

# READING GROUP NOTES

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## About the book

In this haunting new novel, Katerina Klova and her mother are crossing the Atlantic by ocean liner. When Anne suffers a psychotic breakdown, Katerina is left alone on a ship full of strangers who span classes and stations, all of whom carry their ambitions, fears and obsessions with them. For a seventeen-year-old girl, the daughter of an ambassador, it's an exciting, frightening world to navigate.

A.S. Patrić's writing in *Atlantic Black* is achingly tender, the tone merciless but heartbreaking in its compassion. It is a psychologically intense and affecting story of unexpected familial betrayal, of a mother and daughter's relationship, of a brother and father whose voices resonate from afar. Personal loneliness, love and loss, are tightly bound to the wider reality of a world set on a fateful course. The legacy of violence, and of how the First World War precipitated the Second World War reverberates as if 'tolling on the inside of a church bell'. Through the eyes of Katerina and her own family's place within a fracturing world, we see the way damage, yet also hope, are passed from one generation to another.

The story takes place over one day and night, New Year's Eve, 1939. The *RMS Aquitania* steams across the Atlantic Ocean. On the horizon the world is about to explode.

## About the author

### **WINNER of the Miles Franklin Literary Award 2016**

A.S. Patrić is a bookseller and teacher of creative writing. He is the author of two short story collections – *Las Vegas for Vegans*, published in 2012 by Transit Lounge, and shortlisted for the 2013 Queensland Literary Awards' Steele Rudd Prize, and *The Rattler & other stories*.

*The Rattler* (novella) was shortlisted for the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award and received a High Commendation.

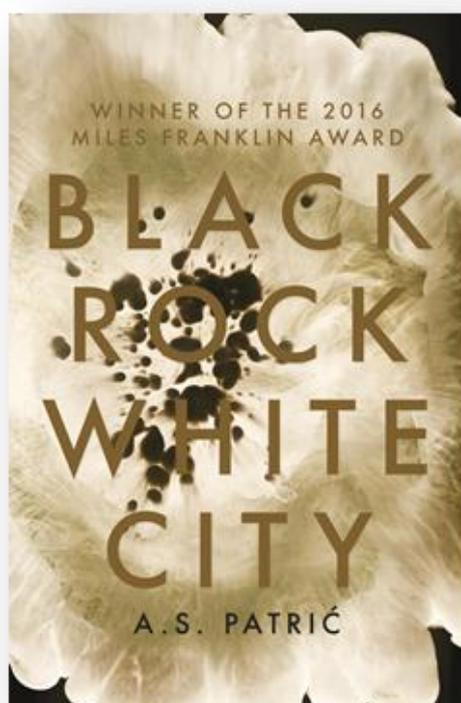
He is also the author of *Bruno Kramzer*, which was shortlisted in the 2013 Viva la Novella Competition.

His debut novel *Black Rock White City* was published to critical acclaim in 2015 and won the Miles Franklin Award in 2016.

A new collection of stories – *The Butcherbird Stories* – will be out in 2018. Alec lives in bayside Melbourne with his wife and two daughters.

<http://aspaticink.blogspot.com.au/>

## Previous works



### Winner of the 2016 Miles Franklin Award

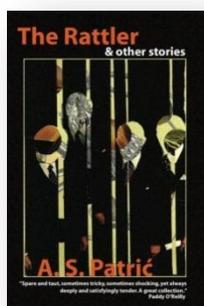
*'Extraordinarily powerful debut novel.'*  
*The Australian*

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

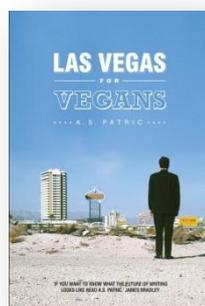
*'Intense, lyrical and troubling.'*  
*Sydney Morning Herald and The Sunday Age*

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

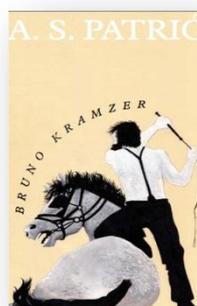
*'This is not a pick-me-up, put-me-down book. Patric builds his characters superbly and the plot builds to a shocking and surprising climax. Some of the writing is confronting but it will grab your attention and not let it go.'*  
*Barry Dick, Sunday Territorian*



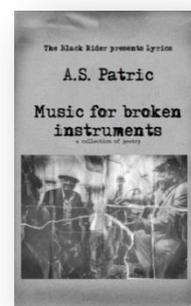
*'A.S. Patric is that rarest of writers - he is absolutely fearless. His stories take risks, his characters soar and his prose sings. Be careful. These stories might cut you.'* Ryan O'Neill.



