

## Judges' Report: 2016 Voss Literary Prize

The winner of the 2016 Voss Literary Prize (\$5,000) for the best Australian novel published in 2015 is

Leah Kaminsky, for *The Waiting Room*, published by Random House.

*The Waiting Room* is set in the northern Israeli city of Haifa in 2001, during the Second Intifada. It opens with Dina Ronen, an Australian-born doctor resident in Haifa, going into premature labour amidst the carnage from a bomb blast which has destroyed the clinic where she works.

This is a novel obsessed with the presence of death in daily life. The radio dispenses bomb alerts along with the weather forecast. Pine cones drop like grenades. Dina imagines her six year old son as a future infantryman, taking a sniper's bullet. She is haunted by the ghosts of the dead, the many relatives who were butchered by the Nazis and her parents who survived the Holocaust, now buried in a Melbourne cemetery.

The most fully realised character in the book is her argumentative mother, dead some 20 years, but refusing to leave Dina's side or to hold back her stories of past terrors, her criticisms, her witticisms and her unasked for advice. It is her mother who, at the end, persuades Dina that 'love is more ferocious than terror' – a realisation, perhaps, that will enable Dina to find a way of living again in a deeply divided world.

*The Waiting Room* is an extraordinary Australian novel which, as Alice Nelson notes in a penetrating review in *The Sydney Review*, 'takes as its impossible project the redemption of the dead – or at the very least their preservation in the pages of literature'.

Kaminsky vividly evokes the claustrophobia of growing up in a Jewish enclave in Melbourne's Caulfield in the 1950s and the jostling of Jews, Soviet immigrants, Arabs, Iranian refugees and Christians in the streets and markets of Haifa. Her book captures the frantic energy of people trying to maintain a semblance of normal life in a time of war - the fraying of relationships, the loss of civility in the face of terror – and trying to find the courage it takes to endure.

The book, which has been years in the making, carries with it the ring of authenticity: Kaminsky is the Melbourne-born daughter of Polish Jewish refugees and a general practitioner who lived and worked in Haifa from 1991-2002.

Kaminsky's eye for physical detail, the way she brings her characters and their often tragic back-stories to life with compassion and humour, and her skill in ratchetting up tension make this a totally engrossing novel. But more than that, *The Waiting Room* transcends the specificities of place and time as it asks us to consider more universal questions: is it possible – or desirable - to forget the past? Can the burden of the dead on the living be overcome? Can the living bring rest to the troubled dead? Is it possible for a survivor, or the children of survivors, to live a 'normal' life? Can compassion for the individual outweigh prejudice born of fear? Who heals the healer?

Leah Kaminsky's *The Waiting Room* is an emotionally powerful, complex and thought-provoking novel – the Voss Literary prize judges hope this award will inspire a second novel from this gifted writer.

Judges: Elaine Lindsay, David Ellison, Amanda Nettelbeck, Brenda Walker, Anthony Uhlmann