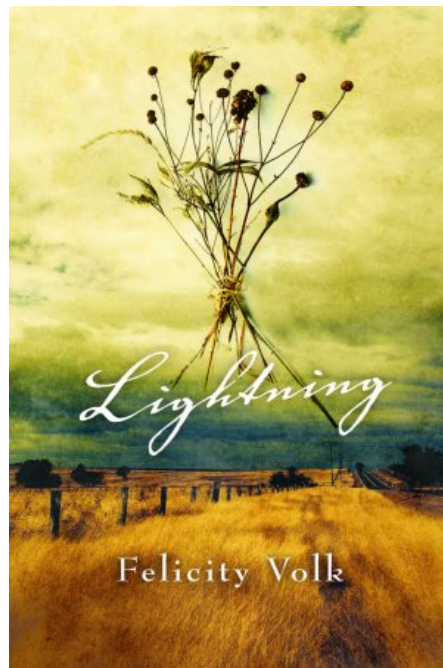


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**



**Felicity Volk**



**LIGHTNING**

## Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.' *Yehuda Amichai*

A number of stories occurring in different times are linked in this complex narrative which traverses not only time but also generations in a tantalising meditation on the legacies of families and the multicultural legacy of Australian history. It is a love story, a eulogy for a lost child, a reflection on grief, and also a manifesto about political asylum and global responsibility. It is told in four parts headed by the words for the base elements of wind, fire, earth and water. The place where each of us is 'right' is a place which is riddled with shared histories and all the pain and joy which that might entail.

Persia is a young woman and pathologist whose relationships have been marred by her aversion to commitment. Her ancestry includes being the great-great-granddaughter of an Afghani cameleer and a German missionary woman. As the novel opens, she is pregnant with the child of her married ex-lover, Johan, and has decided to give birth at home. Unfortunately the baby arrives during a bushfire emergency and power outage, and she gives birth alone to a stillborn child. Crazed with grief she embarks on a grim road trip with her baby and, when her vehicle fails, is picked up by a generous-spirited truck driver.

Ahmed Khan is an asylum seeker whose former life as a plastic surgeon in Pakistan has been obliterated by the need to escape certain death. Najva was Ahmed's married lover (p 110) whom he had met when she brought her brother to him to treat his deformity (p 130). She has since died in an accident, and Ahmed was invited by Najva's husband to suture her mutilated body, in order to make her beautiful again in death (pp 132-4). After Navja's death, her husband and his brother discovered the affair and pursued Ahmed so that he is forced to escape (p 275). He arrived in Australia by boat without papers, and passed himself off as Afghani. Working as an orderly in Grafton hospital, Ahmed encounters Persia when she is brought in having collapsed while travelling with the truck driver, some days after her delivery. Together they embark on a journey which leads to nowhere in one sense, but in another to a fragile solace and recovery for both of them.

Generational legacy is explored in this novel as a personal and national issue, since Persia's family history reveals Australia's multicultural legacy, and Ahmed's more recent arrival mirrors some of the threads of that history. 'And Faruq and Ida begat Farida and Farida and Frederick begat Carl and Carl and Lauren begat Caroline and Caroline and Mario begat Persia and Persia begat...' (p xi) There are various stories told in this narrative including that of Kasib, a maker of wedding chadors in Cairo, set in 1922, and that of Lauren who had worked for German Ruben Mahler's bakery which made famed pretzels in 1922. Lauren is imprisoned for infanticide before escaping to Australia and marrying Carl. There is a complicated web of connections which lead from Lauren's imprisonment to Persia's grief-stricken situation.

Grief is also a major theme, and the loss of a child is a central preoccupation of the novel. Persia's situation is dire given that she is not only alone, but gives birth in the middle of a blackout caused by a bushfire, and has to endure pain, emotional loss and the dangerous physical outcomes of the birth, by herself. Grief and loss are suffered by us all, and in this novel each of the characters has a story to tell. The ugly face of grief is underscored in the thrown brick (pp 76-7), the 'soot-filled' sky (p 44) and the description of 'the benign black of sleep [which] bears marginal resemblance to the safe black of hiding.' (p 44) When Ahmed and Persia visit the sculpture park (p 295), Ahmed identifies symbols of their shared grief and asks Persia: 'What are we? A plague of locusts? A siege of bitterns? A brood of brooders? A pride of left-behinds? A grief of living deserteds?' (p 297) Such poetic symbolism enriches the narrative throughout.

