

2018
SHORTLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD

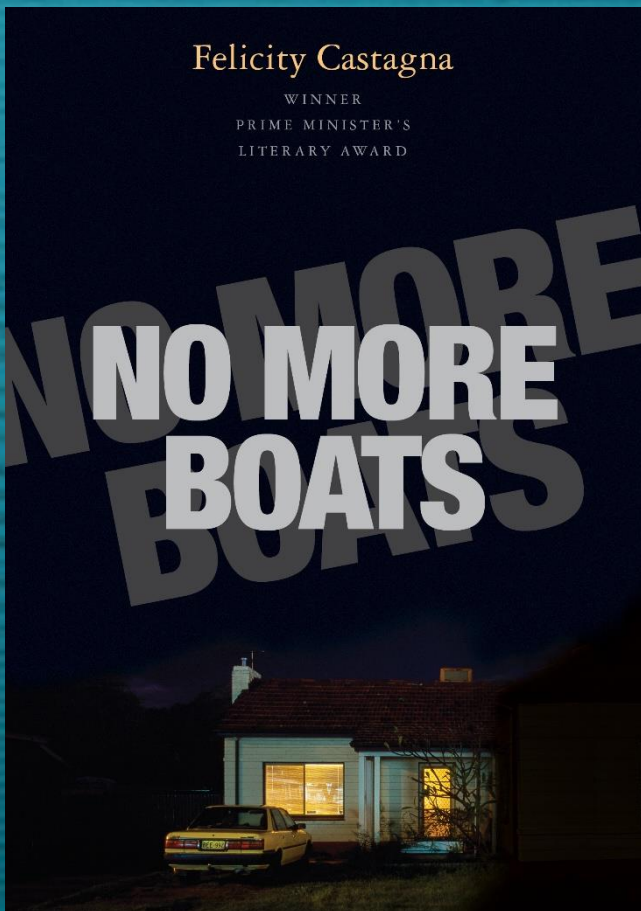


PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL

Felicity Castagna

WINNER
PRIME MINISTER'S
LITERARY AWARD

**NO MORE
BOATS**



EXTRACT



Before

It is 1967. The Australian Prime Minister, Mr Harold Holt, swims out into the ocean and gets eaten by a shark. Or he gets picked up by a Chinese submarine and becomes a spy. It's possible that he just shouldn't be swimming, despite his reputation as a sportsman, because he's thrown his shoulder out of alignment and is taking morphine and also because he might be depressed and maybe he doesn't want to live anymore. Others say he is murdered because he opposes building military bases at Pine Gap, or because he relaxed the White Australia Policy so that the Asians can invade.

It could also be because the oceans around Australia are rough places where boats are known to fall apart and people get caught in rips they can't see and the people and the boats just disappear and no one knows why, or sometimes they do know, but no one wants to talk about what really happens out there. Not really, anyway.

It is the day after Harold Holt has disappeared and Antonio Martone is standing in his new home. He is not yet the Antonio Martone who becomes so famous for a brief moment in history when his own existential crisis coincides with that of a nation that can't decide whether to let in a Norwegian container ship named the MV Tampa and its cargo of 438 human beings, who'd almost disappeared into the ocean, like Harold Holt. For that brief moment between the unwanted ship sitting out there off the coast and the planes colliding into twin towers in another country, Antonio is everywhere holding that gun that may or may not have been his. He's staring blankly out of everyone's television sets and out of the copies of the Daily Telegraph you always find discarded next to you on the train seat.

For now though, he is just Antonio and he's standing here thinking about how the future has finally picked its way out of his head and materialised in front of him. He lays his body down in the middle of the living room and thinks about what he has built. He always knew that the future was waiting for him in this new land across the sea. White aluminium siding, aluminium eight-over-eights, yellow fibreboard shutters, high rectangular windows, crisp brown linoleum marking the path to the kitchen.



Upstairs there are three bedrooms, two baths: total square footage, twelve hundred and sixty-five. He's done the front door in an arch. People don't always understand how much harder it is to bend wood and concrete into a half-moon shape than it is to leave it in straight angular lines, but he knows; it is a deep and private satisfaction to him every time he walks through his own front door.

His house is on a one-acre block, big enough for a market garden out the back. He will grow olives and bergamots like his father did. This is what he has dragged out of the raw earth that had been here, just a big dry tangle of a paddock on the only hill in town – a place of small brown nondescript birds. The house is east-facing. His wife's body casts a long shadow over him as she walks through the door.

'Antonio,' Rose says, looking at him lying there on the floor, 'I think you love this house more than me.'

She walks towards him, bringing her soapy smell; the soft clicking of herself. She rubs her belly, hoping she will be pregnant soon. If it is a girl they will name her Clare; if it is a boy, Francis. They walk together through the house and into the front yard where he has recently laid another slab of concrete.

'Not much room to build a flower bed,' Rose says.

'Later. I make different.' But he knows he won't. It is cleaner this way. It makes the land look more solid. His wife wants so many impractical things. He locks the door and puts the key on its blue piece of yarn around his neck. They turn and face the horizon where the land is being cut up and divided and cut up and divided again into finite squares. Antonio has built on the hilly east side, the only place in Parramatta that isn't flat. From this one hill it is possible to see everything: those tight brick rectangles of government housing, the fibro cottages, the old colonials, the wide stretches of nothing space in between everything. The corkscrews of smoke rise out of the factories in Silverwater and Granville to the east. There is the rumble of roads being poured, of concrete and bitumen stretching out towards his house to take it in. In the distance the sound of railway lines screeching and moving closer.

Antonio looks towards the river but he can't see it behind the mangroves. He is thinking of the point where the salt water meets fresh. He will take his line and hook out there later, to see if he can catch a fish with the other men who sit by the pier. All he wants is this, his own patch of land, this moment in the afternoon; the future to keep coming and coming.