

Roman romance spans a day in the life of love - Australian, The/Weekend Australian/Australian Magazine, The (Australia) - May 7, 2016 - page 18

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The Lovers' Guide to Rome By Mark Lamprell Allen & Unwin, 304pp, \$29.99

If, like mine, yours is a life that has become just a bit too frantic, *The Lovers' Guide to Rome* by Australian author Mark Lamprell is a welcome escape from a world of looming deadlines and too many commitments.

The inspired title of Lamprell's second novel is matched by Lisa White's fabulous cover featuring a carefree young couple making the most of a shimmering day in Rome, as they recklessly ride their motor scooter down the Spanish Steps. The cover alone makes me want to drop everything and join them.

Lamprell's novel, which spans just one day in Rome, follows the exploits of three couples: recently engaged American university student Alice who, in a chance encounter with the motor scooter-riding British student, August Clutterbuck, is shocked to discover that love at first sight may not be a myth, after all; Alec and Meg, whose 20-year marriage is ailing; and the recently widowed Constance who, accompanied by her sister-in-law, Lizzie, has come to scatter the ashes of her late husband.

This heartwarming story has all the makings of a Hollywood rom-com, and given that Lamprell is a screenwriter and film director, who knows — this may be more than idle speculation. What is certain, however, is that *The Lovers' Guide to Rome* has already attracted widespread attention overseas with rights to the book having been sold in North America, Germany, The Netherlands, Italy, Norway, Israel, Serbia, France, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Interestingly, the North American rights have been bought by Amy Einhorn of Flatiron Books who made Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* such a huge success.

Rome is an inspired setting for this exploration of love found, love faltering and love lost. Lamprell's extensive knowledge of the city and its history is clear and although the book is peppered with quirky and informative anecdotes about the city, it is to his credit that it wears the research lightly. In part this is achieved by the use of the "spirit of Rome" to narrate the story. Reminiscent of Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, who uses death, a kindly but exhausted spectre, as his narrator, the spirit of Rome is a more upbeat figure, assigned to inspire and challenge the people within the city. This could be a risky move but, by not overusing the device, Lamprell manages to pull it off.

Unusual narrative choices are not new to Lamprell. His first novel, *The Full Ridiculous* — which was shortlisted for the Russell Prize for Humour Writing, and which has also sold in several overseas territories — is narrated not in the first or third person but in the second person. Lamprell has

conceded that, while an odd choice, it was an effective way to speed up the narrative and deliver the urgency it required.

The Lovers' Guide to Rome is a more leisurely read and the spirit of Rome delivers a thoughtfulness to a moving and entertaining story.

Humour is one of Lamprell's great strengths and his description of the onset of young love, its awkwardness and its insecurity, is beautiful and hilarious. Particularly successful is Lamprell's depiction of the internal voice of the love-struck August as he struggles to contain his desire for Alice: "He felt his crotch stir again and begging it not to make a spectacle of itself, tried to remember when his dog died." Coincidences abound in this story in which an extraordinary number of events take place in one day. Were Lamprell not such an effective and compelling storyteller, it might seem too much. Instead, he takes us with him, forcing us to accept what he would have us believe, from an unexpected kidnapping to an unusual number of coincidental meetings and the unlikely recovery of a lost memento.

The author is a keen observer of people and his description of the people who surround his characters is clear, vivid and funny.

The streets were teeming with tourists on their way home from dinner and Romans on their way to dinner. Half of them were pounding the pavement in sensible nylon-and-elastane-blend travel pants and the other half were teetering in haute couture.

Lamprell's credentials as a screenwriter and director serve him well in. His writing is always visual, cinematic even, and his dialogue is crisp and authentic.

At times, too much direction is provided where the narrative would benefit from a greater subtlety; at other times, he tends to hurry his characters between scenes where a more careful bridging would work better. These, however, are minor criticisms of a big-hearted, feel-good book that picks you up and carries you away from everyday life by immersing you in a tale of love and magic, cobbled streets and breathtaking surroundings. **Suzanne Leal** is a guest at the Sydney Writers Festival, where she'll be discussing her new novel, *The Teacher's Secret* (Allen & Unwin).