*'Patric displays an extraordinary emotional range, moving from comic and sexy to wistful and despairing—often within a single story.'*  
Jennifer Peterson-Ward,  
Bookseller + Publisher



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



*The otherworldly surrealism of 'A Lover in Fortuna' is a particular victory, the astonishing juxtaposition of images threaded together with extraordinary ease... Patric brings this magic imagery to the everyday... Each image is a wonder in and of itself.'* Maxine Beneba Clarke, *Overland*

## For discussion

- *Atlantic Black* is written from Katerina's point of view, over the span of only one day and one night – what effect does this have on the story? Discuss.
- Journey as a metaphor for life is often used in literature. Discuss this metaphor as relevant to Katerina's experiences.
- A ship is often a symbolic element in fiction. How is the *RMS Aquitania* symbolic of Katerina's life?
- Apart from opposing concepts of freedom versus responsibility, and of alienation, what other themes does Patrić explore in *Atlantic Black*?
- Whether we want it to or not, the past will often reappear, to be relived or rejected. Discuss how the past has influenced both major and minor characters in *Atlantic Black*. Think not only of the personal experiences the characters underwent, but also of the time in history these characters occupy.
- Compare and contrast Katerina's relationship with her mother, to that with her father and her brother.
- Discuss Audrius' and Anne's relationship. How much do you think the times they live in has influenced this relationship. Considering we learn of their relationship from Katerina's point of view, how correct do you think it is?
- 'When she [Anne] was with Audrius Klova, that distaste was playful and mischievous. Katerina knows it comes from a much deeper, bitter place.' [p167] What does Katerina mean by this?
- Audrius told Anne that *the English had never been loyal to a greater principle of civilisation, they had only ever been able to be loyal to themselves, to their own interests. "The English are defined by their petty vanity and an unrivalled purity of hypocrisy."* [p168] Considering Anne's origins [*a working-class family in Liverpool*] p104], what does this tell you about Audrius' and Anne's relationship? Anne's behaviour?
- In describing Anne's dressmaking, Patrić writes '*As if Anne were filling the spaces with versions of herself that had vanished, and when she made gowns for Katerina and moved her limbs as though they belonged to a life-sized doll she was making a ghost of Katerina as well*' [p105]. What does that tell you about Anne's personality? And what is meant by 'making a ghost of Katerina'?
- Why did Anne gouge out her eye? Was it just a random manifestation of her psychosis, or was there a deeper meaning?
- After finding out that her mother has gouged out her eye, Katerina met twice with the doctor [in the barber shop and restaurant], but neither times did she enquire about her mother. Did you find this odd? Why do you think Katerina avoided asking after her mother? Why did the doctor not bring it up sooner?
- '*I have a private theory that the real reason for such widespread hysteria, so much emotional suffering, is because trauma is often experienced by us as a species, and it is as a species that our deepest traumas affect us individually*' [p109]. Discuss what Blackshaw meant by this.

