

SPINIFEX & SUNFLOWERS

AVAN JUDD STALLARD

ABOUT THE BOOK

For years, Nick Harris has been drifting, until the day he finds himself amidst red dirt and razor wire, working as a refugee-prison guard in an immigration detention centre in Australia's north-west. Nick is no crusader, no bleeding-heart. Working at Curtin is just a job to pay off his debts.

The longer Nick is there, the more normal the detainees seem, and the crazier everything around them: the desert prison, the resentful staff, the cruel and arbitrary system of deciding whether someone can stay or go. In a place where time passes at an agonising pace, Nick spends his slacking off, swimming with crocodiles, brawling with locals, romancing his workmates.

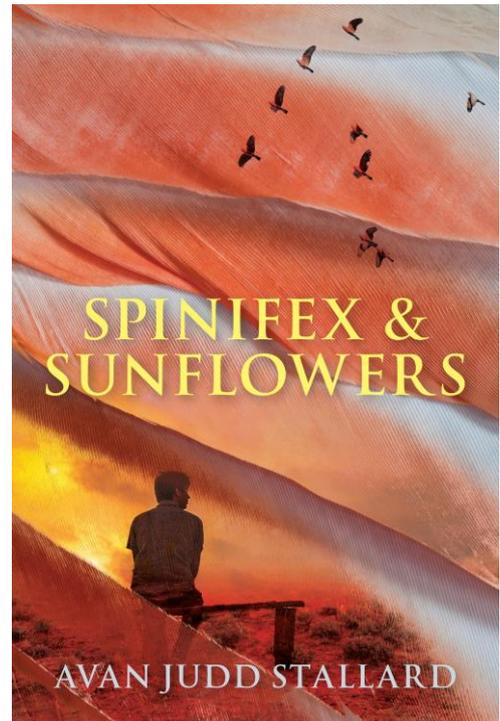
Like his clients, Nick is a future seeker. But he comes to realise that these men behind the wire aren't just clients. They share conversations, they joke and steal and cry and conspire. The more he gets to know them, the more he sees that they are good men, bad men, dumb men and smart men – men just like him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Avan Stallard was born and raised in the south-west of Western Australia. As a child he harboured grand plans to become a barrister, and went on to complete a law degree at the University of Western Australia. However, the reality did not match the fantasy, and he never practised. Instead, he pursued an interest in history with a PhD at the University of Queensland. He later returned to Western Australia and worked as a guard at an immigration detention centre, the experience of which inspired this novel. Avan is the author of the history book *Antipodes: In Search of the Southern Continent*. He continues to write novels and works as an editor. He lives with his wife in the north of Spain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does the story's location inside a real detention centre affect the way you think about this work of fiction?
2. What is your perception of Nick? Is he a character you like, trust, relate to, or care about? Did your opinion of him change as the story progressed?
3. Nick is both highly intelligent and educated, and incredibly blunt and rude. How does this combination of traits inform his view of Curtin? Do they help or hinder him as he navigates the social and political world of the detention centre? How do you think his upbringing has shaped his view of the centre and the events he witnesses there?
4. What is it about Nick's character and self-perception as an outsider that allows him to see beyond the inmates' identification numbers and to engage with their names, stories and humanity, when so many of his colleagues maintain a detached or negative attitude?



5. Roy maintains his aggressively racist comments throughout the book, while simultaneously developing empathetic and personal relationships with the detainees. Would you say this is a common racist attitude – to express a general attitude of hate for all refugees or Muslims, except the ones we get to know? And why does Nick like Roy and bond with him above all the other employees at the centre?
6. Nick becomes worn down by the experience of being a guard. What do you think are some of the most difficult aspects of his job? In what ways do the guards' experiences of time passing slowly and pointless activities mimic the inmates'? In what ways do they differ?
7. Do you agree with Nick, when he wonders whether **tolerance is just another symptom of the problem** (p. 66)?
8. How would you describe Meg's approach to her job, and to the detention centre's operation in general? How does her moral compass differ from Nick's? Do you think of Meg as 'a good person'?
9. What kind of a man is Gabriel? What is his mindset? What motivates him?
10. Who is your least-liked character, and why?
11. **When you're so isolated that even a clergyman can't be bothered, your prison is no longer built of ringlock and razor wire. It's become a prison of the mind.** (p. 56) Do you agree with Nick's observations about isolation here? Is there a logic – for better or worse – to the location of detention centres in remote places?
12. Nick has no compunction about turning up to work drunk or hungover, and openly acknowledges his laziness as a prison guard. Meanwhile, the tasks he is given (such as guarding the cordial machine) often seem to be utterly unnecessary. Do you think his choice to offer an indifferent contribution in a place that he is so morally opposed to is ethically excusable? Do you have any empathy for him?
13. There are a number of parallels drawn in the book between concentration camps and detention centres. What are some of the parallels that stand out most strongly to you?
14. What is the biggest challenge faced by the asylum seekers in the detention centre?
15. Do any of the descriptions of Curtin surprise or shock you?
16. **There's no rhyme nor reason to the mood in which a man wakes. Sometimes the sun is shining, and sometimes the fucking sun is shining.** (p. 144) What role does humour play in the lives of different characters, and in Nick's own attitude?
17. Why do you think Stallard has woven Nick's family history into a story about Australian refugee detention centres?
18. What role does Nick's mother play in the unfolding of the story? Does his relationship with her bear any weight on your reading of the events and characters inside Curtin?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What do Nick's experiences have in common with your time at Curtin?

