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Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 2 April 2011.

Kenneth Slessor’s wonderful 1936 poem reverberates through this new novel by the incomparable Gail Jones. *Five Bells* is an act of homage, a richly-textured work, harking back not only to Slessor but to the great novelists of Modernism: Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and the Master himself, Henry James. It seems no accident that the tortured young man whose story makes up a quarter of this novel is named James.

The four characters whose lives intersect briefly on a bright Sydney day are all strangers to Sydney, in a sense. James is from Western Australia, but visiting Sydney for the first time from London, hoping to reconnect with his lover from high-school days, Ellie. Ellie herself has been in Sydney for six weeks but is only today visiting Circular Quay on her way to meet James. Catherine is a visitor from Dublin, mourning the death of her beloved brother in a senseless accident, blinded and enchanted by Sydney’s summer light. And Pei Xing, though perhaps the most ‘foreign’ of all in some sense, has lived in Sydney for many years, fitting happily into the polyglot world of Bankstown, after enduring the agonising, deadening years of the Cultural Revolution in China.

The cadence of each character’s own language seems reflected here and there in their narrative. A consummate stylist like Jones would hardly write an awkward sentence like ‘Ignoring the ticket machines that looked like the robots of an unfortunately boxy future era, Pei Xing preferred her friend, and his hasty chat,’ unless she was mimicking the English of a well-educated Shanghai woman, learned in childhood and used for reading but not speech until well into adulthood. Ellie, on the other hand, is a native speaker of Australian English: ‘She refused the bullshit theories that life these days was thinner, and denuded.’ Catherine’s inner monologue has a poetic Irish lilt when describing a painting she remembers from childhood: ‘At the poacher’s feet lay two dead rabbits and a gun, and it was a poor house and gloomy, with a little still-life bottle and bowl sitting on a table in one corner.’ And James, son of Italian parents, is touched by the sight of a family picnicking on the grass: ‘It was a simple little drama, everyday, unremarkable. But what had snagged in James’ heart was *Matteo, bello*. It was as if he had heard it before, in the distant past. His own true name, given by his father, was *Gennaro, Gennaro DeMello*.

Words are important. Pei Xing’s future husband, though a Communist Party cadre in the camp where she is a prisoner, woos her ‘in a kind of literary language. He talked, Pei Xing thought, as if words mattered.’ He confesses to her that he too has studied English, and Jane Austen is his favourite author. ‘What he said was seditious and ideologically unsound. This was a confidence of the most dangerous kind.’ James and Ellie, too, are brought together by a love of words, and their teacher Miss Morrison who introduces them to the delightful idea of the *clepsydra*, the ancient Greek water clock, which obliquely refers to the opening lines of Slessor’s poem:

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\text{Time that is moved by little fidget wheels}
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\[
\text{Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow.}
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Catherine is bound to her dead brother Brendan by language: ‘So many sentences of Brendan’s speech wafted in Catherine’s memory. They trailed through at chance moments, like a delayed echo.’
Death, mourning, water, stars, snow, China, Russian literature - all these themes and more keep chiming through the novel, as the characters make their separate ways around the harbour city, all, like Catherine, dragging the past and their family with them. ‘They hung around. She thought of them often and with a kind of doleful, compelling concern.’ There is no dramatic climax and tying up of narrative threads, just the end of a long summer day for each of the four characters, and intimations of what devastation tomorrow might bring for at least one of them. Many-layered and subtle, *Five Bells* is not exactly satisfying. It leaves me wanting more, with that vague sense of unease and disorientation the great novels have always managed to engender.