Asylum seekers are constantly in the news at present, and Ahmed's story is an example of the situations which people may be escaping when deciding to make the perilous journey by boat to Australia. He is a skilled credentialed doctor. His background is not political but his fear of his lover's husband and brother have forced exile on him. He knows that he has little future, for if discovered he'll be sent home and if he remains

underground he'll never be able to recover his profession or to make a real life for himself. Ahmed must continue to keep his origins secret: 'the desire to be known faltered before his fear of being discovered' (p 108). Ahmed discovers the insidious streak of prejudice in his adopted community (p 112) when he works in an abattoir. The ill-informed opinions of some Australians towards refugees are evinced by the subtle ways in which they undermine him. When he asks Persia 'Who's Australian?' (p 241) he challenges the racist attitudes of many Australians who presume a largely Caucasian history in a country which is actually historically very multicultural.

There are 'holder-oners and letter-goers' (p 30), and nomads like Persia travel light. People who refuse to make emotional commitments are often criticised, but Persia has her reasons. Her lovingly remembered father Mario was a man who 'took ordinary things and made them beautiful' but was driven away by her mother Caroline's behaviour (p 346). While they were together, Persia's parents consulted a 'Delphic pot' as oracle (pp 51-2) and moved frequently. Her mother later committed suicide. Until Persia meets Johan, she doesn't know what it's like to really feel comfortable with someone, '*This is what it's like to arrive without also wanting to leave.*' (p 59) Persia at one stage is tempted to examine the 'pathology of her attachment to flora over fauna' (p 25); she would prefer to tend her flowers than to maintain a relationship. The orchids Johan sends her after she ends the affair are therefore symbolic of their shared love (pp 65-6) and her rejection of them is symbolic of the end of the affair.

Chance, fate and destiny are also themes in this novel. The question of whether we are responsible for our circumstances or if our fates are pre-determined is a central motif. 'There are plans that we make, and there are plans that make us' (p 69). When the truck driver takes Persia to Grafton hospital (pp 95-6), an accident occurs (p 98) and a piece of music is referred to which conjures the mysterious, interconnected world in which we live, where silence amplifies what is hidden so that all is revealed. The people and events in this novel are linked by a chain of circumstances which cause both grief and unexpected joy. Journeys are taken 'at the whim of the arbitrary' (p 179) and are never travelled in a straight line, no matter how much or how little we plan them.

'Our names anchor us ... Names are sacred and powerful' (p 176) Ahmed tells Persia as she prevaricates over her daughter's name. This becomes another persistent chord in the novel, where for example, Ahmed reflects on the meaning of his name (p 244). He also calls Persia 'Alice' in reference to the classic children's book and the chaos of the accident at the hospital caused by the Mad Hatter's tea-party fairground attraction which the truckdriver has been transporting to Grafton where Persia and Ahmed first met. The moment when he uses her Christian name for the first time is a significant one in the novel, evoking the rebirth associations of a baptism. When Persia finally names her daughter (p 370), there is a sadness but a sense of resolution and completeness in the act which is very moving.

Ethics and morals underpin the narrative as well. Ahmed and Persia toast a 'pure rescue' (p 207) at one point, in deference to those who commit good deeds with no ulterior motive. However, as Ahmed has discovered, 'The survival instinct teaches you that truth must be supple, pliable.' (p 277) He has no option but to hide his identity, and yet was once a respected citizen. Both he and Persia have had married lovers but felt that the strength of their love excused the betrayal.

An open ending is the only possible conclusion to this novel. Persia and Ahmed have escaped immediate perils but they have major challenges ahead. They have found refuge for a time from the worlds in which colleagues and employers might require something from them, and given that this is set in 2003 when mobiles and email were not quite so prevalent, they are free of the snare of social networking. But Persia's colleagues and employers and Ahmed's case-workers would be looking for them, and they will need strength to survive. It is clear that they have found that strength, in the rediscovery by both of them of the connection to person and place. Or as the Biblical figure, Ruth, told Naomi: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16). Persia, via the literal and figurative burying of her baby, also makes peace with the legacy of generations. The symbolism of water flowing down Uluru, the rainbow and the Covenant suggests further growth. And the final

confluence of the elements - the water, the wind, the fire, (also generated by lightning strikes, as in the start, thus a closing of the circle), and the earth in which the fire-generated seeds crack open, promises new life. The reader is assured that whatever challenges they face there is hope for both of them. The love they have discovered for each other will offer some sort of solace as will the fact that 'all our stories are connected over space and time (p 342). Persia tells Ahmed in a simple and poetic statement what true love can mean: 'In my desert, you are manna each morning.' (p 312) But will that love be enough to save them?