## For discussion [continued]

- Discuss Blackshaw's personality. How do you think he sees Katerina?
- '*She speaks as the blood drips down over her lip. She would normally have stopped, pinched the soft part of her nose at the bridge.*' [p110] Why would Katerina not try to stop her nose bleed? What does it tell you about her frame of mind at that point?
- After her abortion, Katerina dreams that her mother is by her bedside, knitting her a red scarf [p115]. Discuss the symbolism expressed in this scene.
- In discussing her abortion, Katerina says '*Afterwards I did feel like a cat that my mother had fixed. And, of course, not really fixed, not permanently fixed.*' [p113] What did Katerina mean by 'not permanently fixed'?
- When Blackshaw suggests nasal cauterisation for Katerina's frequent nosebleeds, she answers '*As long as it's not a knitting needle... .. I suppose that's a myth. But you never know. Maybe that's what was used once upon a time.*' [p112] Katerina is not referring to nasal cauterisation here. What is she referring to?
- There are a lot of disfigured/damaged/injured people on board – the brigadier, Katerina with her bite and nose bleed, Anne, Tomalin [the barber's assistant], the porter who hobbles, the waiter with pain in his hip, man fishing from the boat deck missing most of his fingers, Kurt Greener – the chatty man who has sat next to Katerina on the bench '*with a cancerous emaciation about him*' [p177] and, of course, Farrar [the boy in toilet cubicle]. Is this a true reflection of any random gathering of people, or is Patrić symbolising something else here. Discuss.
- What is the overriding message of the *Book of Job*? What does it symbolise in terms of *Atlantic Black*?
- How did you interpret the pages from the *Book of Job* left under Katerina's door? Did you interpret them to be a message for her, or something about the person leaving them? Did your opinion change once you knew who left them?
- Compare and contrast Anne's relationship with Katerina to her relationship with Kornél.
- Compare and contrast Katerina's relationship with Kornél to her relationship with her father.
- Consider Querida and Allegralita. Discuss the differences between the two women. What role do these characters play in this novel?
- '*...if her ideals had lost something in the translation from her immaculate conception, the process of the word being made flesh always resulted in elements of corruption, "yet that, my darling, is in the nature of the flesh. Not in the soul of my revolution."*' [p168] What does Aduis mean by this? What does it say about his character? Discuss.
- Anne '*might have intended to master Russian on arrival yet her understanding of the language remained shallow.*' [p167] Is it ever possible for a non-native ever to learn the subtler meaning of a language? How does Patrić use the nuances of word interpretation in *Atlantic Black*?

## For discussion [continued]

- When writing about the man dressed as a jester on the boat deck, Patrić writes '*Very much the Stańczyk expression.*' [176] Who was the original Stańczyk jester? What does he symbolise in this instance?
- Katerina is frequently rude. How did you interpret that rudeness?
- Katerina's mental state can be said to fluctuate between dislocation and wholeness. Discuss.
- '*When I was a baby my parents put me in a suitcase*' Katerina tells Farrar [p195]. What is the symbolism of the suitcase? Discuss.
- What does Katerina's behaviour towards Farrar tell you about her character? Why, in the end, does she leave him in the bathroom?
- The stories that Katerina tells Stephen, about living in '*Xanadu where Kubla Khan lay down his crown*' [p73], and Farrar, about the '*old king in Africa who understood me. His name was Nxumalo*' [pp195-198] are both metaphors for her life. Discuss.
- Discuss Katerina's sexual activities, both before embarking the *RMS Aquitania* and during her journey. How are they a reflection of her personality?
- What do you think happened to the letters in the cherry-wood box? Do you think the Argentine sisters really took them? Why would they be interested them? And why would Anne want the letters destroyed?
- In describing the passengers celebrating the new year, Patrić writes '*There's as much desperation as there is happiness in their welcome of 1939*' [p216]. Why 'desperation'?
- What is your opinion of Anne's behaviour towards Katerina, once discharged from the ship's hospital?
- What does Heinrich mean when he says '*They do not see, we are the war. The war is us.*' [p276]
- Why do you think Heinrich wanted to kill himself? Discuss.
- After reading the ending of *Atlantic Black*, did you realise it had been foreshadowed earlier in the novel? What other foreshadowing did you recognise?
- Did you anticipate the ending? Did you feel that it was inevitable, that the story could only have unfolded in that way? Why/why not? Discuss.
- Discuss how the themes explored in *Atlantic Black* also relate to this day and age.

## Suggested reading

*The Royal Game* – Stefan Zweig; BW Huebsch (trans.) [Pushkin Press, 2001 (1941)]

*The Aunt's Story* – Patrick White [Random House, 2008 (1948)]

*From the Wreck* – Jane Rawson [Transit Lounge 2017]

*Journey by Moonlight* – Antal Szerb; P. V. Czipot (trans.) [Allen & Unwin, 2016 (1937)]

*Navigatio* – Patrick Holland [Transit Lounge 2014]

*Ship of Fools* – Katherine Anne Porter [Little, Brown & Company, 1962]

*The White Hotel* – D.M. Thomas [Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1981]

*Crossing on the Paris* – Dana Gynther [Simon & Schuster, 2012]

*The Edge of the Alphabet* – Janet Frame [W.H. Allen UK, 1962]

*Rites of Passage* – William Golding [Allen & Unwin, 2013 (1980)]

*The Portrait of a Lady* – Henry James [Penguin Classics, 2013 (1881)]

*Atlantic Black*

A.S. Patrić

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Transit Lounge Publishing

95 Stephen St

Yarraville

Victoria 3013

Australia

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