**Gail Jones: *Five Bells*.** London: Vintage Australia, 2012. 224 pp. ISBN 9781864710830. AUD 19.95.
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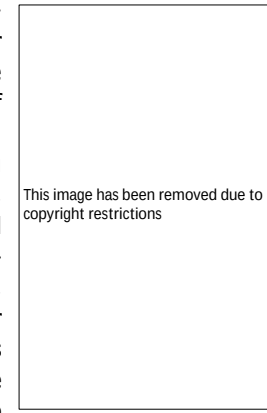


This is Gail Jones' fifth novel and just as fascinating as the previous ones. The author acknowledges that she owes the title to the Australian poet Kenneth Slessor's poem of the same title. Slessor lived from 1901-1971. The elegiac poem about mortality, mourning and memories, which was published in 1939, describes the death by drowning of a friend in Sydney Harbour and is full of reminiscences of him. The title refers to ships' bells, which announced the individual four-hour watches on ships, which meant six shifts over 24 hours. After the first half hour there was one bell, after another half hour there were two, and so on, till at eight bells the watch (= four hours) was over, and a new cycle started. The fifth bell rang out at 2.30, 6.30 and 10.30 in the morning and in the afternoon.

Four individuals converge on Sydney Harbour and the Circular Quay on a warm and bright Saturday morning in January. They are Ellie, a young woman, who lives in an apartment and has gone back to university to get a degree, James, her boyfriend from the days of school many years ago, who has come to Sydney to see her again. They are joined by Catherine, an Irish journalist who is on a visit and to find work, and Pei Xing, a Chinese woman who lived through the Cultural Revolution of Mao, whose parents were killed in the upheaval, and who came to Sydney as a political refugee. Whereas Ellie and Jamie have come with the express intention of seeing each other, the two others are in no way connected to the first two nor to each other. Each spends the day more or less in isolation.

What connects the four very different characters is that they are all haunted by diverse memories. These memories, the presentation of which accounts for a substantial portion of the action, also account for the highly fragmentary structure of the novel. As the day progresses, each of the four characters enjoys the brilliant summer day, but is at the same time again and again overwhelmed by dark

thoughts of the past, which in each case overshadow the day's events and the weekend atmosphere. The reader follows each of them through Sydney, mostly near the Circular Quay, and their invariably sad memories of times past, of persons loved and lost.

The exclusive geographical setting of the plot in Sydney with a lot of clearly marked locations (Opera House, Harbour Bridge, Museum of Contemporary Art, Mrs Macquarie's Chair, George Street and others), is reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as is the concentration on one single day, and also of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, set in London and also comprising no more than one day.

Ellie, who is looking forward to seeing James again, is haunted by her memories of her intimate friendship with James, which started when both were nine years of age and had the first sex at the age of 14, both young and inexperienced, but full of youthful vibrancy. What might have made James attractive to her among other things was his Italian family. His original name was Gennaro DeMello, with the first named changed to James to accommodate Australians, when they immigrated to Western Australia. James is likewise haunted by the past, but he is a much more introverted character, in a way a loner. After dropping out of university medical school, he changed his mind and career to become a school teacher, but at the same time dreamed of becoming an artist, and René Magritte is his favourite painter. He is especially impressed by his painting *The Lovers*, showing "two enshrouded heads" (36) which of course evokes his love for Ellie and symbolizes their situation.

When the two meet around half way through the novel in a restaurant, they assure each other that each has not changed, but Ellie feels uncomfortable right from the start and regrets having come at all, whereas James feels he has chosen the wrong place for such a reunion. The two have a meal together; he talks about his mother's terminal illness and death while Ellie lost and mourned her father. The two find out that neither of them got married, and then they depart after exchanging phone numbers. Typically at the moment of parting James thinks again of Magritte's enshrouded heads. Both are acutely aware that the reunion was an utter failure, barely covered up by the exchange of phone numbers. They have become strangers to each other. James never mentioned to Ellie that he is still haunted by an especially tragic experience as a school teacher when he took a class to the sea and one of the girls went out to swim for herself

and drowned. This tragedy has stayed with him throughout the years and may explain his apparent state of depression.