## WRITING STYLE

1. **Narrative Perspective, Person and Tense:** this third person account is personal in its focus and yet also removed and therefore ambivalent in perspective. Discuss.
2. The novel is **structured** in four parts headed with words denoting the elements of wind, fire, earth and water. Discuss the thematic and symbolic role which these four words play in this work.
3. What aspects of **style** did you particularly notice in reading this novel? For example, personification is used very evocatively (pp 22, 53, 75). Some of the phrases used in this novel make poetry of the banal which leaves one unexpectedly touched eg 'bucket of sadness' (p 198) or 'saucepan of grief' (p 203).
4. **Characters** are inscribed in a minimal and yet significant way. Persia and Ahmed are the focus, but the minor characters such as Persia's Aboriginal friend Salome, whose humour is a source of comfort in her otherwise quite lonely existence; the truck driver; and the Italian woman in the caravan park who assists the pair are beautifully evoked. Choose a minor character and discuss what role that character has played in the thematic development of the novel.
5. **Word play** is another facet of this novel's style. The title itself is one example. Others include for example, Grief-town/Grafton (p 135). Did you notice any further examples of such suggestive word play?

## THE AUTHOR

Felicity Volk studied English Literature and law at the University of Queensland before joining Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. After diplomatic postings in Bangladesh and Laos, and following the birth of her two daughters, she began writing for publication. With fellowships from the Eleanor Dark Foundation (Varuna, the Writers' House) and a grant from the ACT Government, Felicity wrote a series of short stories - several of which have been published and won awards - and her first novel, *Lightning*. Felicity is currently working as advisor to Australia's Global Ambassador for Women and Girls and writing her second novel. She has also published *Women with a mission: personal perspectives* / edited by Moreen Dee and Felicity Volk, Canberra: Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2007.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel opens with a poem 'The place where we are right' by Yehuda Amichai. Discuss this poem in relation to the novel.
2. Persia is a woman with residual issues regarding her mother; feelings which are exacerbated when she loses her child. How much is this novel about parental love and grief? Grief makes people do odd things. When Persia's Toyota window shatters, she discovers a woman, whose house has burned down in the bushfires, sitting on the side of the road with a cache of brick fragments in her lap. 'Share the pain' (p 77) she says. Is this novel about grief or love? Is it about despair or hope?
3. Ahmed's situation makes one ponder the fate of so many who escape persecution or danger. His fear of reprisal makes him lie, and he has no way to reverse the situation he finds himself in. For if the authorities were to discover his origins, he'd more than likely be sent home to a certain death. Did his situation give you pause to think about the fates of the nameless asylum seekers who appear in our news coverage?
4. 'There are plans that we make and plans that make us' (p 69). Is there any point in making plans, or is destiny the determinant in our lives?
5. Ahmed tells Persia that 'stories are all we human beings are' (p 178). What does he mean by this?
6. 'We all crave a Big Brother.' (p 80) In a secular society does the notion of a big brother simply fill the 'God-shaped vacuum' (p 310) left by the absence of a belief in God? Do we each need some sort of witness to our lives?
7. 'And from the four points, silence bellowed old agonies' (p 281). What old agonies is Ahmed thinking of here?
8. Human nature tends to presume and take for granted those people and things which we hold dearest. 'We know least what we've known longest. It's hard to see what you look at all the time,' he said. 'To maintain a curious mind requires energy.' (p 125) 'It's no wonder so few marriages survive. We are too lazy for them, too lazy to keep them alive.' (p 126) Discuss.
9. Beauty is only skin deep as the cliché tells us. In his life as a plastic surgeon, Ahmed had observed that people don't change inside (pp 127-8) and that 'beauty could be a gilded cage; deformity a liberation' (p 129). The parable of Rachel and the blind viola player (p 154) continues that idea of appearances being only part of the whole person. Discuss.
10. 'Home is a person' (p 107). What does this statement mean to you? What does it mean to Persia and Ahmed?
11. The Grafton hospital appears to be under-resourced in never having 'more than three triage staff rostered for the night shift' (p 96). How much is this novel about bureaucratic failure and social systems which neglect those in need?
12. There are untold stories, too, in this novel. The dreadful outcome of the accident outside the hospital would have ramifications for the kind truckie's family and the kids in the other car. Persia and Ahmed escape that knowledge, as another example of how life throws up incidents with no warning, and which leave a trail of other events in their wake. Discuss.
13. 'Silence, thought Persia, after more than a hundred kilometres in its company, *speaks many languages.*' (p 307) What does the novel say about the nature and role of silence in our lives?
14. 'Nostalgia, she thought, was a hunter's pit under a lattice of thin branches and a deceitful layer of grass clippings and strewn flowers. In the depths of a bleak winter it waited around corners armed with a bucket of warm water. The shocking ambush of



comfort that left you colder than ever.'(p 309) Is nostalgia a significant factor in this novel?

15. Persia and Ahmed discuss 'genetic' or 'racial memory' (p 315). What part has it played in their lives?

16. Lightning is the title of this novel. 'Lightening' is a term used in birth (p 32) and there is a further reference to it when they visit Lightning Ridge and hear an explanation of how opals are enhanced when they are struck by lightning (p 227). Why do you think the author has chosen this title? What is its possible meaning?

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