

In the Gutter ... Looking at the Stars. A Literary Adventure through Kings Cross edited by Mandy Sayer and Louis Nowra

Launched by Anne Summers

It is seven years since I returned to live in the Cross.

I had been away for fourteen years when in October 1993 Chip and I moved to Sydney and bought a house in Victoria Street. A few weeks later, our stuff arrived from America and we spent a long, exhausting Saturday unpacking boxes and trying to find new niches for our possessions.

Around 11 o'clock we put aside our labours and went up to Darlinghurst Road in search of something to eat. We were unprepared at first for the noisy throng of people filling the pavements but we soon realised it was Saturday night in Kings Cross after all, the time when suburbia surges to the Cross in search of a good time. Even so, we were rather startled to see a familiar figure, sauntering along Sydney's most notorious strip. What, we wondered, was Australia's richest man doing wandering round the Cross, alone, at midnight on a Saturday night?

But then King Cross is not the sort of place where you ask such questions.

It is a place that attracts all sorts, for all sorts of reasons and always has.

It is a unique place, a blend of the criminal and the bohemian, the literary and the low-life, the refugees from Europe who craved a touch of the cosmopolitan and a place where you could get coffee, and those doing a runner from the straitjacket of suburban life.

Even today, assert Mandy Sayer and Louis Nowra, the editors of this wonderful collection of writings about Kings Cross, the 2011 post code is home to more authors than any other in Australia.

Kings Cross (with its boroughs of Potts Point, Darlinghurst, Elizabeth Bay and Rushcutters Bay) is a place that helps foster the literary imagination but it is very much a real place. It is definitely not a state of mind.

Here are just a few samples:

"...whatever happens to its landscape, Kings Cross will always be a tract apart from the rest of Sydney, still contemptuous of the rules, still defiantly unlike any other part of any other city in Australia. And, although its skyline keeps on changing in an unpredictable and bewildering way, its essence of individuality does not change, its flavour, noises, sights and smells remain the same immutably. For this reason I find as much pleasure in contemplating it today as I did when I looked out of a Woolcott Street window in 1922 – indeed, with its unending flux of lights and colours, its gaudiness and reticence, its sunsets and midnights, it seems (to me) a good deal more beautiful than the highly advertised stones and sand of Central Australia."
Kenneth Slessor in the 1930s

"Kings Cross is a little spurious and more than a little self-conscious, and its air of cosmopolitanism is an awkward masquerade, but there are misfitting foreigners

about and odd eccentrics, and a raffishness has persisted, and it is better than Melbourne, and better than the rest of Sydney, which is even more war-scarred from its self-inflicted injuries". George Johnston in the 1940s.

"...the Gazebo Hotel in Kings Cross, a brand-new cylindrical building, rather like a cocktail shaker." Barry Humphries in the 1970s.

These are a mere tasting of the delights that await the reader of *In the Gutter... Looking at the Stars* (the words are, of course, Oscar Wilde's). Organised by decade, they have assembled a collection of fiction, poetry and non-fiction that describes, explores and celebrates (if that is the word!) life in this most interesting part of Australia.

They note that there were many, many more writers and works that could have been included but as it is they have excerpts from Patrick White, Jack Lindsay, Dulcie Deamer, Robin Dalton, Sumner Locke Elliott, Kate Grenville, and many others, some of whose names I will mention in a moment.

Mandy and Louis note that the 1980s were years of "slim literary output in the Cross" and that this coincided with, and perhaps reflected, the transformation of the Cross in two important and lasting ways.

One was the Asianisation of the Cross, (which is some ways mirrored the two earlier Americanisations of the Cross in the 1940s and again in the 1970s) whereby large number of Japanese and Korean tourists came to be catered for, in speciality hotels, shops and restaurants that only a few years before had been milk bars, coffee shops or legendary hotels such as the Chevron – Sydney first "international" hotel?

Ivor Indyk's marvellous essay on the building of the Chevron Hilton by his Uncle Stan – the notorious developer Stanley Korman – mentions the traffic jams on McLeay Street in 1960 as thousands of Sydney-siders drove past to inspect this marvel, a place where such legends as Eartha Kitt, Johnny Ray and Jerry Lewis were to perform.

The second change was the huge increase in drug use, especially by young people who were lured to the Cross in search of drugs – and the money to pay for them. Increasingly, the editors note, the area became "sharply divided" between "those with money belts bulging with foreign currency, and those on the street who hoped to divest them of it".

So this section of the book includes just two poets and a first-person account of his life in the Cross of the former owner of The Tunnel nightclub – but no fiction. How strange that is after the rich selections from earlier decades.

