

# The Street Sweeper

## Elliot Perlman

### Author Background

- Birth—7 May 1964
- Education—Monash University, Melbourne
- Awards—Australian Film Institute, Film Critics Circle of Australia, AWGIE Awards, Arts Queensland Steele Rudd Australian Short Story Award, Betty Trask Award for Commonwealth Writers Under 35 Years, Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, Best Literary Work Advancing Public Debate, The Age Book of the Year Award, Book of the Year, The Age Short Story Award
- Currently—lives in Melbourne

Perlman is the son of second-generation Jewish Australians of East European descent. Perlman studied law at Monash University in Melbourne, graduating in 1989. He was called to the Bar in 1997, but while working as a judge's associate in the early 1990s he started writing short stories, and won 'The Age' short story competition in 1994.

In 1994 he won The Age Short Story Award for *The Reasons I Won't Be Coming*, a short story that later gave the title to his first collection of short stories, published in 1999. In 1998, his first novel, *Three Dollars*, was published. It won The Age Book of the Year and the Betty Trask Prize. His second novel, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary award, in 2004. Perlman's third novel, *The Street Sweeper*, was published in 2011.

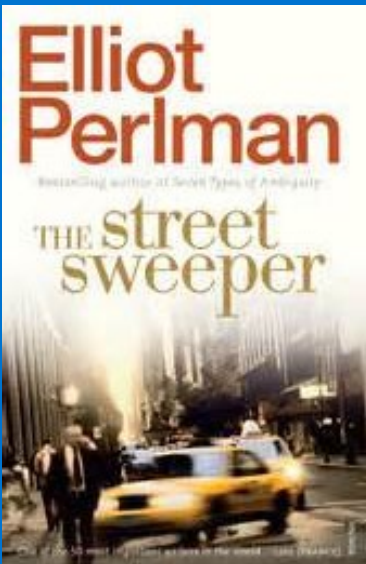
In an interview in 2001 he named Graham Greene as one of the writers who inspire him, describing Greene as "a master of beautifully crisp, clean and spare prose".

His work "condemns the economic rationalism that destroys the humanity of ordinary people when they are confronted with unemployment and poverty". This is not surprising in a writer who admires Raymond Carver and Graham Greene because they "write with quite a strong moral centre and a strong sense of compassion". However, he says, "Part of my task is to entertain readers. I don't want it to be propaganda at all. I don't think that for something to be political fiction it has to offer an alternative; I think just a social critique is enough." He describes himself, in fact, as being interested in "the essence of humanity" and argued that exploring this often means touching on political issues.

Perlman often uses music, and song lyrics, in his work to convey an idea or mood, or to give a sense of who a character is. However, he recognises that this is "a bit of a risk because the less familiar the reader is with the song, the smaller the pay off".

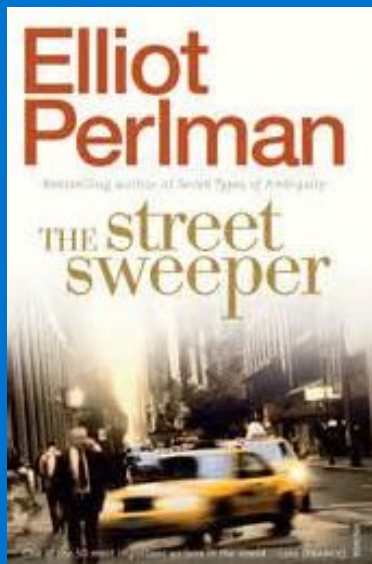
Perlman's novel *Three Dollars* was produced as a film in 2005. It was directed by Robert Connolly, and starred David Wenham and Frances O'Connor. Perlman and Connolly jointly adapted the novel.

