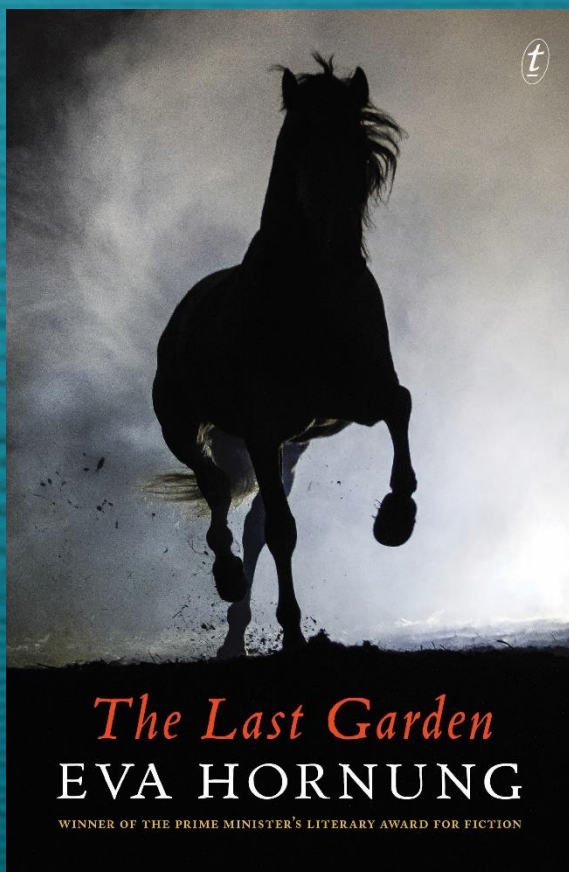


2018  
**SHORTLIST**

MILES FRANKLIN  
LITERARY AWARD



PROUDLY MANAGED BY PERPETUAL



**EXTRACT**



Throughout the months of Hartung and Hornung, Pastor Helfgott visited Benedict every Sonnabend, prayed for him and tried to pray with him, undertook to speak on his behalf in the Hall and made several sweaty and unpleasant trips to Luthertown and one, by locomotive, to Toggenberg all by himself.

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By the dead heart of summer, Benedict had become wordless. He crooned and grunted and roared at the horses. He moaned in his sleep. His hair, bleached and clotted, flopped about his face. Dirt was ingrown into his skin. The root vegetables and hams were all eaten, and he was lean, wiry, sunken-cheeked.

Time swelled and swallowed the days, minutes stretched but hours raced. A month seemed crammed into one slow eye-blink. He woke one morning, and the grass around the barn had grown, headed, seeded and dried a bleached whiteyellow, and a savage sun rose to belt the scorched earth senseless. The water in the Forty Acre dam had shrunk and slimed over, a sunken dead eye in an expanse of baked skin.

He looked around, amazed. Hartung—and yet he could not recall any day of Christmond, except for Heiligabend. He could not hold to mind more than three full days since life began in the barn, and yet clearly there had been... many.

The range horses brought themselves in and took themselves out. They had five foals, four black and one chestnut, and Hilde was slab-sided. Time had lost its hold, the world had keeled, the seasons reeled tipsily along forgotten byways. The past followed him, voracious. It was a chasing storm, a darkness behind his skull. The days fell from him like shining flakes, and it ate them.

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‘It’s wrong,’ Hannelore said, and Pastor Helfgott could see from her fingers that she was annoyed. Her face was smooth, her voice flat and nasal as always, but her fingers rolled and flicked and made small extra movements as she cracked eggs, then mixed and pounded the dough. Hannelore weeded like this when he tapped songs up and down the rake handle or pretended the seed fiddle was a violin.

‘He should be in the Hall helping with the school. For what is his book learning? For nothing? He should have something to do. People are hurt and shocked. He could atone.’



A spatter of dough flew from the bowl and stuck to the dark beam beside him. She paused, carefully scraped dough from each palm and each finger, then went to wash so she could clean the beam. He knew that she was truly angry with him rather than merely offering advice, or she would have let him clean it for her.

He would have to take her to visit Benedict, so she would know that the boy was...incapable.

'He lives in the barn, Hanne. He shuns the house, and can you blame him? The Lord has a plan for him, I am certain, and in his grief, he lives...in utmost humility.' He knew this would appeal to Hannelore. She nodded when he suggested she accompany him next Sonnabend.

But the thought of Hannelore in Benedict's awful barn, trying to talk to the crazy boy, trying to set things right, made him acutely uneasy. For the first time, he felt vaguely culpable, almost accountable, for the state the boy was in.

Hannelore was, as he expected, shocked. As she looked around in dismay, the pastor saw it all as if for the first time. What a contrast between these festooned beams and those glowing in the Hall! The dimensions and the timberwork of the barn and the Hall were similar, he noticed now, and his Hannelore, who kept the Hall glowing red and gold, looked like an angel of judgment. Dust and cobwebs were the least of it.

But when Benedict appeared at the barn doors behind them, Pastor Helfgott saw the boy too as if for the first time: a gold-haired and arresting young man with burning blue eyes. Angelic, somehow.

Hannelore greeted the boy gingerly and stayed only a moment inside. She had prepared a basket, and they all sat in the shade of the barn wall to eat.

Hannelore spoke softly of the school, and Benedict's learning, but the pastor could tell she now had no expectations, not even of a rejoinder. He had told her on the drive that Benedict no longer spoke, and she had frowned, then. But now her flat tones, and her quiet, trite phrases seemed just right, and Benedict sat with his thin legs outstretched, perhaps listening. Hannelore placed food before them both and watched, her face inscrutable. Benedict sat in silence, ate in silence, carried himself with a kind of stillness that was almost—unearthly. Pastor Helfgott was amazed that he had not before noted this, but it now stood out as remarkable.



The meal was finished, and the heat was intensifying. Hannelore gathered the basket and packed it neatly. These were her deep-in-thought hands. She folded and straightened and patted with gentle fingers, lingering over fabric and porcelain. She made a move to go up to the house, but the pastor shook his head slightly and, surprisingly, she sat down again.

The pastor tried to tell Benedict that Ada's sister Ilse Amsel had agreed to be guardian until Benedict came of age, but he was unsure whether the boy heard anything. He wrote it all down—the boy was lettered, after all—and nailed it onto the barn wall, showing Benedict where it was, folded and safe.

Hannelore's visit to the farm proved strangely comforting. In the moment Hannelore saw Benedict, Pastor Helfgott's own impressions changed. He now truly felt a sense of destiny or design to the boy's suffering. She was appalled, of course, and shocked, but she also saw, it seemed, some sense to his isolation for she no longer made suggestions. She now gave realistic gifts, too: food that would keep, utensils she realised he would not go to the house to retrieve, old boots. A copy of the two Books. She wrote short notes and letters to the boy, most of them practical. The pastor read them to Benedict, mainly because he wanted to see what she said. In one she wrote:

Listen to Pastor Helfgott, Benedict, for the Lord  
has given him to you as a guide. He will lead you  
from darkness and pain to the light.

Benedict gave no sign that he heard, but the pastor was very moved. He nailed each note to the wall with the affidavits.

Benedict heard, but attended little. He cocked his head like a dog, listening for ripples, tensions, unspoken sighs, shoulders lifted inside shirts and jackets. He had heard the sadness walled inside the pastor's wife, the helplessness and affection aching away in the pastor. In this current, this voice beneath all voices, he heard everything.