

The Sydney Harbour Bridge: from modernity to post-modernity in Australian fiction

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In the interwar years of the 20th century Australian cities began to be reshaped by the impact of modernism upon architecture, engineering and town planning. Innovative approaches to urban design coupled with new materials and construction technologies and the need to adapt city spaces to new modes of transportation, communication and entertainment, produced profound changes in the built environment. For residents of Sydney, and indeed for Australians generally, the most obvious and significant manifestation of modernity in this period was the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge between 1923 and 1932. The bridge builders harnessed the technologies and skills of modern engineering to produce the world's longest suspension bridge, and with this grand gesture Sydney began to assume its modern form. As travel writer Jan Morris has written, the Harbour Bridge is, 'one of the most talismanic structures of the earth, and then by far the most striking thing ever built in Australia. At that moment, I think, contemporary Sydney began—perhaps definitive Sydney' (24).

This paper examines the Harbour Bridge as it has been represented in a series of (mostly) recent novels that focus on the period of its construction. Contemporary interest in the Bridge will be contrasted with the actual period of its construction when, despite its very obvious appeal to visual artists, the Bridge was all but ignored by writers of fiction. It will be argued that these recent novels look back at the construction of the Bridge through a post-modern lens, at a time when the Bridge has transcended its roots in functional interwar-modernity and been reinvented as a centrepiece of Australia's most visible and theatrical urban space.

That the Bridge has evolved in this way is testament not only to its impact on the physical environment of Sydney and its Harbour, but also to the powerful emotional pull that it almost immediately acquired. Through a remarkable confluence of geography and history the Bridge was built at the very place where the nation's non-indigenous settlement commenced, and in the space where post-settlement Australia is most visible to the world. Of course Sydney Harbour, and more particularly Sydney Cove, as they existed before the construction of the Bridge were hardly emotionally neutral spaces. The Harbour had held great significance to the Eora people for millennia, and the choice of Sydney Cove as the site of European settlement immediately ensured it would have lasting importance for the settler society. Sydney Cove, in its evolved form as Circular Quay, remains the gateway to our most recognisable international city and the chosen stage for signature events of national and even international importance, ensuring that it is constantly re-inscribed with new meaning and emotional resonance. While the short-term view might see the Bridge as a sign of something that is both modern and permanent, the longer-view will appreciate that the space it occupies is ancient, haunted and evolving.

One outcome of the Harbour Bridge's striking modernity was that many graphic artists were eager to record its construction, finding in the marriage of design and engineering an expression of the modernism that was transforming their own art. As Lionel Lindsay observed, 'The Bridge has dwarfed the city and humbled the North Shore. It sets the scale for a new era and a modern Babylon. Old Sydney is now but a memory' (quoted in Slater, 54). Early Australian modernist painters and printmakers such as Grace Cossington-Smith, Dorrit Black and Jessie Traill, and photographers such as Robert Bowden, Henri Mallard, Harold Cazneaux and Frank Cash, regularly—even obsessively—recorded the Bridge, its workers and the surrounding industry. Laurie Duggan has noted that in these representations the Bridge ranges from 'an aggressive symbol of modernity (and masculinity)' (112), to 'a living organism whose energies send out an aura or mantle' (113). Duggan concludes that from its inception the Bridge had a symbolic potency that reduced its function as a commuter thoroughfare to a secondary role.

But whereas pictorial representations of the Bridge in its construction phase were commonplace, there was no similar portrayal in fiction. Perhaps the missed opportunity was Christina Stead's great modernist novel of 1934, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, most of the action of which takes place around the harbourside. But Stead had left Australia in 1927, just as the Bridge was rising from its pylons, and it makes no impression on the events of her novel. In a recent survey of Harbour Bridge writing, Susan Carson notes that Eleanor Dark's *Return to Coolami* (1936) is the earliest novel to use the Bridge as a plot device. Certainly Dark pays homage to the Bridge's modernist credentials with its 'sudden miraculous beauty curving and spinning away over your head, this cobweb wizardry of steel and soaring arches' (22), but its appearance in the narrative is primarily functional. What Dark represents is the completed Bridge, the Bridge as road, serving as a convenient route that transports characters from the city to their rural property.

