

on the
STREET
*a MELBOURNE
anthology*

edited by
SARAH FRASER & SUSANNA NELSON

 Quiet
Corner

INTRODUCTION

Susanna Nelson

Melbourne streets. Surely characters entire within the pages of countless well-received pieces of literary fiction? Surely a subject well represented among the non-fiction shelves of the city's many bookshops? Surely – to be blunt – done to death?

Well, yes and no. If, as iconic Australian architect Robin Boyd mused, our built environment is an allegory for ourselves, then those streets are as ripe for dissection, for yearning, for eulogising, as any plot or character device.

The city is in a state of constant re-imagination; it has always sported, cheek by jowl, an endearing muddle of architectural styles. But Melbourne's built environment has changed beyond all recognition in the last decade, spurred on, for better or ill, by a penchant for new spaces, for minimalism, for subdivision, for higher density, or in pursuit of a knockdown-rebuild opportunity. Blink and you miss things – historic pubs slip away in the hands of greedy developers, for whom the insubstantial fine is a mere tax on the way to greater profit; flimsy apartments go up, while infrastructure crumbles away.

When a piece in this collection prompted a brief recollection of the old Gas and Fuel Corporation buildings – two brown seventies suits that stood, knock-kneed, where Federation Square now commands attention – my response was visceral. I never went inside them. They held no purpose for me. But they were part of a formative mental imprint of Melbourne, the city of my youth. They are now molecules; air. They only continue to exist as long as some of us still remember them.

All the lost buildings, vistas and locations that star in this book are ours, collectively and privately. We have moved through them, cycled

along them, danced in them, huddled in their dark recesses until the dawn breaks outside, clutching sustenance, alcohol, friends or lovers; been sick on the bluestone outside. Even if we have merely admired them on our way through, they remain imprinted on our memories. They exist in our imaginary, even if they no longer exist in the physical world. This collection is testament to that existence.

26 February 2020

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Sarah Fraser

This was supposed to be a very different introduction. It was supposed to be a breezy yet meditative commentary on place, our connection to it, the metaphor of “the street”. Perhaps I would have talked a bit of something about memory and how the streets, the city, written about in these pages exist both geographically and on another, psychological, plane. How Melbourne’s streets are inhabited by four million people, and each of us has a unique map of them. I might have mentioned community, and how, far from being mere means to get from A to B, streets are where the life of a city happens.

However.

As I write, our streets are disorientatingly silent. A global pandemic means they are forbidden to us. At least, forbidden to us for many of the pastimes written about in this book. No shopping, getting drunk with mates, spewing, avoiding past lovers, meeting new ones, watching crowds, hugging strangers, stopping just to look. People scurry along the streets, heads down, faces covered, mostly alone. They walk with purpose, getting from A to B. Our maps are shrunken, utilitarian.

We don't look up, we don't linger; we certainly don't gather. Without people, the streets have lost their personalities – they are stripped back to their most basic function as thoroughfares.

And so, this book has become, quite accidentally, a celebration of public and private life in a time before COVID-19 and lockdowns and social distancing. It's astounding to see what we took for granted. The essences of place that we thought were simple truths – the rowdiness of Brunswick Street, the hustle of Swanston Street, the street-side coffee and sunniness of every other main street in Melbourne – aren't essential or true. They can disappear, actually, in a matter of weeks.

At the beginning of lockdown, I said to a friend that this book now felt like a wake, rather than a celebration. It's like we wrote a birthday speech and ended up at a funeral. I was being melodramatic – this book is definitely a celebration. As Sue has said, Melbourne is always changing, asking us to adjust to a different reality – this is just another, bigger change to get through. COVID-19 has taken our streets away; we can only wait patiently until they are returned to us. In the meantime, I hope these stories are an optimistic reminder of what awaits us.

19 April 2020

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