The 1990s produced something of a revival. There is fiction although much of it deals with or events that are unrelievedly grim: the chilling excerpt from Gabrielle Lord's *Whipping Boy*, or Luke Davies' *Candy*, with the demented quest for a cleanish needle. And there is memoir. Lorenzo Montesini's account of the death, from AIDS, of his lover at St Vincent's Hospice, tells a story that was all too frequently repeated during the decade.

The Cross will never inspire writing that is light or trite. The romance of the place is that it embodies the tougher, edgier side of life. It is a place of risks, full of gamblers

who seldom win much and who often lose everything, including their lives. Sometimes this can become depressing, but it sure beats the sounds of the suburbs.

You will never hear a lawn mower in Kings Cross and that, for many of us, is entirely a sufficient reason to live here. Give me sirens any days. *That* is what attracts those of us who live here and who have written about it. *That* won't change, even though the Cross will, as it always has, continue to evolve, to take on new looks and, at times, whole new identities.

I just saw tonight that they've installed halogens in the Goldfishbowl at the Crest, for God's sake. And the walls are a fashionable turquoise hue. It almost looks inviting.

The map at the beginning of this book is great. It guides you past the houses where some great books were set or written. I was thrilled to learn, for instance, that Dymphna Cusack and Florence James wrote *Come in Spinner* at 18 Orwell Street, just a few yards from where I live. It was always a book I loved, ever since I first read it as part of my research for *Damned Whores and God's Police* and it was my introduction to the history of Kings Cross.

I was also enthralled to learn that not just one but two successful female literary partnerships lived in Orwell Street, just two houses apart, although at different times. M Barnard Eldershaw, the literary name of Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, authors of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, lived at 22 Orwell Street.

You can trek to the Gazebo, scene of Barry Humphreys' spectacular last bender before he got off the booze for good, to the Piccolo Bar, subject of poems by John Tranter and Yusef Komunyakaa, or to Wylde Street, these days prohibitively fashionable but in the 1940s the scene of the hilarious Gala Drag and Drain party described in Jon Rose's book *At the Cross*.

You can go to Victoria Street, where Roberta Sykes lived in the 1960s, to 115 Victoria Street where Mandy once lived, as did Mick Fowler, the seaman who battled to save the street from developers. If you make your way south, you will come to William Street, the scene of many a story from this great collection. But rather than walk down towards the city, best if you trace back your steps to Bayswater Road, to Mansions Hotel, where we are tonight and which is the setting of the chapter from Louis's book *Red Nights*.

There are so many more places that could be included in the map. Perhaps they are do not all, strictly speaking, have a literary connection. But I for one would like to mark the spot of the Aquatic Club, only recently demolished to make way for a regiment of town houses. Peter Finch used to drink there, Steve J. Spears used it as his office and, the editors tell us in their Introduction, Chips Rafferty "managed to die on the path outside".

This map got me thinking.

It made me realise that this city does not landmark its cultural sites. We have no idea, as we walk around, just who lived or worked where.

London and New York place plaques on the houses where writers lived or actors or others who made significant contributions to their cultural history.

I wonder why we don't do the same.

Yesterday I was down at Circular Quay where there is a Writer's Walk – plaques in the ground that commemorate famous Australian writers living and dead. Not all of them even Australian. Somehow Rudyard Kipling and Jack London get to be part of this hall of fame!

This kind of tribute is a great testament to our writers but it is not enough. It is highly selective, for one thing, including only those that made it through some bureaucratic filter, and it gives you no sense of the environments that helped shape those writers.

Knowing where someone lived and worked gives you a much better sense of that.

Then I thought: Do we really want the Cross to be further littered with a bunch of commemorative tablets and the tourist traffic they would inevitably generate?

And I decided: Yes, I think we do.

It would be one tangible way of charting the literary presence that has always, through the various eras and the changes they brought, been a constant of the Cross.

As well as the places and people mentioned in the map Mandy and Louis have put together, I would like to see included David Mitchell's house, where he compiled the magnificent collection that became the basis of the Mitchell Library and which I believe was near El Alamein Fountain. And the flat in Darlinghurst Road, now among the shooting galleries, where Mary Gilmore used to live. And the many, many more places where our literary forebears worked and played.

This book is a wonderful stimulus to such a project, and I hope it comes to Bob Carr's attention, as well as being a rich and nourishing brew in itself.

It is a book to dip into, as well as a book to read straight through. Or you can do as I did, go first to your favourite decade – in my case it was the 1940s! – and then chart your way through the history of this wonderful part of the world – our world!

Mandy and Louis have done a great job and I congratulate them both for it.