The contemporaneous written account of the Bridge's construction that provides the most effective insight into its appeal to the apostles of modernism is that provided by one of the photographers, clergyman Frank Cash. From his home on the Harbour's north shore Cash obsessively photographed the construction of the Bridge in forensic detail, publishing a collection of his photographs as *Parables of the Sydney Harbour Bridge* in 1930, two years before the Bridge was completed. An intended second volume covering the final period of the construction never eventuated. In the text accompanying the photographs in *Parables* Cash recorded his unbridled admiration for the Bridge, and indeed the whole project of modernity, as an expression of God's plan for a higher destiny for mankind. In this highly quotable book—described by Ross Gibson as a 'continuous rapture' (109) and by Delia Falconer as one of the city's 'oddest love letters' (79)—Cash sets his photographs to a commentary that euphorically extols the virtues of the Bridge and its 'truly *Sacramental*' purpose (xi). As Cash writes typically of one photograph,

. . . The Psalmist might have said of that lone figure of our photograph, "What is man, that art mindful of **him**?" And the next moment, he would have exclaimed,

the glory of engineering genius,
outshines the glory of the Bridge.

Man's ability to originate and fabricate the Harbour Bridge rests absolutely on this fact,

Man was made to have dominion over the works of God.

None will deny that steel, stone, concrete, are works of God.

God has given man the faculty of having dominion over them. To man alone of all creation has been given this God-like power, and it manifests from another point of view or belief, that,

the Harbour Bridge displays the truth of, the high destiny of Man. (404-405, emphasis and punctuation in the original.)

With numerous similar flights of fancy *Parables of the Sydney Harbour Bridge* recorded the Bridge's potent appeal to the modern imagination, an appeal enhanced by the otherwise dispiriting economic circumstances of the Depression that reinforced the Bridge's promise of better times ahead. *Parables* also served to highlight both the richness of the visual images, and the paucity of fictional writing, recording the impact of the Harbour Bridge as it transformed Australia's premier urban space.

The first novel to exploit the Bridge's rich symbolic potential was not written until some twenty years after its completion: Ruth Park's *A Power of Roses* (1953). New Zealand born Park first travelled to Sydney in 1940 before settling there permanently in 1942, so she had missed seeing the Bridge in its construction phase. In her guidebook to Sydney published three decades after she had first seen the Bridge from boat-deck, Park recalled that the 'grace and power of the Bridge's design' as she encountered it on that day 'has never become diminished' (*Companion Guide*, 73).

The setting for *A Power of Roses* is the slums of the Rocks in the post-War years. The story features teenager Miriam McKillop, who lives with her dependent Uncle Puss in a former hotel that now provides rat-infested boarding rooms for the inner-city poor. Miriam's dreams of a brighter future are expressed in her admiration of the great modern city at her doorstep:

A mechanised kingdom it was, its iron heart bumping and banging like the throbs of some incalculable steam hammer, never stopping, never sleeping, never hesitating. The fettered lightning ran along its glittering veins, and the smoky cloud of its breath blew out over the sea and the countryside. . . . She looked at it with pride and excitement, for it meant industry—work in a million forms. (96)

Towering over the city, dominating the prospect from every angle, is the muscular architecture of the Harbour Bridge. For Miriam the Bridge epitomises a modernised Sydney, offering a promise of the world from which she is excluded, a world of busy-ness, jobs and a transformed future. Miriam takes to using a spyglass to eye-off the activity on the Bridge, seeing it as a mighty conduit channelling the rivers of industry that drive the city:

And now was the time to turn the glass on the Bridge. Miriam turned the glass took a deep breath of delight as the hair-thin lines of steel became thick as tree-trunks and the pylons blocked out her sky like Coptic skyscrapers. Oh, the beauty and might of it, the great Bridge that people hardly looked at. She saw them, heedless, hurrying, jammed in cars and trains and trams, pouring through the laneways, bursting out like water from the flumes of a weir, never looking up, or left, or right.

