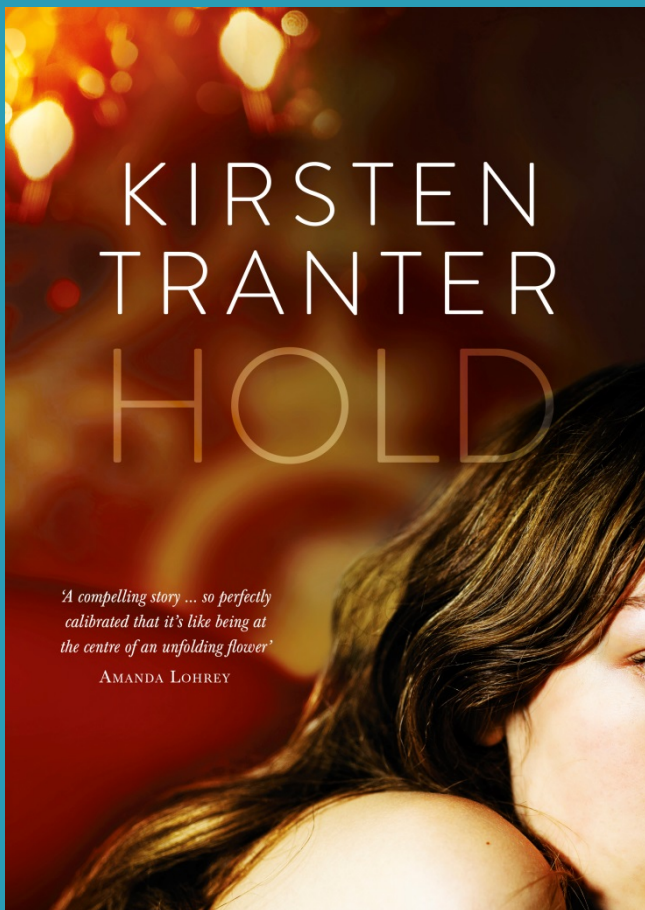


2017
LOGLIST

MILES FRANKLIN
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



EXTRACT



It was a Wednesday in late January, the middle of an unrelenting Sydney summer, a summer that seemed to last forever like the summers of childhood; every month since September had set new records, and the bushfires had been blazing for so long it seemed incredible there was anything left to burn, always a smudged line of ashy smoke against the southwest horizon. David had left for work and I was alone in the house. The cappuccino I had bought on the way home from the dry-cleaners was waiting on the dresser for me to drink. The noise of the street below drifted in through the open balcony doors — car horns blaring, a man shouting. Tyres screeched and the traffic returned to its usual hum, still slow in the dragged-out lull that followed the New Year.

The closet was set against an adjoining wall we shared with the house next door. Our house was one of a row of Victorian terraces, and I wondered whether the door in the closet was a relic from a time when the two houses had been joined. The door might once have opened onto a room that was now part of the other house. Still, it seemed strange to have left it there and not simply bricked it over.

I looked through the keyhole again. The darkness seemed to have changed. I pressed my hand to the door as I straightened up and felt it give; it stuck for a second, in that way doors do when the weather has been wet and the wood swells against the frame. A prickle of adrenaline and sweat flushed my skin. With another harder push the door opened.

It was a small empty room, the proportions made strange by the fact that the ceiling was of a height slightly greater than the length of the room. It was the same tall ceiling as in all the rooms of the house, but made to seem taller by the size of the floor space. It made me think of an Escher print that had hung over the bed of an ex-boyfriend long ago, stairs leading up and down to impossible spaces in an optical illusion. I wondered for a moment whether I was in fact in the neighbour's house, then I noticed that the room had no other door.

There was a fireplace on the facing wall, surrounded by dark green glossy tiles, and bookshelves built into the walls on either side. I crossed to the window to my left and my footsteps made a small, flat-sounding echo in the empty space. The window wouldn't open, and my



fingers came away covered in dust when I tried to shift the latch. The glass on the lower pane was frosted, and textured on the upper half, showing a mottled blue sky.

The floorboards were stained a dark brown, almost black, and the walls had been covered in pinkish-red damask wallpaper. It was in many ways the opposite of our newly renovated home, with its pale oak floors, white walls and modern Danish fittings. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, strung with ropes of crystal beads. I pulled a cord near the door, not really expecting it to work, and two out of the eight little candle-shaped bulbs came alight.

It should have been claustrophobic, with the stuck-shut windows and coloured walls. But something in me relaxed when I walked in, as though the odd proportions of the room were somehow a perfect fit with my body. It was like a strange mix of crossing into a space that was unfamiliar and yet also known in some deep, forgotten way. It wasn't as though the room had been waiting for me in particular, although it did project a sense of something close to consciousness, as spaces sometimes do when they have been used and lived in for a long time.

It felt something like waking up a person from a long sleep, but then it occurred to me that the room didn't feel sleepy at all – more as though its attention had been elsewhere for a time, and was now focused on me.

There was space for a bed or a desk or possibly both. Who had lived here? When was the last time it had been used, slept in, inhabited? I tried the window again with no luck and switched off the light. The sun caught one of the chandelier's crystals and reflected a little patch of shimmering rainbow on the floor. When I looked down at it I noticed a piece of glass near it, a teardrop-shaped bead that had fallen off. I picked it up, filled with a desire to take it with me, but it seemed wrong to remove it. I placed it on the mantelpiece instead, thinking that I could come back with a ladder and fix it.