

The
Butcherbird
Stories

A.S. Patrić

WINNER OF THE MILES FRANKLIN

READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

Eleven stories. Each like a matchstick struck to illuminate the darkness. Evocations of place ranging from a Bangla jungle to the deep, blue Danube to a winter beach in Melbourne excite and seduce. But what truly draws the reader in are the unexpected landscapes of people's lives, explored with rare sensitivity, grace and a fearless truthfulness.

A lonely St Kilda chef invites a beautiful busker to use his spare room. A father sings a lullaby to comfort his young daughter who has woken from a nightmare. A taxi driver picks up an old-world gentleman who is reluctant to disclose his destination. A young immigrant boy growing up in the western suburbs of Melbourne daydreams of infinite possibility.

Death, loneliness, passion and belief: Patrić takes on the big questions in life and writes about the small people of the world with stylistic verve and deep humanity. This collection of stories reveals the author, best known for his award-winning novels, as a true master of the short story form.

About the author

WINNER of the Miles Franklin Literary Award 2016

A.S. Patrić is a bookseller and teacher of creative writing. His debut novel *Black Rock White City* won the Miles Franklin Award in 2016. *Atlantic Black*, his second novel, was published in late 2017, Longlisted for the ABIA Awards 2018 and Highly Commended for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 2017. *The Butcherbird Stories* is his third collection of stories.

A.S. Patrić is the author of two other 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*.

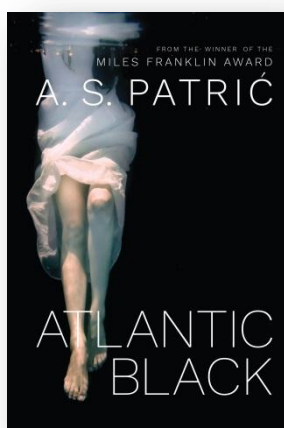
The Rattler (novella) was shortlisted for the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award and received a High Commendation.

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

Alec lives in bayside Melbourne with his wife and two daughters.

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

Previous works



Highly Commended Victorian Premier's Literary Awards 2017

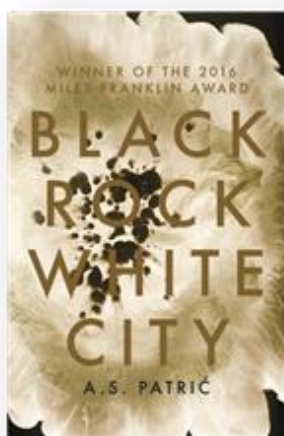
Longlisted ABIA Awards 2018

'A powerful and mesmerising voyage into darkness. Atlantic Black creates an indelible portrait of humanity sailing towards war.'

Heather Rose, Winner of the 2017 Stella Prize

'I am still walking the slick decks of Atlantic Black, looking for a way out for both myself and Katerina. She is a singular character – such a perfect and excruciating balance of acting and being acted upon. A brilliant and devastating novel that will not let me go.'

Myfanwy Jones, author of Leap



Winner of the 2016 Miles Franklin Award

'Extraordinarily powerful debut novel.'

The Australian

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

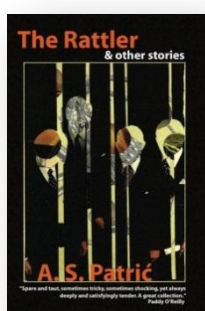
The Saturday Paper

'Intense, lyrical and troubling.'

Sydney Morning Herald and The Sunday Age

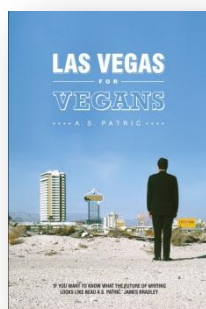
'Bleak, but also intensely beautiful, Black Rock White City is compelling reading.'

The Big Issue. Five Star review.



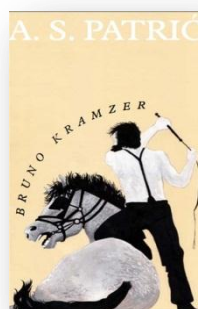
'A.S. Patric is that rarest of writers - he is absolutely fearless. His stories take risks, his characters soar and his prose sings. Be careful. These stories might cut you.'

Ryan O'Neill.



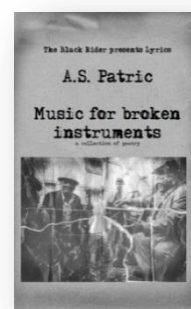
'Patric displays an extraordinary emotional range, moving from comic and sexy to wistful and despairing—often within a single story.'