Catherine from Dublin is a different situation. She intends to spend a happy day in the CBD as a tourist. She moved from Dublin to London, from there to Paris, where she had a brief affair with Luc, a Frenchman and translator from Russian into French, before again leaving. A reunion with Luc eight years after her leaving Paris proved to be a success and can thus be seen in sharp contrast to Ellie's and James' reunion. She intends to phone him time and again, which demonstrates how people apart long for each other if only in indirect contact through a mobile.

In a way Dublin was too narrow for Catherine, symbolized by her mother's Catholic affinity to saints and saints' miracles. (Again one thinks of James Joyce.) Whereas her memories of Luc have positive connotations, she is haunted by her brother Brendan's death in a car accident. She and her brother, who had a doctorate degree in literature, were very close, especially after their mother's death. It transpires in her reminiscences of him that she never overcame this tragic loss.

The fourth character is Pei Xing from China. She is still haunted by Mao's Cultural Revolution and her parents' deaths. Her father was a literary translator from Russian into Chinese, his most acclaimed translation being Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*, which made him a reactionary and a traitor in the eyes of the communists. Pei Xing lives through those hard years again, last but not least because she herself was in prison for a number of years and was harassed by a female guard; she later met again in Sydney. This guard abjectly tried to apologize for the atrocities and her own role as a cruel prison guard. Pei Xing has made her own peace with the past, sees their former tormentor in a hospital and reads *Dr. Zhivago* to her.

These four characters who seem so different at the outset, do have a lot in common, not only the haunting memories, each has to cope with. They are also constantly on the move throughout the whole day. They change from a train or a bus onto a ferry and take a ride through Sydney Harbour. On the one hand they are influenced by the brilliant atmosphere of the glorious summer day, but on the other their memories prevail. The past keeps intruding, for they all have experienced personal losses, and death is their constant com-

panion, and they cannot escape their dark thoughts. In a way they are, perhaps except for Ellie, all ex-pats, uprooted and alone. That is why they intend to phone other people, friends, lovers. But phoning is just not enough, and they know it.

It is fairly near the end that the author gives the plot a surprising turn. A girl, who has gone missing, may have been abducted by her father, and both Ellie and Pei Xing find themselves on CCTV that is shown on TV at news time, because they were somewhere near the girl and her father. When both decide to inform the police and are taken to a police station to give testimony that they did not see anything suspicious, Ellie and Pei Xing are actually seeing each other apparently for the third time, but this time briefly taking note of each other. However, this episode remains a little inconsequential, and the two drift apart again, and this strand of the plot remains unresolved.

To complete the circle back to Slessor's poem, James, who wanders around the Botanic Garden and has become more and more depressed through the afternoon, also boards a ferry through Sydney Harbour and – when night falls – commits suicide by drowning. I was reminded of Kate Chopin's ending of her novel *The Awakening* (published in 1899), in which the protagonist Edna Pontellier actually walks into the sea and drowns, a suicide that is more aesthetic in its presentation than a tragic end.

At the end a storm and rain sweep over the town. The last three paragraphs summarize the female characters' situations, the author here using the present tense. Ellie ends her thoughts of James with her firm intention to ring him the next day. In a way the novel is a celebration of multi-cultural Australia. All the characters in the story plus a number of others that are mentioned and/or remembered have different roots, may have been uprooted and/or moved from one country to another. And as the plot unfolds, the four main characters congregate in the multi-cultural and international atmosphere of Sydney.

Gail Jones continues writing in her highly elaborate lyrical style. Her presentation abounds in metaphors and similes. Her detailed descriptions can be lyrical (Ellie's and James' first sexual contact) or downright gruesome, such as an anatomy session, as perceived by James. Politics (beyond dealing with the Chinese Cultural Revolu-

tion), the visual arts, music and literature (beyond *Dr. Zhivago*) are woven into the plot and affect the characters in different ways and supply an additional intertextual dimension. In order to really appreciate the multiple references it would be necessary to read the novel a second time. I am going to do it.