

## **DLA Judges' Citations:**

### ***Cloud Cuckoo Land* by Anthony Doerr**

*Cloud Cuckoo Land* is gloriously wide-ranging, ambitious and seriously playful. We weave between Idaho in 2014, where the sadly realistic story of a troubled teenager with a gun in small town library unfolds, Constantinople under siege in 1452, where an orphaned girl has to make her own way after the nuns who have raised her flee for their lives, and the spaceship Argos in 'Mission Years' 55-64. There are intermissions in 1970s London, 1950s Korea, present-day America. The settings may be kaleidoscopic but the characters are wholly engaging, teenagers negotiating similar questions across the centuries: what knowledge do we need for adult life, how can we survive, live well and be good in times of scarcity? Is it safer to fear or to hope? The novel is rooted in libraries, archives and repositories, returning always to the precious cargos of the written word. Doerr conjures landscapes, cityscapes: one dying eagle, one child inching up a stone tower, and also an army on the march, a mountainside in spring, a walled city defeated. His well-crafted prose wheels the reader across centuries and continents, leaving us in a slightly changed world.

### ***The Trees* by Percival Everett**

In *Trees*, Percival Everett uses the genre of comic supernatural crime fiction for what readers eventually realise is a more serious purpose than we might first expect. All of the usual elements of the genre are here: a series of grisly crimes, a pair of wise-cracking detectives, and a mysterious old lady who lives on the edge of town. The town, in this case, is Money, Mississippi (or, more precisely, the nearby suburb of Small Change), where two horribly mutilated bodies have turned up – one White, one Black. When the body of the deceased Black man disappears from the local morgue, only to reappear inexplicably at another murder scene, we may think that we are in familiar territory for horror fiction. It is not until we realise that the two dead White men are descendants of the men who lynched Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African American who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955, that Everett's more serious purpose starts to become apparent. Ultimately, *The Trees* emerges as a passionate and unremitting novel about the legacy of racially-inspired hate crimes in the United States, extending beyond African-Americans to Chinese-Americans and Native Americans. Seldom has a writer turned the disturbing power of horror and supernatural fiction to such an urgent purpose than in this compelling novel.

### ***Paradais* by Ferdnanda Melchor**

Polo works as an aide-gardener in Paradise, a luxury housing complex in the Gulf Coast state of Veracruz. A 16 year-old dropout, "dark-skinned and ugly as sin, his mother would say" he cannot pronounce the name of the place: it's *Paradais*, not Pa-ra-dee-sey, says his boss. The rich residents, and those who, like Polo, cater to their needs, all have their eyes riveted on the American neighbour. Polo hates his job, but it's still better than the prospect of going home to his mother. Drinking sessions with Franco, who lives in one of the overpriced homes, are his only available means of escape. Franco may be sex-obsessed and equally ugly but he can swipe real American whiskey from his grandparents, and Polo won't miss a chance to get wasted. He'll even facilitate Franco's sick ploy to assault Senora Marian, a sexy mother-of-two who lives in one of the white villas. Why not? "If he had the chance to go inside the Maronos's house like fatboy did, he wouldn't waste it looking at panties (...) he would swipe the jewelry and watches, the consoles and screens..." In fevered, snaking sentences, Fernanda Melchor adopts the point of view of the perpetrators, their compulsive desire for whatever they cannot have. From the first page we know, even when we'd rather not – where it's all heading, but Melchor's prose is so mesmerizing that I dare you to let go of the book before its very end.

### **Marzahn, *Mon Amour* by Katja Oskamp**

"Man shall not live by feet alone." This funny, thoughtful, heartfelt portrayal of a community is observed through the unusual perspective of the chiropodist kneeling at its feet. Our narrator is a woman who finds her career as a writer faltering, and decides to switch profession. "The middle years, when you're neither young nor old," she reflects, "are fuzzy years. You can no longer see the shore you started from, but you can't yet get a clear enough view of the shore you're heading for. You spend these years thrashing about in the middle of a big lake, out of breath, flagging from the tedium of swimming..." and so she turns to a new role as chiropodist in Marzahn, Berlin, where she finds herself listening intently to her clients. In these ostensibly mundane moments of care and conversation, she discovers that they each reveal something of themselves, their disappointments, their loves, their vulnerabilities, their rages, their joys. A sequence of portraits unfolds, in which each person who sits in the chiropodist's chair is evoked with a gentle tenderness. As the novel progresses, we meet character after character as the narrator does, through their feet, and through this slow, deliberate culmination of vignettes, nimbly translated by Jo Heinrich, a greater portrait is achieved, that of how individuals are inevitably shaped by the ever-turning cogs of the machine of history. Readers, you've never read a book like this; expect to find yourself laughing aloud one moment, and deeply moved the next.

### **Love Novel by Ivana Sajko**

"He thinks of his wife with the smooth ball under her red coat, throwing away the portable TV she thought was responsible for their communication breakdown. At least that's how she phrased it. After pointing out that him watching the evening news on three different channels in a row had nothing to do with being better informed and everything to do with wanting to escape from what was going on, mostly from her and the ball under her coat, she'd pulled the cord out of the socket, lifted the set up against her stomach and carried it out." An actor at what seems to be a dead-end, a frustrated scholar and novelist, and their newly-arrived baby sear every page and every paragraph and every sentence of Ivana Sajko's *Love Novel*, translated from the Croatian by Mima Simić. Sajko takes no prisoners in her uncompromising and unrelenting story of what goes on between the unnamed couple in a city where the 'system' can grind anyone into a state of despair and panic. This recklessly intense and yet imaginative novel turns the hard-up couple's mutual antipathy into an epic series of confrontations. It gloriously marries sociopolitical commentary on failed capitalism in a failed state to the inevitability of failed marriage, locating the narrative in an extraordinary violence of mind and body. *Love Novel* goes ruthlessly into how love, be it ever so intense at the beginning—before the novel begins—in fact, disintegrates for this couple. Matching form with content, it depicts lives that involve walking constantly on tightropes with a ferocity of prose that allows no breathing space, consummately conveying the claustrophobic existence of the characters as external as well as personal circumstances close in on them.

### **Em by Kim Thúy**

*Em* is a novel about love and war by Kim Thúy, a Vietnamese refugee writer in French-speaking Canada. It is an attempt to salvage something human from what the Vietnamese called the American war. And it is possible to read the book in several ways. As a novel, it reads like a personal essay, its writing precise and its stories provisional as it pieces together fragments of human lives lost on all sides of the conflict. On the other hand, it reads like an epic odyssey through the storms of war in less than 150 pages. The reader is introduced to the war's impact through stories of interlinked characters, clinging together through instinct, each in their own circle of hell. The imaginative and creative task of the book is to allow us to pass through these experiences and emerge with a semblance of hope, or at least some of the pain of love. What does sustain us in the journey of the book is the creative insight, empathy and imagination of a survivor turning back in witness, on what the Americans called the Vietnam war. A favourite character is the street orphan, Louis, so named because he

came out black like Louis Armstrong. Alone in Saigon, he learns to survive by seeing into the heart of anyone he meets. Hiding beneath pews in Saigon's Catholic cathedral, he sees that the most powerful woman in South Vietnam has the claws of a dragon.