Jennifer Peterson-Ward,
Bookseller + Publisher



'Patric is to Kafka what Stoppard was to Shakespeare.'

Bram Presser, 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

- Consider the title of this anthology. What elements of butcherbird behaviour hint at the overriding theme these stories?
- Did the epigraph at the beginning of this book influence what you imagined the stories to be? Did your interpretation change as you read each story?
- In this anthology, both *Among the Ruins* and *The Flood* are novellas. Apart from length, what else differentiates a short story from a novella, and a novella from a novel?
- *The Bengal Monkey*:
 - o Consider the title - to whom or what is it referring?
 - o Why would Clara keep the portrait?
 - o What was Lucas alluding to/mean, after staring at the portrait, when he said '*A soul is a knot and I suppose the monkeys just mistake it for a nut—crack it open instead of trying to untie it as we do.*' [p3]
 - o What is the symbolism of the snail shells on Clara's stomach in the painting?
 - o Do you think there is anything special about Luca's Shambhala wine?
 - o '*Clara gazed down into the glass and saw his reflection in the tiny pool of wine and understood what Lucas had done.*' [p8] What has Lucas done?
 - o What is Patrić alluding to when he wrote '*the demon dancing on the head of a pin.*' [p9]? And why demon?
 - o Consider the last paragraph of this story [p12] – how did it change your understanding of what you had read before?
- *Avulsion*:
 - o How does the title of this story foreshadow the ending?
 - o Do you consider the swimmer's reaction to seeing the thumb appropriate? Why/why not?
 - o What literary devices does Patrić use in this story to give it a rhythm, a feeling of repetition?
 - o Did you expect the ending?
- *Dead Sun*:
 - o '*A snow globe would have been a better memento, at least more fitting for their home, since his wife had a series of miscarriages over the years of their marriage and was never able to bring a living child into the world.*' [p25]. Why would a snow globe be more fitting?
 - o What is the symbolic meaning of the postcard [p30]
 - o Discuss the effect of the use of the homophone in the title.
 - o How did your opinion of/feelings re the protagonist change as the story developed? At what point did they begin to change? Why? Discuss.
 - o What elements of the gothic style does Patrić use in this story? Consider not only literary devices but characters as well.
 - o Consider the old couple's behaviour towards the protagonist – why do you think they behave this way?
 - o What does the albatross symbolise?
 - o Who do you think the protagonist of this story is?

For discussion [continued]

- *Butcherbird*

- What is the underlying theme of this story?
- How did you interpret the protagonist's reaction to the email about Cassie's death [p46]?
- How does Patrić expose the narrator's true feelings as the story progresses?
- How does the setting and weather shape this story?
- Compare and contrast the symbolic meaning of the butcherbirds and magpie in this story
- In this story, Patrić does not use Christian names for any of the characters except for Cassie – the ex-girlfriend killed in a car crash. Why do you think that is? What effect does this have?
- What other elements does Patrić use to create the tension the protagonist is feeling?

- *Amy in # 12*

- How did you view Amy's concern for the bird's behaviour? Explain.
- Discuss the significance of Amy covering the bird cage so that her friends only hear it singing [p56]. How is this symbolic of her own behaviour and her relationship with her friends?

- *Among the Ruins*

- *Among the Ruins* can be described as post-modernist in style. What elements of post-modernism does Patrić use here, to what effect?
- Consider Kafka's journal entry at the beginning of this story. What did you interpret this quote to mean? Why do you think Patrić started this novella with this particular quote? Did it influence your expectations as you began to read *Among the Ruins*?
- Discuss the ambiguities of Bruno's character. What effect does this have on how the reader responds to him?
- How does Bruno's family contribute to his conflicted feelings about the work he does?
- Compare and contrast Bruno's relationship with Conrad to Bruno's relationship with Rainer.
- To what/whom is Patrić alluding in the scene about the underwater swimmer [pp70-73]?
- Discuss the symbolic meaning of insects in this story.
- Discuss the techniques Patrić uses to explore the normalisation of evil. What effect do these have?
- What is the symbolic meaning of Bruno's relationship with Faramond, his horse?
- Why is the story of Jonah so important to Bruno? What is its symbolic meaning?
- What is Bruno really alluding to when he explains the value of a chess problem to his father-in-law [p92]?
- What does this story tell us about the control we have over our lives?
- Consider Bruno's last job, with Rainer and Otto. To which of Kafka's stories is Patrić alluding? Did this surprise you? Did you then recognise earlier references to this? Did it make you interpret *Among the Ruins* differently? Discuss.

