

Coffee in the city at Degraeves Street Espresso Bar. Cocktails at Romeo Lane. Beers at the Grosvenor in St Kilda. Late nights upstairs at the Espie's Alfred Felton bar. At this moment in time, one can't help but feel a sense of jealousy, loss, or perhaps grief, following the exploits of characters in Elliot Perlman's latest novel, *Maybe the Horse Will Talk*, which came out last October and is set in pre-COVID-19 Melbourne.

Perlman, best known for *Three Dollars* (made into an award-winning film with David Wenham in 2005) and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (adapted into an award-winning television series in 2017 and screened on the ABC), was recently asked by Paramount Television Studios to adapt his newest book for the US small screen and be executive producer. It's an "incredible opportunity", says the writer, who lives in the inner south-east of Melbourne with his wife and two young sons.

"I had just parked the car at the kinder and was unbuckling my three-year-old from his seat and had

COVER STORY

Bestselling Melbourne author Elliot Perlman is taking his latest novel from page to screen.

craft beer and pale-faced lawyers lurking in their Hawthorn heritage houses make the novel unmistakably Melbourne. Sadly, that will all have to be cut for the television version.

"The whole deal with Paramount is that they want me to adapt it for an American city with everybody being American. So, the only thing that remains Australian about it is me."

But maybe, just maybe, that's how a piece of our city slips in – via a Melburnian who was specifically chosen to tell the story in his unique voice, which Perlman describes as "a little bit, I guess, darkly comic, a little bit caustic, a bit cynical, at least in this novel". Sounds kind of Melbourne to me.

Lights, camera, action on a darkly funny tale

him in my arms when my phone beeped. It was a text from the president of Paramount in LA telling me, 'Please call me when you wake up, we want to buy the *Horse*'. You don't get many texts like that in your life."

Maybe the Horse Will Talk starts with second-year solicitor Stephen Maserov fighting for survival at cut-throat Collins Street law firm Freely Savage Carter Blanche. At home in Elwood, he's father to two young children, but the ex-teacher's marriage is falling apart, he's about to lose his job as a solicitor and life is spiralling out of control. In desperation, Maserov buys more time by getting himself seconded to one of the firm's biggest clients: a construction company battling multiple sexual harassment claims.

The story is a darkly humorous, well-observed account of corruption, abuse of power, corporate bullying and the precariousness of modern life.

While these are universal themes, Perlman's peppering of references to Jeff Kennett, northside

Although the American setting is still to be decided, Perlman says cities such as LA or New York are out, in favour of more "generic" metropolises such as Chicago. And, while it's uncertain on what platform the series will screen, Paramount has indicated its preference for streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple TV or premium cable such as HBO. "The beauty of that is that you can be edgy, people can still swear, people can say things a bit more honestly," Perlman says.

Perlman wrote the book over five years and in between other gigs, including a theatre script and his new children's book sequel, *Catvinkle and the Missing Tulips*, due to be released this October.

The lapsed lawyer and barrister (he hasn't practised for 20 years) says the idea for *Maybe the Horse Will Talk* came from a children's fairytale his father told him, by the Sufi philosopher Nasreddin. In it, a court jester falls out of favour with the king but manages to stay his execution for a year by promising to teach his ruler's prized horse to talk.

Words PETER BARRETT ● Photo JULIAN KINGMA