Nick's time at Curtin was certainly more eventful than my own. No crocodiles or trysts or brawls for me, I'm afraid. But what we do share is an understanding of the psychology at work. These places are destructive, and they are meant to be so. It is their purpose, their *raison d'être* – only they are not just destructive of the lives of asylum seekers, but of Australians, too: both the individuals who enforce the will of our government and its electors, and the society that imagines itself to be something it is not.

Why did you decide to write a novel rather than a work of non-fiction following your own time there?

We can tell the true stories of just about every aspect of the Australian national life – stories of firefighters, soldiers, nurses, customs official, politicians, police officers, even spies – but not the story of what we do inside our detention centres. Only that is forbidden, and one must ask why. What goes on inside there such that the government does not want Australians and the world to see and understand? The papers I signed when I became a detention centre guard invited seven years imprisonment for divulging such precious secrets. Well, that was that. But in so far as fiction can convey broad truths – understandings that surpass how a man's name is spelled, where he comes from, how many loops there were on his self-made noose – I have told the essence of what I know.

Nick develops a strong sense of camaraderie with many of the refugees at Curtin, resulting in his increasingly empathetic attitude towards refugees in general. Did your own attitude to refugees and the refugee crisis change during your time at Curtin?

My attitudes – in that I considered detention brutal and unnecessary, something our nation may one day look back upon with a sense of deep shame and regret – did not change. But I certainly learned a great deal. Book learning became flesh and blood.

What difference do you think one person can make within a system?

While working within a system, one person – a common shitkicker, as Nick would say – cannot change anything systemic. All he can do is offer his humanity to those he encounters. Tiny, seemingly insignificant graces that cost us so little may take on outsize meanings to those who are trapped within the system. So perhaps the answer is no difference, and perhaps the answer is some.

Mani's treatment by the nurses and guards stands out in this book as something that is truly horrific. How do you think a group of people can look into the face of someone like Mani and treat him so badly?

By not seeing him. Mani is not quite human to the nurses and guards. He is something else – an outsider, someone to be distrusted, someone who has come by illegitimate means to take what is theirs, their country's. Before I turned my hand to fiction, I studied and wrote as a historian; if I learned anything from that time, it is that when we do not see people as one of our own, or as an individual who could be one of our own if only circumstances were marginally different, there is no limit to what we might do. I could study history for a thousand years and not even come close to learning about all the different horrors we have delivered upon one another as creatures of civilization – that is, since we gained language and writing and culture and an unquenchable thirst for protecting our own at the expense of others (and at the expense of our own civility). Nothing has changed. Well, maybe the iPhones.

This book is full of laugh-out-loud moments. What role does humour play in your life and in your personal survival strategy?

Many people search for meaning in life, but that quest is terribly onerous. I am willing to settle on something simpler: moments of happiness. And nothing delivers moments of happiness – repeatedly and without fail –

quite like laughter. That is why I try to surround myself with laughter every day. My own brand of humour is perhaps a little irreverent and off-colour for some. I blame my upbringing. I can guarantee no sailor has ever seen a darker or more ribald humour than that found in the school playground of my childhood, or between my brother and I as we sat in front of the kitchen fire and tried to make sense of the many strange happenings of a small town and a large world. Without humour, life is grim. With humour it can still be grim, but evermore bearable.