'You wouldn't think they were on a bridge at all', marvelled Miriam. (63)

Higher up, Miriam is able to spy upon the bridge workers as they go about their everyday jobs, unaware that they have become the focus of a teenage girl's dream of joining them in the industrialised and commercialised machinery of the 20th century city:

The girl's face was wondering as she raised it from the city to the Bridge. What did it matter what sort of work? Any sort she could do, as long as it was work that brought in money to the house. For money meant freedom—from worry of the rent, illness, bad food, loss of Uncle's Puss's pension. (96)

Miriam's attentions eventually focus on one of the Bridge workers, a rusty haired young man, and she believes with 'Exquisite confidence that some day [the] city would bring the young man in the blue shirt right to her doorway' (185). In a conventional romantic conclusion the couple finally meet on the Bridge's walkway, and the novel ends with an expression of confidence that Miriam's world will indeed be transformed.

In a glimpse towards future Bridge novels, *A Power of Roses* also features a scene in which Miriam is enticed out of the Rocks by the sound of fireworks and celebrations associated with 'cracker night'. She finds herself at Circular Quay, the liminal space between her home, the city and the Harbour, that also serves as a threshold for an encounter with the world of her dreams. It is a place bursting with the excitement, gaiety and commerce where the modernised city that Miriam has glimpsed in her view of the Bridge is given its human face. She dances with a Chinese dragon with its 'eight blue-trousered legs'; follows a young man who might be her bridge-worker; charms a hot-dog vendor; and immerses herself in the crowds pouring off the ferries. At Circular Quay, 'Miriam felt that the hidden town was a cornucopia of energy, throwing out its bursting lightnings of its own power and gusto' (184).

In this sequence *A Power of Roses* crystallises the optimism and vibrancy of post-war Sydney as it embraces the possibilities that had been derailed by depression and war. Prolonged post-war prosperity would eventually transform not only central Sydney but also the poverty stricken suburbs about which Park had written in a series of novels. Over half a century later, when another generation of novelists turned their attention to the Bridge they would be writing about a very different city and weighing up this iconic piece of Australian modernism with the benefit of considerable hindsight. Only then did they stop to consider its creation.

The first novel to reflect on the building of the Harbour Bridge was a crime novel, Peter Corris's *Wet Graves* (1991). *Wet Graves* is a novel in Corris's 'Cliff Hardy' series, in which a hard living private investigator deals with the seamier side of contemporary Sydney. In this instance Hardy is confronted with the disappearance of a number of men who are linked by being the sons of engineers who worked on the Bridge's construction. The bodies of the murdered men are eventually located on the Harbour floor, directly beneath the Bridge.

The action of the novel is largely confined to harbourside locations, and Hardy and other characters frequently express their affection for the Bridge and their admiration for the men who built it. Despite the relentless pace of the novel's plotting Hardy takes time to admire both the design and engineering of the Bridge, noting how it 'changed from a dark, abstract outline to a big simple piece of machinery as the lights came on' (94). But this otherwise exemplary piece of functional modernism is not without its dark side. *Wet Graves* is the first of several novels to draw attention to the human toll resulting from the Bridge's construction. Hardy solves the crime after deducing that the killer is driven by a need for revenge associated with a family member who was killed or injured while working on the Bridge:

What it all came to was an obsession, a fixed idea that the building of the bridge had exacted an enormous toll of lives and happiness. The dislocation and eviction of people from the houses on the land resumed for the approaches, the

closing of schools and businesses, the diversion of traffic . . . There was a voluminous recording of the accidents and deaths, and a minute tracing of consequences for wives and families. (190)

Through these murders the human toll resulting from the Bridge's construction continues to be exacted some six decades after its completion. Eventually the serial killer himself, the son of man confined to a lifetime in a wheelchair after a bridge-building accident, joins the body count when he suicides from the Bridge's arch.

