

Run Thomas Run

Kate Carty

Notes for book groups

A summary

A wedding, a poem, a shortcut home – what happens next will shake Thomas Odishu, his wife Esther, and their children Ramina and George to the core. For this is Iraq in 1991 and there are no such things as coincidences. Informants are everywhere, and once you've had a run-in with Saddam's regime, your only chance of survival is escape. But no matter how hard you run, the past is always there, right behind you.

Set in Iraq and England over three decades, *Run Thomas Run* is the gripping story of a father's contorted love, a daughter's coming of age, guilt, redemption, and a child's promise made forty years earlier that should never have been kept.

The author

Kate Carty holds an MA in Creative Writing from Victoria University, Wellington, and a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing from Whitireia Polytechnic. As a journalist she has had lengthy experience on newspapers in New Zealand and Australia.

Kate has had short fiction published in *Turbine* and in the UK. She has had a long involvement with the Assyrian Christian community. *Run Thomas Run*, which is set in the time of Saddam Hussein's regime and its subsequent collapse, is her first novel.

Q & A with Kate Carty

What inspired you to write *Run Thomas Run*?

The book was sparked by meeting three Assyrian Iraqis in a youth hostel in Turkey in 1990. They were two brothers and a sister, and had fled Saddam Hussein's regime following yet another war (the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US's subsequent liberation of Kuwait). I later married one brother, Ashor, and became immersed in the lives of Assyrians: peace-loving Christians who spoke a version of Aramaic, the language of Christ, and had managed to retain their religion and culture over many centuries, despite being a tiny minority in a Muslim-dominated country.

How has the book changed over the course of its development?

Run Thomas Run started out in 2007 as a comedy. Assyrians have a keen sense of humour and I wanted to highlight that. But comedy wasn't appropriate for all that these migrants had been through. I needed a new approach.

A year's mentorship (sponsored by the NZSA) with writer Chris Else followed, during which time a more contemplative novel emerged, focusing on the realities of day-to-day life for an ordinary family under the Iraqi dictator.

In 2010, I rewrote the manuscript from scratch while doing a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing at Whitireia, under the guidance of author Mandy Hager and with input from Anna Rogers and Norman Bilbrough. The book has since undergone countless revisions, finally settling into its current form in 2014 with help from Adrienne Jansen. All up, it has taken seven years for it to take on a publishable form.

How does *Run Thomas Run* differ from other books with similar themes?

My novel differs from these in that the shadow of the regime my characters are running from never quite goes away, even in the new country (England). Also, it centres on Christian Assyrians, a minority neglected within their homeland of Iraq and forgotten by politicians outside it. Other books (such as *The Yellow Birds*) have been written about war in Iraq, but unlike *Run Thomas Run*, these focus on the perspective of American soldiers rather than the Iraqi people themselves.

Based overseas, how is your book relevant for a New Zealand readership?

Assyrians have long fled bloodshed in Iraq and many have settled in New Zealand, with an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 in Wellington alone. Most would have been affected in some way by Saddam Hussein's regime, whether it be personally, or through their parents' decision to migrate to a safer country.

Questions for discussion

1. Was it the torture of Thomas or the move to an unfamiliar country with a different moral structure that tore the family apart?
2. Esther decides to defy her husband and cultural tradition to save her daughter from an unwanted marriage. Did you agree with her decision?
3. Discuss the significance, if any, of Ramina meeting Michael, the IT tech.
4. How do you think that Leyla's death and the events leading up to it shaped Thomas' relationships with both his son and daughter?
5. Do you think the family still would have broken up if they'd stayed in Iraq?

6. Discuss the title *Run Thomas Run*. Why do you think it was chosen?
7. The epilogue, rather than going into the future, brings us back to the beginning of Thomas' story. Did this change your opinion of Thomas and the decisions he made?
8. Following the death of Saddam Hussein, the family are overjoyed. Thomas, however, has a more muted reaction. Why do you think Thomas was not elated at the dictator's death?

Notes by Erin Donohue. Thanks for assistance to Kate Carty.



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