



THE WINTER PALACE

BOOK CLUB KIT

THE WINTER PALACE

A tale of war, survival and enduring love

If he had died, I would know it in my heart.

In 1939, Anton, a captain in the Polish army, says goodbye to his wife, Elisabeth. He is leaving to defend their homeland against the invasion by Nazi Germany and Russia. They make a vow that – whatever happens, however much time passes – they’ll meet again at the Winter Palace, their stately home in the Polish countryside.

The winds of war draw them far apart. Anton is captured and sent to Siberia as a POW. He eventually joins a lost army that battles through snowstorms and scorching deserts in Central Asia to find freedom. Anton survives, driven by his determination to join Elisabeth again. She, meanwhile, is forced to be the ‘mistress’ of a Nazi officer before escaping to join the Polish resistance.

As the war ends, Anton and Elisabeth are at the opposite ends of the world. Anton is in Australia. Elisabeth is in Poland, awaiting his return for months and then years. Will they ever meet again at the Winter Palace?

In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer.

Albert Camus

The story of Anton and Elisabeth is fictional, but reflects the experience of so many during the Second World War, especially in Poland. The country was invaded from both east and west in 1939 due to a secret pact between Hitler and Stalin to divide the country. In addition to the horrors and destruction of invasion, over a million people were abducted by Russia, transported to Siberia to work in forestry camps and mines. Entire towns were emptied as families were herded into cattle wagons for the long journey to the east.

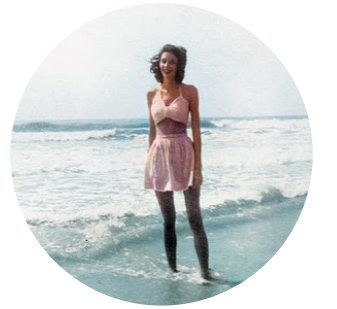
The experiences of Anton and Elisabeth were all too common. Equally true was the formation of the Anders Army and its extraordinary odyssey which took them eventually to Palestine. The rape and sexual enslavement of women such as Elisabeth by the German occupiers is also well documented. It was organised on an industrial scale.

The long parting of the couple evokes wider experiences. Not only the fate of displaced persons after the war, but that of emigrants and refugees up until modern times. So many broken families. So many who can never see their beloved homes again. Around one on three Australians were born overseas so these are common feelings. For all of us, too, the past is another country to which we can never return, but with which retains our loyalty and affection.

For Anton and Elisabeth, the challenge is how to stay loyal to their love for of each other, while living in the present and moving on to the future. The hard-fought answer they both come at last is encapsulated in the epigraph from Albert Camus which opens the novel, the discovery that, despite all which has happened, there is an invincible strength within themselves.

Discussion topics

- 1** Elisabeth and Anton are young adults when the novel starts. They have both reached nearly 100 years of age when it ends. In what ways do you think each of them changes?
- 2** What other characters from the novel stayed in your mind? Were there any you particularly sympathised with?
- 3** Buildings play an important role in the story? Which did you notice apart from the Winter Palace itself?
- 4** Had you heard about the Russian invasion of Poland in 1939 before reading *The Winter Palace*? Had you heard of the Anders Army? Can you think of any other untold stories which could inspire new novels?
- 5** Is there a time or place from your own past that you think of with particular nostalgia sometimes?
- 6** What did you find the most emotionally moving moment in the book? Why was that?
- 7** What do you think is the ultimate reason that Anton and Elisabeth are unable to reunite once the war is over?
- 8** The two main characters never meet again after they part at the Winter Palace. It might have made a conventional ‘happy ending’ if they found each other, but would it have made for a better novel?
- 9** What do you think is the significance of Anton’s watch to the story?
- 10** Much of the novel is set in Russia and Palestine. Do the wartime passages in the novel remind you of any contemporary events in the world today?





A conversation with Paul Morgan

What inspired you to write *The Winter Palace*?

I've long been fascinated by the idea of someone waiting for another for a long time – keeping faith with a past which seems gone, but is more alive and meaningful to them than the present. Reading about Poland during the war gave me the idea to use this as a historical background for my characters.

What draws you to write historical fiction?

Placing a story in a specific historical period allows for an interplay of the personal and the social. Our individual lives and our social and political setting profoundly influence each other, sometimes in quite subtle ways. This applies to all of us in one way or another. We are social creatures.

Have you always written?

Yes, although the proportion of authors who can make a living by writing fiction is tiny, especially in a country with a small population like Australia. Books and language always have been my life. After academia, I worked as a rare books expert, editor and critic, and as a communications director. These days, I write full time and also serve on the PEN International, Melbourne Centre committee.

What sort of books do you read yourself?

My reading is very eclectic. Fiction, philosophy, history, thrillers . . . By my bedside at the moment are Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*, Brendan Colley's *The Signal Line*, John Gray's *Feline Philosophy*, and *The Shortest History of China* by Linda Jaivin.



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