In the Author’s Note at the end of his new novel, *The Street Sweeper*, Elliot Perlman mentions the risk that he might cause offence ‘by employing the idioms of cultures other than my own’. It seems to me that this is only one of many risks Perlman has taken in writing this novel, so many that I hardly know where to start.

For one thing, he has written a Holocaust novel when the market is overcrowded with Holocaust novels – ironic, when one of his themes is the indifference of the American public to Holocaust testimony immediately after the war. Perlman has included great chunks of history – seemingly undigested accounts of the American civil rights movement and the Second World War, without bothering to dovetail them neatly into his narrative. Sometimes this happens when an older man is telling his son, or a younger friend, about something he believes it is vital for the young man to know, but sometimes it’s just narrated in the omniscient third person without any such veneer of dramatization. He’s likely to bounce around among different points of view, even within the same paragraph. Accounts of the deaths of people unrelated to the main action are often interpolated, with the clear aim of demonstrating that everyone’s life and therefore everyone’s death is significant, but for the most part there’s a trail of connections to be followed, like a treasure hunt or a detective story, with historical truth as its unambiguous ultimate goal.

Creative writing experts would tell him to cut his book down to half its 550 pages, to show not tell, to keep better control of point of view, to introduce more postmodern indeterminacy into his narrative, not to be so keen to point a moral. Geordie Williamson, in the *Australian*, even went so far as to accuse the novel of lacking ‘characters with inner selves substantial enough to exercise readers’ empathetic muscles.’ *Pace* one of Australia’s leading critics, this astounds me. Perhaps my empathy is unusually easily aroused – but I don’t think so. Perlman’s main characters – Lamont, the black man struggling against racism and injustice in present-day New York, and Adam, the Australian Jewish historian adrift in America – these people had my full and unequivocal attention for the few days it took me to devour this novel. There were times I wondered whether I could actually bear it if things didn’t work out for them.

As the novel opens, Lamont witnesses an incident which turns out to have no serious consequences but encapsulates beautifully what Perlman later describes as his ‘chronic low-grade nervousness, a restlessness coupled with anxiety that was more or less constant … as though he was expecting a calamitous event that he was unable to identify and was therefore completely unable to prevent or avoid.’ That Lamont feels this way is already quite clear from various things that have happened, and how a reader’s empathy could fail to be engaged by this gentle, put-upon soul is a mystery to me. Adam is perhaps slightly less sympathetic, if one takes a rational view: he seems intent on destroying his own life, but still his raw misery is such that the gradual improvement which comes about through a series of lucky accidents comes as a huge relief.

*The Street Sweeper* is clearly not for everyone. Perhaps it requires a certain patience and suspension of the usual criteria by which novels are judged. However, I found it almost physically gripping, agonising not so much because of the horrors it describes – we haven’t exactly become inured to stories from the death camps, but a certain self-protectiveness might cushion their effect on a contemporary reader. No, the principal source of tension comes from the operation of chance in the lives of its characters – so much depends on their making the connections that we have already drawn, between a man’s cousin and her husband’s friend, or between a busy oncologist and a worker on probation in her hospital.
Didactic? Yes. Partisan? Yes. Long-winded? Perhaps. Other novels might be more finely written, but *The Street Sweeper* is still carefully structured and cleverly plotted. It’s also passionate, intelligent, wide-ranging and finally optimistic. And I hope there’s still a place in the literary world for novels like this one.