
After a seemingly slow beginning, and some awkwardly expressed phrases such as ‘A child sounded a squeal’ (4) and ‘With a trampoline heart she saw the Bridge to her left’ (1), Gail Jones’s fifth novel, *Five Bells*, proves to be a poetic masterpiece, rich with background stories and examining a single event from multiple perspectives. Although the trampoline metaphor conveys its meaning well enough, it appears too early, before the reader has found bearings in the narrative and thus it interrupts the flow. Similarly, to say that the child ‘sounded a squeal’ rather than simply ‘the child squealed’ or ‘she heard a child squeal’, puts an awkward distance in the early pages, which creates a gap between the character in question and the world that they move in. It is only later that we see the novel is showing us observations of shared events through the eyes and consciousness of multiple characters.

The device of examining a single event from multiple perspectives is an interesting and effective one. It might have been a cumbersome disaster to present the experiences and background stories of four individuals arriving in the same city on the same day, and at the same time, but Jones handles it skilfully and weaves a very deep and textured narrative around the loves and losses, the hopes and fears of her four main characters.

The title *Five Bells* immediately calls to mind Kenneth Slessor’s 1939 poem and this is in some ways a distraction, especially if the reader is familiar with the poem, because it sets up an expectation that the novel will mirror the poem, and raises questions when the lives of its characters seem to have nothing to do with the poem. However, the influence of *Five Bells*, the poem, is pervasive and the narrative rings with little resonances here and there. Time, which is a central theme of the poem, is also a theme in the novel, with two of the characters, James and Ellie, remembering back to their school days and shared lessons about ‘notions of time, ... the clepsydra, the water clock’ (96) and echoes of the time meditations from the poem appearing throughout the narrative. The time theme recurs as characters consider their present situations and fall back into memories of years gone by. It is made explicit, for example, in the opening sentence of chapter 6: ‘Strange how time seemed now and then to reverse, patterns to flip over and resume in another life. The quirk of any story, the element of return’ (171).

James has returned to Australia to reunite with his high school sweetheart/lover, Ellie. The pair grew up together in Western Australia, but Ellie moved to Sydney to take up a scholarship and James is visiting Sydney after several years away in Europe and London. Catherine is visiting Sydney from Ireland and she carries with her the grief of losing her adored brother, Brendan, in an accident. Pei Xing has lived in Sydney for some time but she originates from China and her background story focuses on her suffering during the Cultural Revolution. She was imprisoned for several years and was tormented by a brutal prison guard, yet she has found a way to come to terms with her past suffering and, rather than seek revenge, she is now a regular visitor to the ill and ageing guard, showing her kindness and reading to her from *Doctor Zhivago*.

The narrative takes place over a single day, as with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. However the stream of consciousness reminiscing of each character takes the reader
back many years providing insights into the shaping of their personalities and giving a great deal of depth and detail to the story. In some ways, more happens in these past lives than happens in the present day. On the day of their respective arrivals at Circular Quay, everything seems fairly ordinary as we see them move from the ferry, observing the harbour, the bridge, the Opera House, and taking in the sights and sounds of the city. *Five Bells* seems a very Joycean novel and not merely because it takes place over 24 hours. Perhaps it’s the Irishness of Catherine’s story that gives it this flavour; or the pervasive literary references, including a line from the Ezra Pound poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’.

When I think of the experience of being among a large crowd of people in a public space and try to imagine the multitude of individual stories, thoughts, hopes, fears and dreams that are brought together in one place and time, I do see the attractiveness and potential for sparking the literary imagination. It can be interesting to consider how people might respond differently, and indeed how they might witness differently, a shared event. There are two key events in the novel but neither is conclusive. Questions remain as the story ends and this feels a little unsatisfying after the minute detail of past lives has been shared.

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