

Inner Cities: Australian Women's Memory of Place

~ Drusilla Modjeska (ed.)

Penguin Books, 1989

reviewed by
Chris Rossiter

Where are the city limits for feminist writers? Do they all live within 5 km of the GPO?

This collection hums with the rhythm of the inner suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne: Newtown and Chippendale, Brunswick and Carlton. In some cases the boundaries stretch out as far as Bondi, Balmoral or the Lane Cove River, although Sylvia Lawson faces snide criticism from a fellow student for her bourgeois life when she makes the physically short but child-constrained journey from Longueville to a city protest meeting.

So many contributors to this memorable book have found their way to the inner cities, close to universities and sweatshops, estate agents and gelaterias, and backlanes full of half-dead secrets. Most important, the inner city is full of friends. It is a place to re-live and to re-play memories.

Of course, this perception of geographical homogeneity is only superficial and it is inaccurate. There are wonderful visions of cities other than Sydney and Melbourne: the infinite variety of letterboxes in suburban Perth, viewed by Elizabeth Jolley through eyes honed by her English father; the stultifying Adelaide of the 1950s lavishly drawn by Barbara Hanrahan; exotic distant cities, seen through eyes misted by childhood imagination or the observant gaze of journalists or fresh postgraduates. But the prose and poems collected here recount far more than sights; they revel in sounds, smells, textures and music.

Two contributors highlight the persistent dilemma of our capital: soulless, unfriendly, clinical and contrived – but such excellent child care! Canberra has no inner city, so how can it be a real city? Rather, an agglomeration of modules, epitomised for me by the sight once of a nine year old, jogging along a carefully designated jogging trail, in carefully co-ordinated jogging attire.

Certainly none of the women in this book spent their early years in such joyless, Reebok-encased endeavours.

Even more striking than the sense of inner-urban familiarity is the huge diversity of personal histories which have contributed to this book. Different cultures, different loves, different landscapes. Some have always lived inner city lives, some are no doubt passing through; some have found a centre after years of change and travel. It is an obvious observation, but one brought home again and again.

This diversity makes the book so compelling and so uplifting. There are many delights in the collection: delectable childhood adventures, later accounts of loss and growth – all personal, but each with an awareness of time and history, as well as place. Particular gems for me were Ania Walwicz's "Australia", a burning indictment of the strangling blandness of what passes for Australian culture; Amirah Inglis' haunting "Tale of Three Cities" and the discovery that Sophie Watson writes as wonderfully about her personal world as she does in analysing cities and houses. Her five pieces signpost this well-chosen collection, although on its own, each item is riveting and often moving.

Men feature relatively little in these poems and stories about the inner worlds of women, despite how large they loom in determining the outer form of our cities and towns. My one regret is that few pieces directly explore the setting where the majority of Australian women (and especially young women) live their lives – in the vast suburbs, far from the GPO.

4 Machinedream

Dreaming of Machines

review by
Colleen Chesterman

The 1990 Sydney Biennale contains a sophisticated installation by video artist Jill Scott imaginatively exploring the theme of women and their relation to technology. In "Machinedreams", Scott uses images of herself as four members of her family to represent changes which have occurred both for women and for the machinery to which they relate.

Jill Scott is a leading video artist. Her original training was as a painter, and she moved from this into video