The next novel concerned with the Bridge's construction is Alex Miller's *Conditions of Faith* (2000). Perhaps strangely for a story dealing with the building of the Bridge, very little of it is set in Australia, and the few scenes that are take place in Melbourne. *Conditions of Faith* tells the story of the marriage of Australian Emily Stanton and Scottish civil engineer Georges Elder. Both Emily and Georges are descended from engineers for whom the building of great bridges is the centre of their lives. The novel opens with Georges making sketches for a Sydney bridge in the early days of their courtship, declaring, 'It's been with me all of my life' (8). The Bridge serves Miller's narrative as a symbol of modernity, and Georges is an embodiment of a modern type, a man driven by his dream of shaping cities with all the detached efficiency of modern engineering. As a friend explains, 'He builds the world for us and doesn't ask what we intend to do with the world he builds. That is our business . . .' (50).

Emily, on the other hand, has very different ambitions. As the young Georges spent his time dreaming of Sydney, Emily was dreaming of Europe, and it is only after they arrive in Paris that she comes into a full understanding of her ambitions. Emily's passions are increasingly engaged by her study of ancient history and her fixation on a 3rd century Christian martyr, Perpetua. The novel portrays Emily's deteriorating relationship with Georges as she increasingly dedicates herself to the study of classical history, while he works tirelessly on a tender for the Sydney bridge. Georges stays true to his passion for building the Bridge, unable to yield to Emily's desire to stay in Europe even after his company's bid is dismissed on a technicality. He enquires after subsidiary work, and after being offered a position engineering the approaches to the Bridge, he leaves for Australia with their daughter Marie. The marriage of Emily and Georges is therefore scuttled by a clash of values, a clash indeed of civilisations, measured in the gulf between northern hemisphere tradition and the antipodean modernity represented in the Bridge.

The next novel to focus on the building of the Bridge is Vicki Hastrich's *The Great Arch* (2008). Ralph Cage, the novel's protagonist, is based upon photographer and author Frank Cash. Cage, like Cash, is a Protestant Rector living on the North Shore of the Harbour, obsessed with photographing the Bridge and the two volumes that he plans to write and illustrate as a record of its construction. Moreover, he is preoccupied with the ways in which the Bridge's modernity represents the will of God, seeing it as his role to interpret the Bridge as a sign of God's plans for mankind. Cage believes he is 'A translator of progress' (69) and he writes to his parishioners that, 'from the rubble of our wrecked suburb, the arch of the Bridge *will* rise to herald a different age. Modernity promises peace and prosperous times' (92).

The price that Cage pays for having one eye on the future is to lose sight of the present and of the human toll being exacted on his family and community by depression, and indeed by the building of the Bridge. He is only remotely aware of his children as they grow away from him; of his parishioners as they suffer through the worst of the Depression; of the rising threat

of war in Europe; of the dislocation caused by the destruction required for his beloved bridge to be built; and of the men who die as they work on the Bridge.

The completion of the Bridge should be a high point for Cage, but instead it is the beginning of his decline. Crucially he is overlooked for an invitation to the official opening and humiliated by being reduced to attending a distant celebration, where ‘Over and over in his mind run the words . . . what now?’ (221). For Cage the missed opportunity to attend the Bridge’s opening marks the point at which meaning dissolves from his life, and it will haunt him until his death. He is upstaged—or more accurately, replaced—at this moment by a nine year old boy from country Victoria who has ridden his horse for weeks to arrive in Sydney for the opening. Lennie Gwideer, based on a real life equivalent Lennie Gwyther, is feted on his arrival in Sydney and rewarded with a prominent place at the opening. Hastrich has narrated Lennie’s progress towards Sydney with the refrain, ‘Lennie Gwideer is coming’; and by the time he arrives he appears as the coming man. The popular interest in Lennie’s presence at the opening is in stark contrast to the muted reception given to Cage’s photographs and book. And by the time the Bridge is completed Cage faces the horrible realisation that the second volume of his book will never be published—having only one volume, he declares, is like having ‘half an arch’.

There is, however, one of Cage’s photographs—the one of which he is least proud—that does strike a chord with the public. On one of his climbs upon the bridge-in-progress he comes across a young woman, Ann Patchett. Patchett is presented as a very modern type, untutored in the civilities that Cage expects, and who treats the Bridge is little more than a prop for her own display of breezy insouciance.

