

READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

WINNER of the Miles Franklin Literary Award 2016

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 breath-taking roar of energy that explores the immigrant experience with ferocity, beauty and humour.

About the author

A.S. Patrić is the award winning author of *Las Vegas for Vegans*, published in 2012 by Transit Lounge. *Las Vegas for Vegans* was shortlisted for the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards' Steele Rudd Prize.

He is also the author of *Bruno Kramzer*, which was shortlisted in the 2013 Viva la Novella Competition, and *The Rattler & other stories*. *The Rattler* (novella) was shortlisted for the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award and received a High Commendation.

Black Rock White City was published by Transit Lounge in April 2015. It won the Miles Franklin Award 2016.

Alec Patrić's next novel – *Atlantic Black* – will be published with Transit Lounge in 2017. Alec lives in bayside Melbourne and is a St Kilda bookseller.

Reviews

'Extraordinarily powerful debut novel.'
The Australian

'It is very good; it may be a classic.'
The Saturday Paper

'Intense, lyrical and troubling.'
Sydney Morning Herald and The Sunday Age

'Bleak, but also intensely beautiful, Black Rock White City is compelling reading.'
The Big Issue. Five Star review.

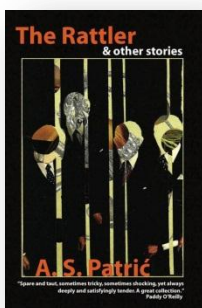
'This is not a pick-me-up, put-me-down book. Patrić builds his characters superbly and the plot builds to a shocking and surprising climax. Some of the writing is confronting but it will grab your attention and not let it go.'
Barry Dick, Sunday Territorian

'Everyone is a victim. Lives are ruined. Tragedy does not take sides. And therein lies the knockout blow of this truly wonderful novel: the scars endure, the poison continues to course through the vein, but simple humanity might still triumph.'
Bram Presser, Bait for Bookworms Blogspot

'It's not just another relationship novel; it's not just a novel about sad migrant experiences and damaged people. Black Rock White City is a novel about the complexity of city life and although it is firmly grounded in the suburbs of Melbourne, it is universal in its fully realised ambitions.'
Lisa Hill, ANZ Litlovers

'It's a story of war without being a war story; it's thrilling but without a thriller's tendency to rely on stereotyped heroes and victims. It's the kind of almost-mystery novel you'll race to the end of, then bemoan the fact you didn't take more time to savour. Perhaps most importantly, it's a tale of heartbreak in reverse.'
Cara Lennon, BMA Magazine

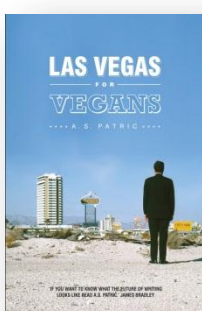
Previous works



'An explosive mix of muscular prose and sharp originality. In this collection, A. S. Patrić proves himself to be a writer who must be taken very seriously.' Vanessa Gebbie, author of *Short Circuit, A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*.

'Spare and taut, sometimes tricky, sometimes shocking, yet always deeply and satisfyingly tender. A great collection.' Paddy O'Reilly.

'A.S. Patrić is that rarest of writers - he is absolutely fearless. His stories take risks, his characters soar and his prose sings. Be careful. These stories might cut you.' Ryan O'Neill.

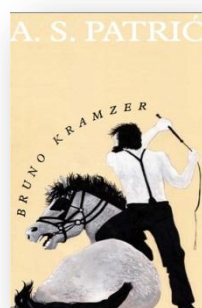


'This is the second collection of short stories from Melbourne writer (and bookseller) A.S. Patrić, following last year's The Rattler and Other Stories. In Las Vegas for Vegans, Patrić displays an extraordinary emotional range, moving from comic and sexy to wistful and despairing—often within a single story.'

Jennifer Peterson-Ward, *Bookseller + Publisher*

'A. S. Patrić is one of our most daring new writers. Las Vegas for Vegans shows how daring he can be. It is a wonderful book.' Wayne Macauley

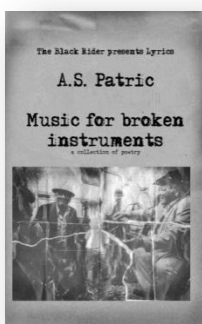
'Patrić chisels out his stories like a master craftsman, chipping and honing and smoothing away the edges and splinters of reality, leaving us with small, beautifully formed objet d'art on the page.' John Birmingham



'Patrić is to Kafka what Stoppard was to Shakespeare.' Bait for Bookworms.

'A study of evil at once deceptively simple and tremendously engaging. Bruno Kramzer's strange and troubling tale will only enhance A. S. Patrić's reputation as one of Australia's most innovative story tellers.' Patrick Holland

'Patrić does the avant garde with aplomb.' Booklover Book Reviews



'The otherworldly surrealism of 'A Lover in Fortuna' is a particular victory, the astonishing juxtaposition of images threaded together with extraordinary ease...

