

**Meg Brayshaw. *Sydney and Its Waterway in Australian Literary Modernism*.  
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This study provides an engaging and persuasive exploration of the myths and realities of “Sydney’s connection to its waterway” through a close examination of five novels from the 1930s and 40s written by female authors (7). Each chapter offers a case study that considers how these novels explore the complexities of urban modernity alongside a wide range of literary, cultural and social “currents” of the interwar period. Across this study as a whole, Meg Brayshaw eloquently argues for the value of more regional or localised studies of modernism that facilitate understandings of modernity “as a phenomenon that is both situated *and* transcalar, conceptual *and* embodied” (15).

The central focus on Sydney’s waterway allows Brayshaw to deeply engage with many of the key issues of this period such as urban development and regeneration projects, cosmopolitanism, new scientific theories, and the “complex debts of capitalism” (10). While several of the novelists under discussion in this study acknowledge and engage with early colonial violence and the illegitimacy of empire, it is much harder to locate engagements with the growing Aboriginal political activism movements of their present. As Brayshaw incisively notes, where Aboriginal people are referenced (if at all) “they are a sign of settler modernity’s failures and a possible source of philosophic wisdom to inspire a better future, but never a participant in it” (22–23). This study also traces a rich vein of eco-critical thinking through many of these novels that touches upon issues of land misuse, environmental harm, and the need to restructure and rethink the relations between settlers and their natural environment.

The novels are discussed in chronological order, and Christina Stead’s *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) fittingly opens this study to explore Sydney’s transition from provincialism to urban modernity through the novel’s representations of modernity’s origins and potential futures. Although *Seven Poor Men*’s largely regressive character trajectories present a mournful tale of unfulfilled hopes for a revolutionised future, Brayshaw highlights how the novel’s “aqueous dynamics” (42) create space for “a new mode of narration, a boldly modernist vision of what is possible in Australian urban fiction” (67). She argues specifically for an “estuarine” understanding of Stead’s Sydney, to consider how its waterway helps “generate and structure modernist narration” within the novel (41, 38). The estuary is understood here as “both open and closed, a transition zone subject to both oceanic and riverine influences, where the past remains active as sediment and silt carried by the tides” (41). These aqueous dynamics are elegantly traced within the novel as a series of blockages and flows, where competing representations of submersion and elevation mirror the novel’s own “unsteady mix of hope and despair” (41).

In contrast with Stead’s utilisation of an “aqueous dialectics” of blockage and flow, Brayshaw traces the “tides and waves” that threaten to overwhelm the leading characters of Dymphna Cusack’s *Jungfrau* (1936) in the second chapter (73–74). Cusack’s characters endeavour to navigate the “wild tides” of their contemporary existence, and Brayshaw focuses on Cusack’s attempts to realistically represent the lives of modern urban women with an emphasis on “relationships and sexuality, and bodily and intellectual autonomy in a social milieu that has not yet evolved to reflect new values for living” (73). Similar to the novels by Eleanor Dark and Kylie Tennant discussed later in the study, emphasis is also placed on the “role of community and cooperation as methods for living in urban modernity” (99).

*Jungfrau* is a self-consciously modern novel, presenting a highly literate, sophisticated world deeply interested in contemporary ideas. For Brayshaw, this is where the novel’s



narratives” they contain reflects the novel’s larger “challenge[s] to socio-spatial hierarchies and the grand narratives of urban planning” (143). Brayshaw takes exception to the broader critical consensus on Tennant’s writing abilities, which praises her journalistic accuracy but “minimises her creative and conceptual capacities” (143). Instead she argues that Tennant’s writing style and form can more productively be read “in the context of the novel’s questioning of teleological progress and celebration of the adaptive and improvisatory strategies of the urban poor” (143).

The last novel in this study is centred less on the presence of water, than on its absence. M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947) chronicles the end of Sydney, exploring the totalising forces of war, capitalism, and environmental degradation (175). The Sydney of this novel is suffering from extended drought and clogged by dust and smoke from bush fires. When Sydney’s harbour is referenced within the novel, it is with an awareness that it serves as one of the city’s biggest liabilities, leaving its inhabitants vulnerable to marine attack during wartime. However, as Brayshaw reminds us, the city finally falls because of fires lit within the city, rather than enemy bombs, serving as the climax to novel’s extended “indictment of settler modernity’s environmental failings” (196). Brayshaw reads the novel through the lens of Paul Saint-Amour’s theories of “encyclopedic modernism” to consider how “projects of synoptic representation” are at once “necessary and impossible” (185–86). Thus the novel’s “urge towards synopsis and diagnosis is clear, but the impulse is routinely undermined by reflexive introspection about writers and the novel form, and by the stylistic and structural inconsistencies brought on by the book’s impossible aspirations” (176).

Each of these authors offers a version of Australian urban modernity that is “not settled, but slippery and silted” (29). Throughout this study, modernity and meaning are productively interrogated in these five novels of the interwar period to trace “an orientation to the world that is fluid, relational and responsive,” but these new possibilities remain constantly at risk of “obstruction or blockage” (206). As Brayshaw outlines in her conclusion, each of these writers’ engagements with Sydney as a city “built on water” results in novels whose dynamic engagements with multiple viewpoints and temporalities create space for new readings that resist neat closure and containment at their close (20). These authors instead “infuse modernity’s spaces and processes with productively estuarine qualities of changeability and circulation, unsettlement and opacity” (25). This study is a valuable read for scholars interested in urban modernity, those interested in interwar novelists, and those keen to expand and redefine their understanding of how we might productively trace hydrological patterns and settlers’ relations to their environs (both natural and man-made) in fictional texts.

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