

Friendly intrigue

While many of us never get beyond the pleasantries with our neighbours, author Suzanne Leal's life was changed by a close friendship with her former landlord.

Through openness and kindness

Leal, a Wollongong expatriate, developed an intimacy with her Sydney neighbours in the early 1990s which continues to this day and was the basis of her gripping 2006 debut novel *Border Street*.

Leal, who regards her former Tamarama landlords Fred and Eva Perger as family, used their experiences of the Holocaust to create the fictional story of a young Australian woman who becomes intrigued with her Czechoslovakian-Jewish neighbour.

Fred is transformed into the character Frank; and the fictional Kate is loosely based on Leal.

Leal, a brilliant student who graduated from Smith's Hill High School in 1985, studied French and German literature at Sydney University before becoming a criminal lawyer with the Legal Aid Commission.

She realised she had a novel in the making when Fred began revealing details of his life in Prague during the Nazi occupation.

By 2001, when Leal began recording his oral history on tape, she had moved

to a different Sydney suburb but the pair remained close.

Much has been written about this particular time in history but Leal could see the compelling and revelatory nature of Fred's story.

"I knew so little about the Czech Republic," she says. "Anything that I had read about the Holocaust was Polish-based or German-based."

Leal says the fact her protagonist does not derive strength from his religious beliefs added to the story's appeal and depth. He has Aryan looks (blond and blue-eyed), speaks German, and is slightly obnoxious.

"What I find fascinating is that he is completely areligious and resents being classified as Jewish, seeing himself rather as Czech," she says.

Leal also believes her special relationship with the Pergers was an important element in developing authentic characters in *Border Street*.

"As Fred's neighbour and confidante, I found myself in an unusual position: I was almost family, but not quite," she reflects.

"This meant that while Fred knew me well enough to trust me, we had enough distance from each other to enable him to recount his life to me with some objectivity and, consequently, with absolute candour."

Leal admits that Fred's anti-Asian sentiments initially annoyed her, because having been a victim himself shouldn't he have had more compassion for others in dire circumstances?

As Leal developed the character of Frank, she pondered the question

of whether too much is expected of people who live through extraordinary circumstances.

"Frank is annoying, racist and absolutely endearing and those characteristics can inhabit one person," she says. "I think to demand more of him because he almost died in this Nazi era is presumptuous for someone like me."

Leal, the mother of three boys, comes from an academic background. Father Professor Barry Leal, now retired, lectured at the University of Wollongong in European languages and is a former vice-chancellor of The University of Southern Queensland; and mother Roslyn, also retired, was a teacher.

Border Street, released by Scribe Publications, was the result of 12 months of interviewing and three years of writing on a part-time basis.

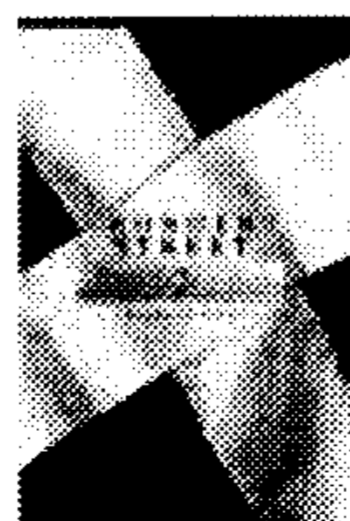
During that time, Leal suspended her lawyer duties to take up a position on the Migration Review Tribunal.

LOUISE TURK



MEET THE AUTHOR

Leal will speak at the Sydney Writers' Festival on the topic of Fiction from Fact on May 31, and on the subject of Remembering the Holocaust on June 1.
Website: www.swf.org.au



BORDER STREET
Suzanne Leal
Scribe Publications,
\$32.95

From this date, then, from April 1942, the Germans had everything of mine: the house, the factory, the jewellery, my family, my girlfriend.

Border Street, Suzanne Leal