For discussion [continued]

- *The Rothko*

- Mark Rothko was an American painter of Russian Jewish descent, generally identified as an abstract expressionist. He suicided at the height of his career in 1970. Does knowing who he was influence your reading of the story?
- Patrić writes '*The paintings go into the garage and then return after a few weeks.*' [p127] and '*They came back from the garage ...*' [p228]. Consider his choice of words here – what effect does this create?
- After taking the painting to Sinatra, the protagonist states '*I want to leave as much of the fury and humiliation behind me as I can.*' [pp130-131]. Why does he feel 'fury' and 'humiliation'? Is it only for being brushed off by Sinatra, or is it, like in the previous story when Bruno explains to his father-in-law Jonah's anger with God [pp93-94], because he realises '*he is just a piece in a game that means nothing*' [p95]? Discuss.
- Consider the last paragraph of this story. Did it change your earlier interpretation of the story? Discuss.

- *HB*

- *HB* is just over 500 words and can be classified as flash-fiction. Apart from length, what are the elements of flash-fiction?
- How does Patrić manage to distil the history of both women in so few words? Discuss.
- Consider the last line. Did it trigger an emotional response/reaction from you? What was it, and why?

- *Memories of Jane Doe*

- Which elements of traditional story writing did Patrić break away from in this story? What effect did this have on your enjoyment/appreciation of the story?
- Why did Patrić write every character's story in the third person except for Nina's. How does this influence the story? Discuss.
- Patrić has the ability to make trauma/violence beautiful. How does he achieve this?
- Why does Cicely not want to accept the possibility that Ron may have killed Nina?
- Consider the battery hens. How is their situation similar to that of Ron, Cicely and Nina?
- Discuss the effects of generosity in this story.
- What role does Isaac's story play in *Memories of Jane Doe*?

- *Punctuated Air*

- Is *Punctuated Air* a story, or is it autobiography? Why do you think as you do? Can it be both? Discuss.
- Compare and contrast the experience of immigrants coming by boats to that of immigrants coming by plane in this story. How does the journey influence their experience of their new country?
- Consider the title of this story. Apart from the tubercular coughing of his father, what else is it alluding to?
- Discuss the importance of words to the people in this piece [think books, languages, letters, radio etc].
- How does Patrić manage to create both the desolation and the optimism of the then-outer suburbs of Melbourne in the seventies?

For discussion [continued]

- *The Flood*

- Discuss the different possible meanings within this story of the title *The Flood*
- How does the weather/rain shape this story?
- How does the motif of the graffiti mirror reflect Koschade's view of himself and his life?
- What function do Areti's texts have in this story?
- Discuss the different ways Patrić explores the fragility of life in this story.
- What is the symbolic meaning of the mandarin?
- Discuss the importance of Maria Callas' voice to Koschade.
- What aspects of Australian society are reflected in *The Flood*?
- What does this story reveal about Koschade's religious beliefs?
- What imagery does Patrić use to depict Koschade's feelings and emotions?
- What does the statue *The Pathfinder* [pp215-216] symbolise in this story?
- What does Koschade's explanation of how he saw the world as a child and the story of the little matchgirl tell you about him?
- How does Patrić foreshadow Thomas Avon's intentions?
- What purpose does Thomas Avon's narrative about his son's Rottweiler have in this story?
- Were you surprised by Thomas Avon's actions at the end of the story? Why/why not? Discuss.

Suggested reading

The Trial – Franz Kafka; Breon Mitchell [trans] [Penguin Books Australia, 2015 (1925)]

The Girl with the Dogs – Anna Funder [Penguin Books Limited, 2015]

Chronicle of a Death Foretold – Gabriel García Márquez [Vintage, 2003]

The Stranger – Albert Camus; Matthew Ward [trans] [Vintage International, 1989 (1946)]

Notes from Underground – Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Michael Katz [trans] [Vintage Publishing, 1993 (1864)]

Dear Life: Stories – Alice Munro [Knopf, 2012]

The Hunter and other stories of men – David Cohen [Transit Lounge, 2018]

Pale Horse, Pale Rider – Katherine Anne Porter [Penguin Books Ltd, 2011]

Foreign Soil – Maxine Beneba Clarke [Hachette Australia 2013]

You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down – Alice Walker [Mariner Books, 2003 (1971)]

New and Rediscovered – Vicki Viidikas [Transit Lounge, 2010]

The Art of Living – John Gardner [Open Road Media, 2010]

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