(adapted from Wikipedia)



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### Book Summary

#### ***The Street Sweeper***

*Elliot Perlman, 2012*

*Vintage Australia*

*576 pp.*

*ISBN-13: 9781741666182*

From the civil rights struggle in the United States to the Nazi crimes against humanity in Europe, there are more stories than people passing each other every day on the bustling streets of every crowded city. Only some survive to become history. Recently released from prison, Lamont Williams, an African American probationary janitor in a Manhattan hospital and father of a little girl he can't locate, strikes up an unlikely friendship with an elderly patient, a Holocaust survivor who had been a prisoner in Auschwitz-Birkenau. A few kilometres uptown, Australian historian Adam Zignelik, an untenured Columbia professor, finds both his career and his long-term romantic relationship falling apart. Emerging out of the depths of his own personal history, Adam sees, in a promising research topic suggested by an American World War II veteran, the beginnings of something that might just save him professionally and perhaps even personally. As these two men try to survive in early twenty-first-century New York, history comes to life in ways neither of them could have foreseen. Two very different paths - Lamont's and Adam's - lead to one greater story as *The Street Sweeper*, in dealing with memory, love, guilt, heroism, the extremes of racism and unexpected kindness, spans the twentieth century to the present, and spans the globe from New York to Melbourne, Chicago to Auschwitz. Epic in scope, this is a remarkable feat of storytelling.

(from the publisher)

# The Street Sweeper

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Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library



### Discussion Questions

1. On page 1 we read, 'The trick is not to hate yourself . . . if you can manage not to hate yourself then it won't hurt to remember almost anything . . .'. Which characters in *The Street Sweeper* might benefit from remembering this?
2. What is the role of memory in *The Street Sweeper* and in what ways does memory affect the plot of the novel? How many examples from the novel can you find?
3. In what ways has Adam's father, Jake Zignelik, influenced Adam's life and the person Adam is?
4. How many parent/child relationships can you find in *The Street Sweeper*? Compare and contrast these relationships. Can there ever be a tension between helping the world and helping your child?
5. From 1946 to the end of his life, Henry Border dedicates his life and career to telling the world about what we now know as the Holocaust yet he takes dramatic steps to keep a secret from his daughter, Elly. Is he right to do this and what was Wayne Rosenthal's role?
6. James Pearson, 'Mr. Anything-You-Want', is a Chicago meat worker who takes young Russell Ford under his wing. How does he meet Russell and what is the trauma Russell has experienced?
7. *The Street Sweeper* tells of terrible tragedies, both personal and more global, but it also shows bravery, tenacity, courage, heroism and astonishing kindness between people. What examples in the book can you find of bravery, tenacity, courage, heroism and astonishing kindness between people?
8. List the ways in which *The Street Sweeper* makes a case for the dignity of each human being, irrespective of where someone comes from or of what group this person belongs to.

*(from publisher)*

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### Reviews

"The Street Sweeper is a big book, a brave book, a humane and liberal book in a period of history when those values are being derided by conservatives of several schools"

**Australian Book Review**

"...In heartbreaking detail, this emotional novel offers a fascinating insight into the best and worst of human nature, memory, racism and heroism. Perlman, an acclaimed Australian author, is fast developing a reputation as a modern literary master. And it is well deserved."

**Madison Australia**

"A heartless doctor, a street sweeper, a stalled academic, an old man with a story to tell that outranks all our present day concerns, engage with one another in this spellbinding novel. Today we are too busy and too distracted to tell or hear a story, to find or be a listener with all the time in the world. Thus knowledge vanishes as memory fades and life comes to an end. This is a book to be read in a quiet place and slowly"

**Australian Country Style**

"This is absolutely the best fiction book I have read this year. I loved every minute of it even though at times it made me gasp for breath (to the extent that I was asked at the train station if I was OK). I can't get out of my head some of these images and even if these stories are not even remotely connected to my personal memories in some way they are now my personal memories.

The narrative is gripping, the characters are moving but what I love the most is the sense of people (often quite ordinary people). Being part of history, making it into a living, breathing fabric of memories, is something we all have the responsibility of remembering and sharing, of making sure that 'we tell everyone what happened there' and to these people so their unimaginable suffering, pain and heroism is never ever forgotten, is central.

I also loved all the incredible interrelations between stories, the fact that the author was able to bring all these cultures, backgrounds and religions together, united in a simple human understanding of one another, while telling and sharing the stories about the great divide that was created by just the same kind of human beings.

There is truly an amazing sense of connection in this book which really makes one walk away from the experience of reading it shaken but still very hopeful."

**LS Travel Retail Pacific**

"*The Street Sweeper* is at once a meticulously researched historical investigation and a contemporary tale of tribulation, rehabilitation and discovery. Perlman manages uncompromising social commentary without moralising and brings our social and judicial institutions sharply into view. *The Street Sweeper* left me seeing in eight dimensions. All this and a dashing author headshot on the cover - just perfect!"

**Brisbane**