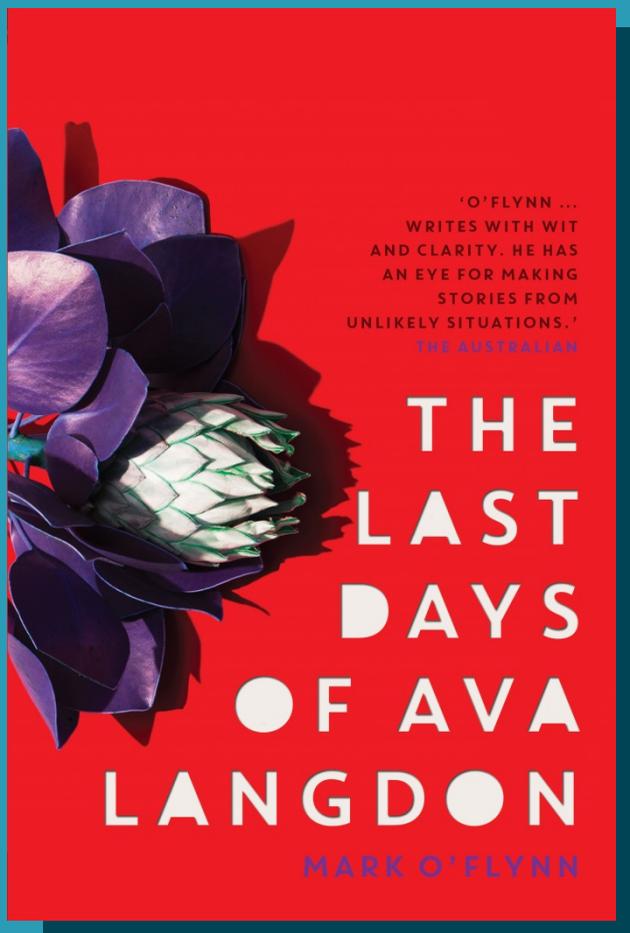


2017  
**SHORTLIST**

MILES FRANKLIN  
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



'O'FLYNN ...  
WRITES WITH WIT  
AND CLARITY. HE HAS  
AN EYE FOR MAKING  
STORIES FROM  
UNLIKELY SITUATIONS.'  
THE AUSTRALIAN

THE  
LAST  
DAYS  
OF AVA  
LANGDON

MARK O'FLYNN

**EXTRACT**



Dawn cracks like an egg against the fibro walls of the derelict shack. An egg? Is that quite the right assessment? The yolky light makes itself known to the windows. She can smell it. The eastern sky pales quickly through the trees. Within the walls she has already been awake for over an hour listening to the various creatures rustling outside, inside, tramping about, creating bigger footsteps than they own. The blankets pulled up to her chin. The bedsprings squeaking their familiar dirge. There are other noises in the ceiling she doesn't recognise. On the plaster overhead a galaxy of mildew.

And now the light is hatching, she has no excuse. She sits up. Her breath steams into the cold air of the room. A porcelain doll sits watching her from the top of the wardrobe, its hair sticking up in tufts. Miss Min-Mog. Bonjour. The curtains are yellow in the windows, cadmium yellow originally, now faded to the colour of jaundice. Again, not quite right, but it will have to do – she hasn't got her thinking cap on yet. One of the cats sits with its nose to the gap between the bedroom wall and the floorboards. That's where the draught and the smell of death get in.

The ash benign in the fireplace. The language of dreams dropping away. Blackened leaves fragile in the grate like the shadows of leaves.

Morning at last.

Her feet search for their slippers under the cot. She locates one. Where's the other? Never mind, she'll find it in a minute. She yawns broadly, her mouth tacky. The cats stir and move about her legs, purring for favour. She goes to the dunny bucket just by the entrance to the bedroom (it'll be freezing outside, there'll be frost), and, sitting, lets the last dregs of the night drain away. She'll empty it later. She stamps her feet to get the circulation back into them. Her liver gives a lurch. She feels it. Pissupprest: there's a word, the holding in of urine. She's got to learn to get up in the night more, but what's the point? Funnel-web spiders migrating across the floor give her the willies. She knows they're not after her, per se, but nevertheless they're another worry. Other creatures besides. A slug underfoot in the middle of the night can cast sleep to the wind. Catching sight of herself in a little wedge of mirror perched on an exposed joist, she stops. Who is that hideous creature? What form dost thou take? Her hair like the thatch from a mattress used for nesting material, with lavender bags under her eyes.



It is Ava, she thinks. It is me. If only I had another life.

If only she had another life. If only she could have been born someone else; it's a small enough change. Another woman. A child. Oscar Wilde, for instance. Why not? What might that have been like? To be someone else. Resurrection.

She lies on the kitchen floor – is that her lying there? No blanket pulled up to her chin.

The mildew.

She goes to the kitchen door – the only door – and opens it to the wind. The scrub is still there, close and claustrophobic. If anything, it has come a little closer during the night, as if it is playing Grandma's Footsteps, and has only just frozen motionless now that she is watching. What's the time, Mr Wolf? Their leaves wash in the wind. She's right. On the clear patches of ground near her washing line there is frost. Her singlets hang out there stiff with cold. The morning light is weaving between the trees to the east, birds adamant about the dawn. Frost lies on the outside water tank also. Everything still. At her feet upon the welcoming stone is spread a tiny explosion of feathers. Which one of them has done this? she asks herself, giving the nearest cat behind her a toe-poke out the door.

'Bastards,' she curses, and slams it shut. The house shudders. The other cats all seem to have vamoosed. They know when to stay out of her way. Ava on the warpath. Hurricane Ava. The sudden tempest of her anger in the air. Perhaps they have gone for good?

She stirs the ash in the grate with a twig. The scorched leaves disintegrate. An old plough disc sits at the back of the hearth like a Chinese soldier's breastplate. She finds a warm coal at the fire's core. It glows with exposure to the air. She piles on some newspaper and kindling kept in a box for just this purpose. The headline in the paper says *Junie Morosi* love nest, but that is of no concern to Ava. Good luck to her. That is not why she has the paper. It's a few weeks old anyway. She puffs and pants at the grate, blowing up gusts of ash until the paper catches. The exertion makes her dizzy, which is okay. Ava does not dislike dizziness as a state of being in the world, she tells herself, trying to ratify her thoughts into a state of kitchen-sink sagacity. She does not discriminate between one point of view and another. Male, female, you, me, alive, dead. The



world would sometimes seem to demand it, an altered state of dizziness, or so she thinks, and what a time of day to be thinking it. Why did she get up so early? Apart from her usual night terrors. The slugs underfoot. Ah yes, she remembers, the appointed time is nigh. She needs to prepare.

Against the wall, on the kitchen table – the only table – under a stone paperweight lies the wrapped parcel containing *The Saunteress*. The typewriter beside it with its mouth closed. Imperial Model T Made in Leicester, England. Oh the sparks it spat out yesterday, she recalls, those keys falling like slain infantrymen on the fields of Flanders, resurrected, marching on. Today will be a great day. She circles the date on the calendar and scrawls Great day beside it. On the calendar is a picture of a ghost gum in snow. The first of June, 1974. No other date is circled for this month. Nor the one previous, but she's not going to revisit that. Time past is time past, but what glories time continuing contains. Soon the fire is blazing away and all the last vestiges of her dreams have been banished. Is that too strong a phrase for it? Banishment. Exile. Never mind. Let all the creatures that lurk in the shadows begone. She stomps about the house making a ruckus, claiming back the definition of the walls, her space within them.