. . . overcasual, overfamiliar, unmannered, unschooled, unaware of the respect he’s due. Why, she seemed to have no proper understanding of his position at all! She’s walking away. Down the curve of the arch, the breeze tugs at the skirt of her dress. She didn’t even bother to say thank you or goodbye. Ralph watches her. She swings her arms and disappears into the wall of noise . . . (188)

Cage photographs her reluctantly and at her insistence, and is immediately displeased with the results, considering the picture of the girl to be frivolous alongside his images of masonry, concrete, steel and rivets. But just as Lennie Gwideer’s precocious ride has captured the public imagination by revealing the human stories that underpin this engineering and architectural marvel, the image of the girl also resonates with the public because of a human interest that eludes other photographs in Cage’s portfolio.

What matters is that Ann Patchett is no one important. Which is not to say that she’s no one special. She has that clear-faced look that nobodies in archival photographs sometimes have of being absolutely grounded in their own times, but who also seem to possess the uncanny ability to see out of the photo to future generations. They are unflinching. And their candid gaze affirms the value of the ordinariness of all people as something steadfast and noble. (186)

The photograph becomes Cage’s one famous image, constantly reprinted and circulated, often without attribution, so that Ann Patchett is remembered while Cage is forgotten. Cage himself, however, continues to be disturbed by both his meeting with Patchett and the resulting photograph, but this does little to help him understand that if modernity—as expressed in either the Bridge or his volume of photographs—is to prevail it will be because of its capacity to express something intrinsically human rather than enact a divine plan. *The*

Great Arch tracks Cage's life to its exhausted completion, alone in a nursing home in the late 60s; his thoughts and memories still consumed by the Bridge, its construction, the opening to which he was not invited, and a famous photograph of an otherwise anonymous woman.

Cash also makes a minor appearance in the most recent novel to address the construction of the Bridge, Ashley Hay's *The Body in the Clouds* (2010). This is a complex novel, told in three separate narratives that collectively span the history of Sydney Cove since 1788. The first is set in the first years of the settlement, and features astronomer William Dawes and his relationship with indigenous girl Patye, chronicling his attempt to use her knowledge to record the language of the Eora. The second narrative is set between the 1920s and 1940s and features Ted Parker, a man who longs to work on the Bridge construction, but is confined to less glamorous supporting jobs on and around the Harbour. Unable to build the Bridge, he stays close to those who do and absorbs their stories and tales. The third narrative is contemporary and tells the story of Dan, an Australian who has been living in London for ten years and is homesick for his native Sydney. He finally takes the return flight to be with his childhood friend Charlie and to reach Sydney before the death of 'Gramps', Charlie's grandfather and the person in Dan's own life who is closest to being a grandparent.

The only direct connection between these three tales is that Gramps is the aged Ted Parker, the would-be Bridge builder. But *The Body in the Clouds* is all about connections—in particular the fragments of stories and images that unexpectedly connect as they cascade across time and place, being reinvented, retold and reinterpreted by successive generations. The key story that Gramps has used to give shape to his own life, and to that of his extended family, is about the day he fell from the Bridge and survived—of how he 'flew' from the Bridge to the surface of the Harbour. For Dan and Charlie it was the 'story that had marked out their childhood, the story about miracles and flying, leaping into the unknown' (257). But as Ted Parker/Gramps lies dying, Charlie and Dan discover that he never did work on the Bridge, and that although he witnessed the fall he has made his own, their own lives have been shaped by a lie, a story that 'belonged to another family' (257).

The Body in the Clouds makes the point, however, that stories are never literally 'true'. They simply *are*—found, borrowed, modified or wilfully manufactured 'objects' that emerge from the complex interweaving of personal, communal and spatial histories that makes them nonetheless uniquely capable of expressing their own sort of personalised truth. 'Stories' we are told, are the material that 'held you together, gave your skin shape, like muscles and bones' (302). They are also capable of expressing something beyond truth as they can, in some alchemical way, embody the *quintessence* of a space or place. *The Body in the Clouds* suggests that stories, events or objects can imprint themselves upon a place or landscape, so that they have always been incipient, and never completely erased. Instead they wait to be glimpsed or sensed at the periphery of our experience of 'reality'. As Ted Parker believes:

