



Hi, thanks for your interest in *Inkflower*, my soon-to-be released Young Adult novel with Walker Books.

*Inkflower* is the story of a Holocaust survivor who had buried his story as a way of moving past the horror of his teen years to build a new life in Australia. It's fiction, but it's the truest thing I've ever written and very timely.

We find out at the start of the novel that Emil has Motor Neurone Disease and six months to live and has gathered his family to tell them the secret he's been hiding for so long: the story of a small boy who is beaten up at school and forced to wear a yellow star because he's Jewish, a kid who is shaved, tattooed and torn from his mother at the gates of Auschwitz, put to work in a coal mine and forced to hike through ankle deep snow, but saved time and again by the kindness of strangers.

He tells his story in alternating chapters to his 16-year-old daughter, Lisa and her brothers – the *Then* chapters – on Friday nights. He tells them about the days after liberation, discovering his parents and brother have been killed, escaping Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia with a new name and birthday, living in a refugee camp and falling in love.

Lisa's story unfolds in the *Now* chapters. These are set in her 1980's living room – where her father reveals his past – and at her school with her best mates and her boyfriend, none of whom know she is Jewish or that her father is dying. Lisa is a secret-keeper like her father. She doesn't want to be the news story of the week; she likes the story she has.

She listens, at first because she is forced to, later because she wants to understand who she is and where she comes from. Most of what her father teaches her – lessons about life, love and dying - are taught via his Lightwriter's mechanical voice after he loses the power of speech – but it is these lessons about pride, dignity, hope and love that teach her how to be vulnerable and let people in.

Like Lisa's dad, my father was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease and given six months to live. Like Lisa's dad, mine sat us down and told us his story, a story I've stayed true to, except to add some dialogue and detail gleaned from research and a recently unearthed testimony my father gave to the Melbourne Holocaust Museum decades ago.

Everything that happened to Lisa's father mirrors events in my father's life. The challenge was revisiting the feelings my dad's death stirred in me twenty years ago. My father had raised me to build walls and let go of pain and sadness, just like he had after the war. So that's what I did after he died, I thought of him, free of his disease and at peace, and I smiled.

This book was my chance to dig deeper and truly grieve. To be the same age my father was in the camps. To be a Jew in hiding, a girl with her own secrets. That's where I blended truth and

imagination – in the *Now* chapters told from Lisa’s point of view. I didn’t go to Glenrock Secondary. I wasn’t seventeen when my father died. I didn’t go through all the teenage dramas that consume Lisa ... mostly why does her father have to go and die, and why tell her this huge sad secret now? I was thirty-seven with a child of my own. Lisa is younger, angrier and more unsure of herself than I was ... but she’s me.

My Dad is gone now and soon there won’t be any survivors left to say ‘I was there, it was real’. Maybe that’s why I wrote this book for teens, because in these uncertain times – with COVID and climate change and racism and hate crimes - we’re still hurting each other. And maybe, in *Inkflower*, I’ve created something healing, something kids can take forward into their lives when they encounter someone who’s sick, or someone in the schoolyard who’s being bullied. A book that lets them hold onto hope and build resilience.

Certainly, the timing is right for another book about the Holocaust, especially given Holocaust education in schools is now mandated for Years 9 and 10. State guidelines promote the use of fiction that is created after the Holocaust and based on survivor recounts, like *Inkflower*, particularly where protagonists are the students’ age and the book is set locally.

There are lots of themes for teachers to dip into: WWII, the Holocaust, cultural understanding, history, antisemitism, refugees, racism, death and dying, family relationships, disability, loss, grief and resilience. As the author and the child of a survivor I can also speak to the students allowing an experiential component.

*Inkflower* is not just for teens. There has recently been a resurgence in interest in Holocaust literature so I’d hope this book, like my others, will have cross-over appeal.

It’s been twenty years since my father died. I wrote his story because I felt it needed to be written, and because now more than ever, it needs to be told. Thank-you for finding space on your bookshelves to share it with others. On this, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my father’s death, it feels like a beautiful tribute.

*Suzy Zail*