...Elsewhere in Music for broken instruments, Patrić brings this magic imagery to the every day. In 'King Hit', he conjures prisons only mice escape from, a coffee cup skull and an old man dancing like a king. In the poem 'We of the Synchronised Yawns', destiny becomes the train that leaves at 3.13am in the station of your mind. Each image is a wonder in and of itself.' Maxine Beneba Clarke, *Overland*

For discussion

- The title links 'Black Rock', a suburb of Melbourne, to 'White City', which is the translation of Belgrade in Serbian. But the symbolism of both those names has deeper meaning. Discuss.
- The novel is written in the present tense, from multiple points of view. What effect does this have on the story? What other stylistic techniques did you notice in reading this novel?
- What importance do the characters living in the suburbs depicted in *Black Rock White City* place on their migrant identity? Are there characters for whom this identity is particularly important and, conversely, are there characters that distance themselves from it? Discuss.
- Words and language – and the absence of language – are key themes of this book. Compare and contrast the way words and language are used by Jovan, Suzana and Dr Graffito.
- Discuss how *Black Rock White City* highlights the complex connection between language and identity.
- What does the novel say about the nature and role of silence in our lives?
- Consider the ways in which *Black Rock White City* addresses the act of seeing – of looking, engaging, recognising, judging, misinterpreting, ignoring etc...
- Did you find any humour in this book?
- Discuss the various narrative modes Patrić uses to unfold this story, in particular in relation to Dr Graffito.
- Miles Franklin Award judges commented that Patrić's '*idiosyncratic awareness and sometimes disconcerting vision inhabits the margins between realism and fable*'. Find examples in the novel where this applies and discuss.
- Compare and contrast the different ways Jovan and Suzana Brakočević approach their immigrant status and their ability to deal with their new lives as the book progresses.
- Suzana believes that Jovan's broken English is '*some strange point of pride. That he doesn't want to rid himself of the heavy accent that makes sales assistants or doctors or the landlord talk to him as if he's a cretin. That he knows how to form perfectly constructed grammatical sentences and feels more comfortable at a distance to English – a language to dabble in, and play with, only. Everything that he has been serious about, all his work, left behind with his native tongue.*' [pp.103-104] Do you agree with Suzana's opinion? If correct, what does it tell us about Jovan's state of mind?
- How important is it to Jovan's survival to find effective responses to Graffito's messages? Discuss.

For discussion [continued]

- Though their relationship lacks intimacy and is sexually dysfunctional, there is a deep bond between Jovan and Suzana. How does this bond sustain both of them? Is this bond destructive in any way?
- Discuss how A. S. Patrić uses sex scenes to show character.
- Discuss how Jovan's sex with Tammie is crucial to his continued existence.
- Minor characters are portrayed in significant ways. Consider the following characters and discuss what role that character plays in the thematic development of the novel: Miss Richards, Vladimir Mitrovich, Dickens, the Silvers, the Coultas, the reporter.
- Consider Suzana in comparison to Jelka. Discuss the similarities and differences between the two women.
- Discuss the symbolism of Jovan's gift of the red metal tractor.
- Is this novel a hopeful one? Do you feel Jovan and Suzana have a bright future ahead of them?
- How does *Black Rock White City* represent Australia's attitude to migrants?
- In an interview in *Good Reading Magazine* [30 August 2015], A. S. Patrić said '*Literature can return us to our humanity.*' What do you think he meant by that?
- In discussing fiction with filmmaker Terry Gilliam, Salman Rushdie stated that a writer needed to move beyond the real world in order to be able to comment on the real world¹. South African writer Freed agrees, stating '*In the battle of competing truths, fiction, if it is done right, will always win over what fondly passes for fact... ..It is life on the page. It has made order out of chaos, sense out of the senseless.*'² In stories depicting the plight of refugees, do you agree that fiction is the better platform? Why, or why not?
- Considering your answer to the above question, are there some subjects that should not be used for fiction? Or does rendering difficult subjects in fiction make them easier to understand and encourage empathy?
- In a review in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [30 April 2015], reviewer Owen Richardson states '*he [A.S. Patrić] is a writer who, deliberately or not, continues Patrićk White's mission to bring European modernism to the Australian suburbs.*' What is your understanding of 'European modernism', and do you agree with this description of Patrić's work?

¹ Rushdie S, 'Salman Rushdie talking to Terry Gilliam', *Lost in La Mancha*, 'Conversations' - 29th Annual Telluride Film Festivals, September 2002, filmed by Telluride Community Television, DVD: Madman Cinema / The Globe Film Co / Rialto Entertainment: US & UK: 2002

² Freed L, *Reading, Writing and Leaving Home*, US Toronto London: Harcourt, 2005, p39.

Suggested reading

The Cellist of Sarajevo – Steven Galloway [Text Publishing, 2009]

Sarajevo: A War Journal – Zlatko Dizdarević [author] Anselm Hollo [translator], [Fromm International, 1993 – non-fiction]

The Bridge on the Drina – Ivo Andrić [author], L. Edwards [translator], [Allen & Unwin, 1959]

Amber – Stephan Collishaw [Sceptre: Hodder & Stoughton UK, 2004]

The Orchard on Fire – Shena Mackay [Moyer Bell, 1995]

That Devil's Madness – Dominique Wilson [Transit Lounge, 2016]

By the Sea – Abdulrazak Gurnah [New Press, 2001]

The Suitcase: Refugee Voices from Bosnia and Croatia– R. Boric, J. Mertus, J. Tesanovic & H. Metikos [University of California Press, 1997 – non-fiction]

Crime and Punishment – Fyodor Dostoyevsky [Penguin Books Ltd, 1998 (1866)]

War and Peace– Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy [Leo Tolstoy] – [Penguin Classics 2012 (1869)]

Exile: The Lives and Hopes of Werner Pelz – Roger Averill [Transit Lounge, 2012]

Kite Runner – Khaled Hosseini [Riverhead Books, 2003]

The Arrival – Shaun Tan [Hodder & Stoughton, 2006 – graphic novel]

More to the Story: Conversations with refugees (2015) – Rosemary Sayer [Margaret River Press, 2015 – non-fiction]

The English Class – Ouyang Yu [Transit Lounge, 2010]

Black Rock White City

A.S. Patrić

Transit Lounge Publishing

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