

Life's borders bristle with barricades

Border Street

By Suzanne Leal

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THERE ARE COMPELLING STORIES behind many elderly people that are capable of affecting younger generations as they try to put a human face on the past. *Border Street* is one example of such a collision of generations that has a lasting impact upon one young woman.

Sydney in the mid-'90s. A couple in their 20s — Kate and Cameron — rent one half of a duplex owned by an eastern European couple, Vera and Frank, who are in their 70s. The landlords are reserved to begin with but after several attempts Kate engages Frank in a brief conversation in German.

So begins the story of Kate, a Sydney criminal lawyer, who is intrigued by the history of Frank and Vera, and sets herself the task of learning about their lives and how they came to settle on Border Street, near Bronte.

In the claustrophobic conditions of sharing both a courtyard and paper-thin walls between homes, coupled with an overly inquisitive Frank (who likes to appear at the window when Kate and Cameron are alone), the two couples' lives intertwine from an early stage. What follows is a history that stuns and saddens the naive, idealistic Kate and causes her to question her

notions about love, about fair play, and her belief that luck will deal everyone a good hand in the end.

During a series of taped interviews that Kate proposes — initially out of sheer curiosity — Frank unravels his youth in 1930s Czechoslovakia, through the Nazi invasion, his internment in the Czech Jewish ghetto Theresienstadt, then Auschwitz, Kaufering, and finally Dachau, before the war's end and his return to Prague. Frank's wife Vera offers her own history to Kate over cooking lessons and coffee.

As Kate's involvement in their lives intensifies, so her relationship with Cameron is increasingly strained. His frustration at being watched over by the couple frequently boils over. Kate is likewise agitated from time to time, overwhelmed by Frank's need for her attention and care whenever he chooses to knock on their door — which is often.

This is Suzanne Leal's first novel, and she acknowledges a couple who had become like family to her and allowed her to use their stories. Perhaps because of this, Frank's account is the most detailed part of the story and his character the most complete and believable.

It often comes as a surprise that

the action takes place in Sydney, as much of the heart of the narrative is Frank's first-person account, in his heavily accented English beautifully emulated on paper by Leal, of the horrors he experienced at the hands of the Nazis in Europe.

Indeed, we learn little of Frank's relationship with his wife, or of Kate's with Cameron.

Tales of the Second World War and its prisoners are not new to us but *Border Street* gives a detailed account of the realities of genocide as they were experienced by two of its survivors. It also gives an honest impression of the deeply lonely plight of those who lost their families and friends in the butchery of 1940s Europe and sought to rebuild their lives a long way from their birthplace. Frank describes his attempts at finding happiness, as well as the weight of his sadness and grief, with such brutal honesty it will lodge in your heart.

Border Street tells a story of one man's survival against enormous odds, and of its lasting effects. Leal has recounted this tale and woven a warm account of the unlikely friendship between people with 40 years and continents between them.