. . . if something happened somewhere, if something singular, unexpected happened in some particularly malleable place, maybe it couldn't help but leave a trace—or alert you to its coming. People sat and waited for miracles, so there had to be signs that they would come. People went back to the spots where extraordinary things had happened, so there had to be evidence. (221)

Sydney Harbour, it seems, is one such 'malleable place', and it is a phenomenon that Delia Falconer identifies as typical of the wider city when she writes of the apparent 'ghosting' whereby, 'There is a sense that everything has an extra layer of reflection, of slip beneath the surface. Few other cities have such a compelling sense of being so temporary and yet so

close to the eternal' (21). In *The Body in the Clouds* it is the Bridge that is 'ghosted' on to the Harbour, when it is glimpsed fully formed by William Dawes in 1788 (94), and by Ted Parker as he works on its footings (15). In this way readers are reminded that although the Bridge might have a monumental physical presence constructed of steel, concrete, bolts and rivets, it has an equally persistent and more human presence constructed of stories, dreams and imagination.

What are we to make of these books dealing with the building of the Harbour Bridge some three quarters of a century after its completion? They can be read in part as a reflection of a contemporary fascination with the manner in which modernity was imprinted on urban environments, examined in the form of this signature building. Susan Carson, at the conclusion of her survey of mostly non-fiction bridge writing, writes that, 'It is clear the Bridge has become a repository of subjective musing, that includes a range of ambivalent and contradictory ideas about the city of Sydney itself and the process of modernity' (427). This is generally true of these novels, particularly in terms of their ambivalence regarding modernity. The graphic artists of the 1930's, including Frank Cash, could look optimistically towards the Bridge as a promise of a better life in a transformed city, and some of this same spirit imbues Park's novel from the 1950's. By the end of the 20th century, however, modernity is viewed far more critically. It is noticeable that the Bridge in these novels serves not only as a marker of progress, but also a symbol of the alienation that is now seen as a hallmark of twentieth-century urbanism. Georges, for example, fails in his bid to engineer the great Bridge of his dreams and the attempt costs him his marriage; Cage doesn't get his invitation to the opening and fails to find a publisher for his second volume of Bridge photographs; and Ted Parker never gets to work on the Bridge and is reduced to inventing stories that make him a part of its construction.

Wet Graves, *The Great Arch* and *The Body in the Clouds* also stress the number of deaths that occurred in the building of the Bridge, and *Wet Graves* and *The Body in the Clouds* dwell on the loss of the historic areas of the Rocks that gave way to the Bridge's construction. The human cost of modernising Sydney is therefore emphasised, and at one level these novels collectively provide a sense that the Bridge, and by implication the wider city, are impervious embodiments of a disinterested modernity that deflects the dreams of the individuals who invest in them.

But what these novels do not do is simply to fix the Harbour Bridge in the lens of interwar modernity. The dynamic social, cultural and physical space in which the Bridge is embedded has ensured that it has continued to evolve in the national imaginary. What has happened in recent years, and what is reflected in these novels, might be seen as the Bridge transitioning to a postmodern phase. 'Postmodern' is of course an unstable term, particularly as disciplines are crossed; it is used here to express the sense in which geographer Louise Johnson applied it to Australian cities and buildings as being 'playful, eclectic and alive with metaphor, ambiguity and asymmetry', and where there is 'collage, collision, pastiche and humour and a veritable cacophony of styles' (52). Some of these elements might initially appear foreign to the Bridge—after all its strident, iron-clad modernity seems to allow little scope for 'ambiguity', 'collage' or 'pastiche'. What has happened, however, is that the Bridge has acquired all of these qualities as it is increasingly used and appreciated as an expressive component, a player, within the events that comprise the theatre of contemporary Sydney. Greg Richards and Robert Palmer have identified the 'event' as a central component of 'the postmodern city' (9), with 'eventful cities' revelling in experiences that are entrepreneurial, creative and intercultural as they adapt to abundant leisure and tourism.

