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This is the author's radio script of this article.


The Body in the Clouds is Ashley Hay’s first novel, though she has written several books of non-fiction and some short stories. The narrative spans four centuries, with a complex network of images stretching across the years, all centred on one place, Dawes Point on Sydney Harbour, at the southern end of the Harbour Bridge.

The earliest thread of the narrative concerns William Dawes – yes, the very same man in Kate Grenville’s novel The Lieutenant – who arrived with the First Fleet in 1788. Dawes sets up his observatory on this piece of land, which he calls Point Maskelyne, after the Astronomer Royal, but which is later renamed in his honour, though of course it already had a name, Tarra. Like Grenville’s Lieutenant, he is rather a loner, though he makes contact with a series of young Aboriginal women from whom he learns the Indigenous languages and beliefs of the area, including the idea that while the bones of the dead are buried, the body is in the clouds.

Then we meet young Ted Parker, a bright-eyed teenager who has travelled to Sydney to work on the new harbour bridge. He doesn’t make it onto the bridge, working on the barges underneath, but in 1930 he witnesses the spectacular fall from the bridge of Roy Kelly, the only man to have survived the fall.

The contemporary story concerns Dan, a young Australian adrift in London. He’s been there ten years, working in the finance industry, and has been in a steady relationship for five, but still feels like a tourist. He abruptly leaves for home when he hears that his friend’s Charlie’s grandfather, the nearest thing he had to a grandparent of his own, is ill, perhaps dying.

These three stories – or perhaps scenarios is a better word – are freighted with heavy significance. This is a very literary novel and there’s rarely more than a hint of a plot or human drama which might carry the reader along without being made aware of the parallels, resonances and interrelations across the three stories. I started making a list: Gulliver’s Travels, stargazing, comets and shooting stars, looking at a city – either London or Sydney – from a great height, some movement not quite seen in the peripheral vision, keystones both literal and figurative, finding shapes in clouds, Icarus flying, people falling – too much, really: one’s constantly being pulled up by the feeling that the import of these motifs is being insistently pointed out. At the central point of the novel the three men, Dawes, Ted and Dan, are all in a dream-cloud together, though they don’t quite make contact.

One of the threads is the importance of stories – Charlie’s grandfather tells Dan that ‘It’s stories we live by,’ and Dawes tells his friends Watkins Tench and John White that ‘it’s none of it real until it’s written down and read in London’. But though this novel is full of stories – anecdotes, scraps of narrative – it lacks the overarching story-impulse which makes a novel readable and engaging. The symbolism, which should be at the service of the narrative, becomes the ruling principle, and the novel never breaks free of its dulling, dragging effect.