

Leah Kaminsky, *The Waiting Room* (Vintage Australia, 2015)

Haifa, Israel, May 2001, and a heavily pregnant woman, a doctor, is at the site of a bomb blast, picking her way carefully through the dead, perhaps looking for her husband who is not answering his phone. Her attention is suddenly caught by a coloured gemstone lying amid the rubble; 'the last thing she sees before she passes out is a mangled body lying in a heap over in one corner. Red lipstick still perfectly frames the dead woman's lips'.

From these opening pages the narrative of *The Waiting Room*, a debut novel by Australian writer and physician Leah Kaminsky, jumps back to six hours earlier. It's a technique we've grown familiar with through television: the reveal of the body before the title credits, then the scenes of familiar domesticity, the 'normal' before the catastrophe. In this case, the doctor, Dina, her husband Eitan and young son Shlomi are having a hurried breakfast before leaving for work and school. In the background Radio Haifa is alerting listeners to a possible terrorist attack in the city. Melbourne-born Dina has lived in Israel for ten years and has grown used to such warnings – there was a bombing in the centre of Tel Aviv just yesterday – but this is the first time there has been a high alert in Haifa. Conscious of her child's presence in the kitchen she switches the station to one playing Mozart.

Time moves slowly in a waiting room, and so it does in the opening pages; it is chapter six before Dina finally reaches her clinic. And slowly the reader realises that this is a novel not only written in the present tense but in real time: this is one climactic day in the life of a family doctor living far from home, and the narrative will move at her pace and in her head. A female Leopold Bloom, if you like, setting forth into the streets not of Dublin but of Haifa.

The child of Holocaust survivors, Dina is accompanied on her commute, as she is everywhere, by her dead mother, a constant presence in her life and voice in her head. She sees her, too:

Looking at her now, it's hard to believe that Dina's mother was once a beauty. Granted, death hasn't done much to enhance her appearance: the unkept bleached hair, grey roots showing, her pink nightie peeking out from under her quilted dressing-gown, orange slippers on her feet. Her mother hasn't changed since the evening she died. No Fashion Police in the afterlife, it seems.

Before leaving home, Dina and her Israeli-born husband have been arguing: she wants to return to Melbourne, he doesn't. She is worried about the safety of her children (she is eight months pregnant), and is plagued by visions of Schlomi as an 18-year-old conscript if they remain in Israel: 'She is living into his future, stepping out with him onto the battlefield ... reaching for him as he falls to the ground'.

Dina lives 'into' her past, too; her dreams are filled with her dead relatives who arrive 'carrying Kugel, gefilte fish, pickled herring and chopped liver with fried onions, trying to force their food and the horror onto her'. Almost everything Dina experiences, from snapping her shoe heel to hearing a recipe on the car radio, brings her mother to mind, and her mother's 'unavoidable tales'. It's as if she is sitting on Dina's shoulders, commenting on her day with interjections and anecdotes. Mostly these are short and entertaining; a few, like the story of buying carp at the Lodz fish market, go on far too long. But one does wonder how Dina keeps her mind on her patients and their treatments with these constant maternal interruptions. Which is perhaps intentional: Dina

Book reviews: *The Waiting Room* by Leah Kaminsky. Ruth Starke.
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

would be a better doctor if she were more focused and less emotionally invested. At one point the account of Dina's day stops for a full eight pages to tell the back story of an Iranian woman sitting in her waiting room. It's a harrowing tale but it sits oddly in the middle of the free indirect narrative which places the reader inside Dina's head and outside on the streets of a city facing a terror alert.

Anyone who has read Lily Brett will be familiar with 'survival guilt' felt by the offspring of Holocaust survivors. Dina has it in spades, although she attempts to shrug it off or, as a teenager in Caulfield ('a place hope went to die'), to fuck it away with the 'nice Jewish boys' approved of by her mother and, like her, 'unborn at Auschwitz station, but forever standing on that platform, in line, waiting to be chosen, to be sent right or left'. She rummages through her parents' hidden papers, 'determined to find the document that would reveal she was someone else's child, desperate to prove that she had been born unstoried, rather than carry the dark pages of her parents' life in her veins'.

It's writing like this that will constantly reward readers of *The Waiting Room*, but the clinical details of Dina's day are also enhanced by Kaminsky's own medical background – how to break the news to a patient, for example, that she is not carrying a longed-for child but has a cancer that will kill her within three months. (She fudges it.) Haifa is brought vividly to life; readers will close the novel feeling as if they have visited the markets, cafes and shops with Dina, and travelled the same traffic-clogged streets and narrow laneways.

The fragmented story is true to personal memory, particularly traumatic memory: this is how we make sense of things, by putting together shreds of stories, words and asides that often occur to us at inopportune moments. The inanimate objects that lodge themselves in Dina's memory – her mother's shoes, her father's glass eyewash cup – have their counterpart in the hundreds of thousands of objects taken from deported and murdered Jews and now displayed behind glass in Holocaust museums around the world.

But *The Waiting Room* is not solely a Holocaust novel; it is a novel about what it is like to live with fear in a country in a prolonged state of war. (Kaminsky herself lived in Israel for ten years.) Dina longs to take her children home, to visit her mother's grave, to watch the black swans on Albert Park Lake, to be in a *safe* city. 'Do you honestly think Melbourne is that much safer?' Eitan asks her, and given the recent terrorist attack that left six pedestrians killed in Bourke Street, he has a point.

Whether to stay or go is a constant source of conflict between husband and wife. He calls her a *galutnik*, a Diaspora Jew and a coward; he is a *sabra*, a strong Jew born on a kibbutz. But Dina, through her patients, knows that the courageous Israeli woman can also suffer from panic attacks and stomach ulcers born of an intense fear for her children.

In the final pages we return to the bomb blast, learning with a shock exactly where Dina is, what has been targeted and who has been killed. And when her dead father visits her hospital bed, Dina learns – or is reminded of – the secret of his past and her beginning, just as her own daughter is born. Now, more than ever, Dina wants to go home to Melbourne. When she does, she takes her children to visit her mother's grave and is finally able to lay her to rest.

Ruth Starke

Flinders University.

Book reviews: *The Waiting Room* by Leah Kaminsky. Ruth Starke.
Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 1, November 2017.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

2