaced something (this includes vandalism as refined as etching small letters into the lens of the ophthalmologist's equipment). It's an interesting narrative choice for the novelist to make. It reminded me of the increasingly ridiculous serial-killer novels that appear on the market – with increasingly bizarre modes of murder. I think that what it is meant to do is provide perspective – the actual real-life and recent events in Bosnia are the real horror story – (there may be a complete obscenity in our preference for the former).

Through the novel we feel what it is like to be an immigrant. Jovan, the refined poet speaks imperfect English and prefers to be misunderstood rather than trying to alter how people see him. He chooses to drive a wreck of a car. People call him 'Joe' – Jovan is apparently too hard to remember and pronounce. He indulges in a nihilistic affair; he is a man who is deeply depressed. He and Suzannah live in Frankston; the blariness of the suburbs is the backdrop for the story. I took a while to warm to the book but I think it's very good. I think this comment sums it up: "Something I love about this novel is its lack of stylistic cynicism – its willingness to probe its character's experiences, minds and hearts without the protective padding of irony." (<http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.co...>)

Trudie says

****3.5****

This book was tough in many ways, not least of which is how to fairly review it.

Reading it completed a goal I had set for myself of reading the five books making up the 2016 Miles-Franklin shortlist. Looking back I see I have resolutely given these books fairly ho-hum reviews which would seem to suggest that this list was not my best route into Australian fiction this year.

On the plus side I do think *Black Rock White City* is the correct winner as it pushed my reading boundaries and had sustained sections of writing I really enjoyed.

However

The narrative choices made often bedevilled me. Consisting of what I would call disjointed slice of life vignettes, interspersed with grim, half-recalled flashbacks from a life in Belgrade, and an odd storyline involving a kind of malevolent Banksie-type artist, stalking the hallways of Sandringham hospital.

It didn't really feel complete as a novel to me or rather as immersive as I would have liked and yet I admired it in parts. The characters at its core - Jovan and his wife Suzana represent a heartbreaking immigrant experience, the snippets of back story you get are compelling and I was impressed by Patric's decision to take a reader right up to a violent episode but then write

" Do not visualise the details. Do not try to imagine what husband and wife may, or may not, have thought or felt. As those images on television broadcasts could not fully penetrate the minds of Suzana and Jovan, or anyone watching anywhere else at the time, so no one will ever know anything of this experience."

Although a very different style of novel a good companion to this book maybe Aminatta Forma's *The Hired Man* as it also is a quiet reflection on people's lives post the Yugoslav wars of the 90s.

This section in particular reminded me of that novel

"....war is hard to disguise as anything other than the Devil himself. Turning mailmen, barbers, greengrocers, electricians and taxi drivers into dismembering demons. Burning up entire generations of men as if their souls were made of hay. The Devil was never a comic book character, with a red face and small horns protruding from his skull - he is a force as real as gravity, raging through the minds of men with the fires of Hell"

I realise how conflicted I am on this book, its terse uneven prose, sometimes unwieldy poetry, elliptical and often oddly fantastical plot and yet and yet

I am pleased it won.

Sam says

This is an excellent book. Deeply moving, it is not the easiest to read but well worth the effort.

Lesley Moseley says

WORTHY WINNER OF THE MILES FRANKLIN AWARD

I am such a fussy reader, that 4 stars is very high praise for me. Stunning, is the word that seems to describe the experience of reading such a 'real' portrait of several damaged but resilient, souls.