The reinvention of the Bridge as a postmodern form has been ongoing but can certainly be dated to the last twenty years. Milestones include the introduction of annual fireworks displays based on the Bridge in 1996; the beginning of the remarkably successful commercial Bridge climbs in 1998; the reconciliation Bridge walk in 2000; the featured role played by the Bridge in millennium celebrations and the Sydney Olympics; the celebrations surrounding the 75th anniversary of the opening in 2007 that saw some 250,000 people walk across the Bridge; the commencement of an annual Breakfast on the Bridge for 6,000 in 2009; and its central place in a series of one-off promotional events, including its recent ‘Oprah moment’. As a result the Bridge and the surrounding Harbour have been transformed into a building and space with which Australians actively engage for reasons that can be playful or serious; looking back or moving forward; building meaning of personal or national significance. Whereas the Bridge might have been constructed as an elaborate support for a comparatively short piece of road, it has now emerged as the centrepiece of Australia’s premier postmodern space, where change is the norm; display is constant; no prospect is fixed; and context is the key to interpretation. In the process the Bridge has been ‘humanised’ in a way that transcends its stoical modernity. To quote Delia Falconer again, this is something not easily achieved in Sydney, a city with a ‘physical presence so strong, and so moody, that it is often hard for the human side to get a look-in’ (23); but the Bridge and its surrounds are now the focal point for locals and tourists alike as they embrace the postmodern urban experience.

At the time of its construction the visual appeal of the Bridge as a potent symbol of transformation was apparent and it was artists and photographers who rushed to record its strikingly modern outline, but decades later the interest in graphic representation of the Bridge has been diminished by over-familiarity and its status as a visual cliché. The processes by which the Bridge has been assimilated into the entertainment and touristic fabric of the city have, however, enhanced its appeal to writers of fiction, as the accumulation of incidents, events and ceremonies has embellished it with the ‘human’ element—the stories—that were initially dwarfed by its monumental modernity. It therefore seems that novelists are attracted to Sydney Cove and its immediate environs, including the Bridge, for two quite different but nonetheless related reasons. On the one hand the Cove gains a singular historic importance as a unique spot that takes in the whole of post-settlement, and elements of pre-settlement, Australia; and on the other hand, it is the place with which so many contemporary Australians engage—either personally or via the media—as best representing the ‘human’ potential of the postmodern city.

It is hardly surprising that Gail Jones, in her recent novel *Five Bells* (2011), portrays Circular Quay and its built environment as the quintessential Australian experience of postmodern space, where one encounters a kaleidoscopic irruption of the natural, built and human environments. In order to express the way in which this space responds to human agency, Jones takes Ashley Hay’s emphasis on story and intensifies it through her evocation of four contemporary lives intersecting in a single day at Circular Quay. This apparent geographic and temporal unity is disrupted by the continuous incursion of stories from other places and times. Each of the characters brings personal, family and cultural stories—stories from home and abroad; from reality and fiction; from recent and distant past; that are joyful and tragic. At Circular Quay these characters and stories intersect not only with each other, but with other characters and stories embedded in the place and space itself, of which the contemporary characters may not be aware, but which, as Hay had predicted in *The Body in the Clouds*, keep seeping through at the edge of their perception of reality.

The most apparent of these ‘other’ stories is derived from Kenneth Slessor’s great Harbour poem ‘Five Bells’ from which Jones’s novel takes its title; but others come from the long,

complex history of Sydney Cove and its iconic built environment. In particular Jones filters her characters' experience of Circular Quay through their shifting perception of the Opera House, Luna Park and the Harbour Bridge. These supposedly disinterested structures are incorporated into the narrative through their capacity to absorb and reflect the shifting emotional states of various characters and thereby enrich the many human stories that cycle through this densely signified space. In this context the Bridge is no longer seen as an indifferent icon of modernity deflecting the aspirations of those who fall within its orbit, but rather, a part of the rich 'cinematic illusion' of a 'new time'(205) that is manifested in the postmodern city. As Jones writes: 'The Harbour Bridge loomed at the end of the street; it hung against the sky like one of those dream-catchers you find in hippy homes, a net for invisible entities and the gluey stuff of the ether' (124).

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